

## EDITORIAL

# Intersectionality and Power: Notes from the Editors

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The past fifteen years have seen an explosion in research about secularism and non-religion. We know more about the emergence and social context of non-religion, including who leaves religious institutions and why (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Keysar 2014; Sherkat 2014; Vargas 2012; Voas and Chaves 2016; Zuckerman 2011), the historical context of non-religion in the United States (e.g. Porterfield 2012; Schmidt 2016), and how non-religious individuals understand themselves and come together to forge identities and communities (Baker and Smith 2015; Blankholm 2014; Cimino and Smith 2014; García and Blankholm 2016; Guenther *et al.* 2013; Kettell 2013, 2014; LeDrew 2013, 2015; Manning 2015; Smith 2011, 2013; Stewart 2016; Sumerau and Cragun 2016).

Much of this work does not consider non-religion an isolated case, but rather in relation to other religious groups and authorities in society (Lee 2015; Quack 2014). Taking this relational approach, we quickly come to two conclusions that at first appear contradictory in the case of non-religion in the United States. First, non-religion can be marginalized. A growing body of work highlights both prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior toward non-religious individuals (Cragun *et al.* 2012; Edgell *et al.* 2006; 2016; Gervais *et al.* 2011; Hammer *et al.* 2012; Swan and Heesacker 2012; Volokh 2006; Wallace *et al.* 2014). Second, non-religion is concurrent with a high degree of social advantage. Non-religious Americans tend to be more white, male, and well-educated, and are therefore able to exercise a certain degree of agency in choosing to leave religious institutions or to embrace a particular vision of secular modernity (Baker and Smith 2015; LeDrew 2015; Sherkat 2014).

In reality, this apparent contradiction highlights the importance of understanding non-religion from an intersectional perspective. The social status of non-religion, like any other ideological standpoint, is not simply defined by *either* privilege *or* marginalization. Instead non-religion is a compelling empirical case to illustrate the principles of intersectionality at work, or, as Crenshaw (1991: 1245) writes, “the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (cf. Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). For example, current scholarship focuses on the “gender gap” in religious

involvement (Carroll 2004; Voas, McAndrew, and Storm 2013). An intersectional approach might consider how norms of religiosity are differentially enforced across genders, and in turn how they foster different gendered experiences with non-religion and strategies for expressing non-religion (e.g. Baker and Smith 2015). If non-religious identities are stigmatized, the privileged may be freer to embrace them because they can better weather the consequences of stigmatized choices (Edgell, Frost, and Stewart, *in press*).

The research presented in this special issue represents a set of innovative, early forays into an intersectional approach to non-religion. We are excited about these authors’ contributions to the field because they tackle both cutting edge theoretical work and basic social facts that speak to a number of recent trends on non-religion in particular and in the social sciences more broadly.

For example, many of the authors in this issue consider the intersections between race, gender, sexuality, and non-religion, particularly through the lens of transgender individuals’ experiences. This conversation is especially important as other research considers the racialized aspects of non-religion (Kahn and Lloyd 2016; LeDrew 2015) and the implications of trans\* experiences for social scientific examinations of identity and inequality (e.g. see Brubaker 2016; Miller and Grollman 2015; Murib 2015, among others). While previous work compares the experiences of non-religious individuals to other identity-based political movements, especially the LGBT movement (Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow 2007), the articles in this issue from Mathers and Kolysh also push us to think about the empirical ways that non-religion might intersect with respondents’ religious and racial backgrounds, queer and trans\* experiences, and even geographic space to produce social standpoints that challenge movements based on stable and coherent shared identities (Gamson 1995; Stewart 2016; Wilcox 2009).

These articles also advance the field by returning to basic investigations with a critical eye and a willingness to question consensus in the literature on religious identities. Work by Cragun and Sumerau demonstrates notable *similarities* in the way that religious and non-religious respondents evaluate certain minority groups and in their rates of chronic health conditions. While much of the work in our field has studied non-religious individuals on their own terms, and rightfully so, these pieces demonstrate how an intersectional approach also requires thinking about the ways that non-religion does *not* distinguish particular social standpoints, but actually falls in line with

existing divisions along lines of religion, race, gender, and social class.

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### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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