

Atheists and Other Cultural Outsiders: Moral Boundaries and the Non-Religious in the United States

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We use data from a nationally representative survey to analyze anti-atheist sentiment in the United States in 2014, replicating analyses from a decade earlier and extending them to consider the factors that foster negative sentiment toward other non-religious persons. We find that anti-atheist sentiment is strong, persistent, and driven in part by moral concerns about atheists and in part by agreement with cultural values that affirm religiosity as a constitutive moral grounding of citizenship and national identity. Moral concerns about atheists also spill over to shape attitudes toward those who are spiritual but not religious (SBNRs) and influence evaluations of the recent decline in religious identification. Americans have more positive views of SBNRs than of atheists, but a plurality of Americans still negatively evaluate the increase in the percentage of Americans who claim no religious identification (nones). Our analyses show the continuing centrality of religiously rooted moral boundary-making in constituting cultural membership in the American context.

How persistent and durable is anti-atheist sentiment in the United States? A decade ago, [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#) found that Americans express a stronger preference for distance from atheists in both public and private life than from any others in a long list of racial and religious minority groups. Recent changes in the percentage of Americans who claim no religious identity and in the visibility of atheists raise the question of whether religion remains constitutive of the symbolic boundary that divides cultural insiders and outsiders in the United States, and highlights the need to understand how Americans evaluate the full range of non-religious groups and persons.

We analyze attitudes toward atheists and the spiritual-but-not-religious, and also examine how Americans evaluate the increase in the nones (those claiming

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no religious identity) using a nationally representative survey that contains the same dependent variables used a decade ago by [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#). Taken as a whole, our analyses allow us to understand the mechanisms driving negative sentiment toward the non-religious in the United States. They also allow us to develop a better theoretical account of how religiosity, as a proxy for moral worth, underpins cultural membership in our increasingly multicultural society ([Lamont 1992](#); [Lamont and Molnár 2002](#); cf. [Bail 2008](#); [Edgell 2012](#); [Edgell and Tranby 2010](#); [Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009](#); [Kivisto 2012](#)).

We take a threefold analytical approach. First, we investigate whether the rising visibility of the non-religious in American life has reduced Americans' willingness to draw symbolic boundaries excluding atheists. Second, we use quantitative data to test empirically the interpretation of the meaning and sources of anti-atheist sentiment proposed by [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#). This is important because while the authors' main analyses relied upon nationally representative survey data, the theoretical interpretation of the findings relied substantially on a small sample of qualitative interviews that supplemented the main data source. Third, we examine Americans' attitudes toward the spiritual-but-not-religious and the nones to see if the same moral concerns that drive anti-atheist sentiment also shape attitudes toward other non-religious Americans.

Our first research question is about change over the past decade: *Is anti-atheist sentiment as high today as it was in 2003?* Since 2003, atheists have become more organized, vocal, and visible ([Blankholm 2014](#); [Cimino and Smith 2014](#)). This might reduce negative sentiment toward atheists by making dominant group members more knowledgeable about their goals, lifestyles, and cultural practices (cf. [Putnam and Campbell 2010](#)). However, increasing familiarity can also enhance negative sentiment toward minority groups who are seen as threatening, especially when the threat is not understood as economic or political in nature (e.g. see [Quillian 1995](#)), but as moral or cultural ([Bail 2008](#); [Edgell and Tranby 2010](#)). Studies of symbolic racism ([Sears et al. 1997](#)) and anti-Muslim sentiment ([Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009](#)) show that the persistence of negative sentiments can be rooted in dominant group members' sense that a minority group's culture is pathological and their choices are morally troubling.

This leads to our second research question: *Do specific moral concerns motivate anti-atheist sentiment?* While their main analyses drew on nationally representative survey data, [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#) used small-sample in-depth interview data to support their interpretation that anti-atheist sentiment is rooted in perceptions of atheists as immoral (cf. [Lamont 1992](#)). They identified three distinct moral concerns that dominant group members have about atheists: they associate atheists with criminality (a threat "from below" in the status hierarchy) and with materialism and an elitist lack of accountability (threats "from above"). We develop this analysis using survey items asking about specific beliefs about what atheists are like and what problems other Americans associate with them.

Our third question is about negative sentiment toward other non-religious Americans: *Is it atheists in particular that Americans find morally troubling, or*

are they equally concerned about the rising percentage of those claiming no religious identity and about other non-religious persons and groups? Moral concerns with atheists could be rooted in a perception that they are specifically problematic because they embrace a politicized identity that is intolerant or combative, hence rejecting of civic norms of tolerance and politeness (cf. [Eliasoph 1998](#); [Putnam and Campbell 2010](#)). If this is the case, Americans' attitudes toward other non-believers should be more accepting. To investigate this, we analyze sentiment regarding the spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNRs), and also examine how Americans evaluate the increase in the percentage of those who claim no religious identity (nones).

Below, we show that anti-atheist sentiment is persistent and durable, still higher in 2014 than for all other groups except Muslim Americans. We find that a significant minority of Americans associate atheists with a lack of morals, an association that drives anti-atheist sentiment in both public and private life. Americans also evaluate the increase in the nones quite negatively. However, sentiment toward SBNRs, who may be understood as embracing some elements of theism, is more positive. Perhaps most significantly, Americans who have moral concerns about atheists also have more negative sentiments toward SBNRs, and they are more likely to negatively view the rising percentage of Americans who claim no religious identity.

Our findings support the argument that atheists are persistent cultural outsiders in the United States because they are perceived to have rejected cultural values and practices understood as constitutive of private morality, civic virtue, and national identity. Moreover, any refusal to embrace a religious identity is troubling for a large portion of Americans, provoking moral concerns that are not limited to those who are the most adamant in their rejection (atheists). Examining attitudes toward atheists sheds light on more general processes of moral boundary-making in the United States, and reveals the continued centrality of religion as a moral boundary-marker.

Religious and Moral Boundaries in America

Most scholarship has treated religion as a source of social inclusion, one that has become more expansive over time. Despite the formative influence of Protestant culture on American institutions ([Hall 2005](#)), the formal separation of church and state and a secular, rights-based understanding of citizenship have led to an increasing tolerance for religious pluralism ([Hecl 2007](#)). The trend was not always smooth or uniform. The Know-Nothing Party recruited widely on the basis of anti-Catholic sentiment in the 1840s ([Dolan 1992](#)), and a significant undercurrent of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism buoyed the KKK and anti-immigration politics well into the twentieth century ([McVeigh 2009](#)). But by the 1950s, broad if not universal acceptance of Catholic and Jewish immigrants in American cities, workplaces, and politics had paved the way for a widespread and popular ecumenical movement, and [Herberg \(1983\)](#) famously argued that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews were all "good Americans." Since the 1965 immigration reform, even small non-Christian

groups have encountered an environment of pluralism, in which religious differences are retained and respected (Eck 2007).

Putnam and Campbell (2010), in *American Grace*, draw on contact theory and argue that America's historically high rates of religious involvement foster identity formation and civic participation in American life, while the voluntary and expressive nature of religious commitment means that religion is not, overall, a source of violence, conflict, or division (cf. Hout and Fischer 2014). Recent research on millennials, who are less religious, more tolerant of diversity than were their parents, and uncomfortable with religious dogmatism (Wuthnow 2010), supports the thrust of this meta-narrative of increasing pluralism and tolerance.

It remains unclear whether the expansion of the American moral "we" can include atheists and others who are not religious. Religious belief and commitment have historically been understood as proxies for the private virtues—integrity, trustworthiness, and concern for others—that underpin public life (Caplow et al. 1983; de Tocqueville [1835] 2003; Lamont 1992; Smith 2003; cf. Weber [1905] 2009). Likewise, American national identity is understood in moral and religious terms (Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013). An understanding of public and private moral virtue as intertwined, based in religiosity, and central to American national identity is not only enshrined in founding myths (Smith 2003), but also instantiated in enduring civic, political, and discursive structures (Hall 2005). Thus, religious minorities have a pathway to cultural insider status (cf. Herberg 1983) through engaging in practices like prayer and communal religious participation which are understood as moral and as having public implications.

However, religious minorities perceived as explicitly rejecting dominant, morally important beliefs and practices may face persistent negative sentiment (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009). Non-Christian immigrants feel pressure to display pro-national behaviors to compensate for their outsider status when they wish to be considered "true" Americans (Jacobs and Theiss-Morse 2013), and adopt Christian cultural practices and organization forms even if they subvert historically important aspects of their own religious traditions (Cadge and Ecklund 2007). Wiccans had to fight to get their sacred symbol, a pentagram, placed on the gravestones of soldiers in national cemeteries because of its historical association in Christian religious culture with the devil (Shane 2007). And when minority religious identities become politicized, they are problematic. Rates of anti-Muslim violence spiked after the attacks of September 11, 2001 (as did attacks on Sikh Americans, who are often confused with Muslims by dominant-group members¹). Even the generally tolerant millennials exhibit relatively strong anti-Muslim sentiments (Cox et al. 2011).

Analysis of anti-atheist sentiment can serve as an empirical case through which to develop a better understanding of the general processes of moral boundary-drawing and cultural membership in the United States and the persistence of religion as a moral boundary-marker. The increasing numbers and visibility of the non-religious may challenge dominant normative discourses about religion's centrality to morality and citizenship (Williams 2013) and the

understanding of religiosity as a choice that reveals one's moral character (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009). To be clear, religion does not *necessarily* play this role in all social contexts; America may be distinct in both its emphasis on authenticity and moral worthiness as relevant for citizenship and the importance of religiosity as a valued form of social capital (Lamont 1992). Moreover, even in the United States moral boundaries are not drawn *solely* against the non-religious. Racial, sexual, political, and other outgroups may be designated as moral outsiders, not fully accepted into cultural membership (Sears et al. 1997); it is important to note that religious discourse can be central to such designations as well (Edgell and Tranby 2010; Tranby and Hartmann 2008; Williams 2013). The fact that Americans are willing to explicitly state moral concerns about the non-religious—and especially atheists—makes moral boundary-drawing visible.

The Non-Religious

The rise of the nones has been dramatic and has garnered both media and scholarly attention. In 1972, 5 percent of American adults identified as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular”; in 2010, it was 16 percent (GSS 1972–2010; see Hout and Fischer [2014]); other surveys put the figure at just under 20 percent of all adults, and at 32 percent for Americans under the age of 30 (Pew 2014a and 2014b). Being “non-religious” is a transitional stage for some (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Most “nones” are not atheists or agnostics: about half of the “nones” (55 percent) describe themselves as either religious or spiritual, 41 percent pray more than once per month, and 68 percent believe in a God or a universal spirit (Pew 2014a and 2014b). This trend toward non-affiliation has resulted in a large and heterogeneous group of non-religious Americans (Baker and Smith 2009, 2015; Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010).

Americans are increasingly identifying as “spiritual.” And while some embrace a theistic spirituality that is compatible with participation in mainstream religious institutions (Ammerman 2013), others identify as “spiritual” or “spiritual-but-not-religious” to signal a critical distance from organized religion and religious identities (Besecke 2013; Hout and Fischer 2002). The stability of spiritual identification has been questioned (Smith and Denton 2005), but Mercadante's (2014) research shows that identifying as SBNR often signals formative and long-term grappling with the adequacy of religion as a locus of meaning-making (cf. Zhai et al. 2008). For our purposes, what matters is that SBNRs are visible and that the label suggests openness to some theistic beliefs. Like the “nones,” SBNRs are a heterogeneous non-religious group.

Despite the growing visibility and variety of non-religious identities in the United States, much of the existing research focuses only on atheists and agnostics, who report experiencing discrimination on a regular basis (Cragun et al. 2012; cf. Swan and Heesacker 2012). Experimental research on hiring discrimination and voter preferences suggests that anti-atheist stigma may have negative material and interpersonal consequences (Djupe and Calfano 2013; Franks and Scherr 2014; Wallace, Wright, and Hall 2014; Wright et al. 2013), which may explain why

more privileged Americans (white males with a college degree) embrace it (Baker and Smith 2015). Atheists may be associated with an aggressively politicized form of non-religion (Putnam and Campbell 2010; cf. Eliasoph 1998); they may be visible in daily life because they are confronted with institutions that code civic participation in Christian religious terms. Students are asked to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in schools, and community meetings often open with a prayer; the Scouts and fraternal orders endorse statements of faith, usually Christian, and AA mandates embracing a “higher power.” For atheists, choosing to “go along” or “pass” in such a context violates a well-defined and explicitly embraced non-theistic identity, while nones and SBNRs may have more flexibility in orienting themselves toward these valued civic rituals.

Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann’s (2006) study of anti-atheist attitudes used measures of social distance in both public and private life and focused on the causes of anti-atheist sentiment. They found that about 40 percent of respondents said that atheists “did not at all agree” with their vision of American society, and about 48 percent said they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. These attitudes were strongest among women, African Americans, and those who saw religious belief as central to national identity. Supplemental qualitative interviews indicated that some respondents thought atheists were more likely to engage in deviant or illegal behaviors, some thought they were cultural elitists unaccountable to everyone else, and others simply thought atheists were unconcerned with the common good (2006, 227). Recent research on atheists’ experiences with distrust and discrimination (Hammer et al. 2012; Harper 2007; Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011; Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff 2012) generally supports the argument that distrust of atheists is often based on assumptions about atheists’ morality, trustworthiness, or cultural competency. In sum, prior research suggests that moral concerns may drive anti-atheist sentiment, but it provides little insight into the factors that shape how Americans draw symbolic boundaries that may exclude other non-religious groups, identities, and persons.

Data and Methods

Data

We use data from the Boundaries in the American Mosaic (BAM) Survey, designed as a ten-year replication and extension of the original American Mosaic Project study of religion, race, and diversity. The data come from a nationally representative sample recruited through the GfK Group’s KnowledgePanel, a probability-based online panel consisting of approximately 50,000 adult members covering approximately 97 percent of American households. Panelists are compensated for their time with either a cash incentive or the provision of a computer and Internet access.

The BAM Survey sample was drawn from panel members using a probability proportional to size (PPS) weighted sampling approach. Data collection took place between February 28, 2014, and March 16, 2014. Of the 4,353 people

that were contacted, 2,521 completed the survey, for a completion rate of 57.9 percent. Research on non-response bias in KnowledgePanel samples has found no significant differences in respondents and non-respondents related to the goals of the survey (Heeren et al. 2008). Studies using Heckman selection procedures have shown that self-selection bias is not an important factor in participating in KnowledgePanel surveys (Cameron and DeShazob 2013). Combined with base and post-stratification weights,² the BAM Survey is weighted to account for survey non-response and oversampling of African Americans and Hispanics. All analyses use these survey weights.

A primary goal of the BAM Survey was to replicate items from the original American Mosaic Project survey to assess trends in key measures. The AMP was collected using an RDD-based method, while the BAM uses ABS techniques. Though RDD sampling was the best methodological choice in 2003, increasing numbers of Americans use cell phones and call privacy and screening technologies (Blumberg and Luke 2011; Chang and Krosnick 2009; Link et al. 2008; Smyth et al. 2010). Further, the operational costs of RDD telephone surveys continue to increase substantially due to difficulties in reaching respondents (Curtin, Presser, and Singer 2005). These challenges meant that an RDD survey was no longer the best option to reach a random sample of Americans in 2014, prompting the change in survey mode.

Many items from both the AMP and the BAM Survey are forced-choice format questions, which produce similar results in web, mail, and telephone surveys (Smyth et al. 2006; cf. Dillman 2009). A recent comparison examining survey-mode effects between a probability-based telephone survey and a probability-based web survey found no significant differences in accuracy between the two surveys (Yeager et al. 2011). At the same time, caution is needed in making too much of changes between the two survey deployments, as web-based surveys may reduce social desirability effects on the reporting of controversial beliefs or behaviors (Krumpal 2013; Tourangeau and Yan 2007; cf. Presser and Stinson 1998; Hopkins 2009; Powell 2013).

Variables

Dependent variables

Our first dependent variable comes from this survey item: “Here is a list of different groups of people who live in this country. For each one, please indicate how much you think people in this group agree with YOUR vision of American society.” Respondents were presented with a list of fifteen minority groups presented in random order, and for each they selected from a range of four options: “almost completely agree,” “mostly agree,” “somewhat agree,” and “not at all.” We recoded responses to this question into a dichotomous variable where 1 indicates that the respondent selected “not at all” and 0 indicates any other choice. This question is akin to traditional thermometer questions but was designed to capture what Lamont and Molnár (2002, 187–88) call cultural membership as perceived distance from others in public life. A positive answer is an indicator of solidarity, while the negative answer

illustrates symbolic boundaries when a respondent stakes a claim against an outgroup.

The second question asked, “People can feel differently about their children marrying people from various backgrounds. Suppose your son or daughter wanted to marry someone from the different backgrounds listed here. Would you approve of this choice, disapprove of it, or wouldn’t it make any difference at all one way or the other?” Again, we recoded this question into a dichotomous variable where the 1 category indicates a respondent saying they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. This is a standard measure of group prejudice, and we interpret it as a measure of personal trust and acceptance.

These two questions regarding atheists were asked in the earlier AMP survey, providing us with a basis for direct comparison between the factors shaping anti-atheist sentiment in 2003 and 2014. In the BAM Survey, these items were also asked regarding the spiritual but not religious (SBNRs). Finally, we use a third dependent variable that asks respondents to evaluate the implications of the increasing percentage of Americans who claim no religious identity, asking respondents, “Increasing numbers of Americans claim no religious affiliation. Is that a good thing, a bad thing, or neither?” We recoded the responses into a dichotomous variable (1 = “a bad thing,” 0 = “a good thing” or “neither”).

We use five blocks of independent variables in our models: demographics and social context, religious belief and practice, cultural values, experiences with diversity, and attitudes toward atheists (see table 1).

Demographics and social context

The demographic variables include age (as a linear or dummy variable, depending on the model), a dichotomous measure of gender, three dichotomous measures of race (Black, Hispanic, and “other” or mixed race), a six-category ordinal measure of educational attainment, and an eight-category ordinal measure of household income. We treat these demographic variables largely as controls. Our measures of social context include four county-level measures: the percentage who voted Democratic in the 2012 presidential election, the rate of religious adherence,³ religious heterogeneity, and the percentage of those who fall below the poverty line.

Religious belief and practice

Our replication model includes a scale measure of religious involvement that combines an ordinal measure of respondents’ self-reported attendance at religious services (seven categories ranging from “never” to “more than once a week”), an ordinal measure of religious salience (“How important is your religion to you?” Very important, Somewhat important, Not very important, or Not at all important), and a dichotomous measure of whether respondents reported volunteering at a church or other religious institution in the past year (standardized scale $\alpha = .77$). This measure goes beyond the standard use of church attendance to measure religious involvement, and similar scales have been successfully used in previous research (Edgell and Tranby 2007, 2010).

Table 1. Independent Variables

Variable	Obs.	Mean/ Prop.	Std. dev.	Description
Age	2521	46.97	17.02	Continuous measure (18–94)
Female	2521	0.52	0.50	Dummy variable
Education	2521	3.24	1.61	Six-point scale
Income	2521	5.63	2.09	Eight-point scale
Age < 35	2521	0.29	0.45	Dummy variable
Black	2521	0.12	0.32	Dummy variable
Hispanic	2521	0.15	0.36	Dummy variable
Racial ID as “Other” or “Mixed race”	2521	0.07	0.26	Dummy variable
County % Voting Democrat 2012	2144	51.12	15.09	
County % Religious adherence rate	2513	38.33	11.72	Sum of county-level ratios of denominations
County % Religious heterogeneity	2513	1.05	0.09	IQV for county-level proportions of denominations
County % Below poverty line	2514	15.61	5.46	
Religious involvement scale	2468	6.62	3.26	Scale of attendance, salience, and volunteering
Personal religious importance	2484	3.02	1.10	Four-point scale
Religious service attendance	2479	3.38	2.19	Seven-point scale
Volunteering at religious org.	2521	0.21	0.41	Dummy variable
Conservative Protestant	2471	0.24	0.43	Dummy variable
Catholic	2471	0.23	0.42	Dummy variable
Biblical literalism	2423	0.30	0.46	Dummy variable
Non-religious identification	2471	0.33	0.47	Dummy variable
Political conservatism	2466	0.36	0.48	Dummy variable
Sympathy for African Americans	2375	5.90	2.30	Scale support: affirmative action and financial aid
Everyone follows the rules	2493	0.71	0.45	Dummy variable
Society based on God’s laws	2431	2.64	1.08	Four-point scale
Freedom of religion	2508	3.65	0.67	Four-point scale
Separation of church and state	2504	3.23	0.92	Four-point scale
Good Americans are religious	2503	2.53	1.03	Four-point scale
Values diversity	2507	0.56	0.50	Dummy variable
Reports diversity in town	2427	0.68	0.47	Dummy variable

(Continued)

Table 1. continued

Variable	Obs.	Mean/ Prop.	Std. dev.	Description
Considers diversity a strength	2479	3.67	1.08	Four-point scale
Atheists elitist	2394	1.96	0.93	Four-point scale
Atheists immoral	2393	2.18	1.03	Four-point scale
Atheists criminal	2385	1.86	0.91	Four-point scale

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: Data are weighted to correct for non-response bias and oversampling. Religious denominations include Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, and Presbyterian (source: US Religion Census). All attitudinal scales are coded such that higher values represent stronger agreement or importance to respondents, while lower values represent stronger disagreement.

In our updated models improving upon the replication, we separate these measures and treat them as individual independent variables to provide a more direct interpretation of the influence of each. We also include a dummy variable for conservative Protestants and Catholics in the replication model. In the updated models, we use conservative Protestants and respondents who report no religious affiliation. These dichotomous variables were derived from a survey question “What is your current religious preference, if any?” that provided response options based on the RELTRAD scheme (Steensland et al. 2000). We use the label “conservative Protestant” to connote the broad range of religious tradition among those in this category. The variable for no religious affiliation is an extension of the RELTRAD scheme that includes those who identify as spiritual but not religious and those who identify as nothing in particular. We collapsed the response options from the RELTRAD scheme into these two dummy variables so that our reference category is all other religious identifications, because this allows us to examine whether attitudes about atheists and other non-religious groups are polarized against a moderate middle (cf. Evans and Evans 2008). Finally, we include a dummy measure for respondents who agree that the Bible is the literal word of God.

Experiences with diversity

Attitudes toward small outgroups may be shaped by a person’s own experiences with social difference or agreement with a kind of cosmopolitan acceptance of diversity as its own good (for race-based critiques, see Bell and Hartmann [2007]; Hartmann [2015]). We use three items. The first is “Here is a list of things that people may think are important in the United States. Please indicate how important YOU think each of these is,” with the response options “very important,” “somewhat important,” “not very important,” or “not at all important.” We use these options as an ordinal measure in response to the prompt “We value racial diversity.” We also include a measure of respondents’ general

acceptance of diversity discourse: “The United States is one of the most socially and culturally diverse nations in the world. Do you see this as mostly a strength, mostly a weakness, or equally a strength and weakness?” Respondents answered this question on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “mostly” and “somewhat” a strength, to “equally a strength and weakness,” to “somewhat” and “mostly” a weakness. Measuring subjective exposure to diversity is a four-point scale asking the extent to which respondents strongly agreed, somewhat agreed, or somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statement “There IS a lot of social and cultural diversity in my city or town.”

Cultural values

We include a dichotomous measure of political conservatism and a scale variable that measures sympathy toward African American inequality, as attitudes toward atheism may be related to broader views of tolerance or prejudice. We use a dichotomous measure of procedural values (“It’s important that Americans all follow the same rules”). We include ordinal measures agreement that society’s standard of right and wrong should be built on religious principles, the importance they place on the free exercise of religion and the separation of church and state, and whether they agree that good Americans should be religious.⁴

Beliefs about what atheists are like

We include three measures that directly capture assumptions about what atheists are like, developed to test the interpretation of interview data reported in [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#). These measures capture perceptions of elitism (“atheists are part of the elite, unaccountable to you and me”), of a generalized lack of morality (“atheists lack a moral center”), and of criminality (“atheists are more likely to engage in criminal behavior than others”).

Methods

We use logistic regression⁵ and build three models of Americans’ willingness to draw public and private boundaries that exclude atheists. First, we replicate, to the extent possible, the models in [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#). Second, we create a “best fit” model that modifies this replication approach; in this model, we eliminate missing data from a non-significant independent variable (county percent voting Democrat in 2012); add independent variables unique to the 2014 data; and eliminate the composite religious involvement scale to enter the component variables separately. Third, we develop a final model that adds variables that measure perceptions of atheists as immoral, elitist, or criminal. Using list-wise deletion of missing cases across our second and third models reduces the missing data in each model by about half.⁶ We use the Hosmer–Lemeshow test, the percentage of cases correctly classified, and the Bayesian Information Criteria to assess equation fit for both weighted and unweighted tests of each model.

Results

Descriptive Results: Attitudes Toward the Non-Religious across a Decade

The BAM Survey sample contains a total of about 33 percent of respondents who fall into a broad “religious nones” category; 3.8 percent identified as atheist, 3.5 percent as agnostic, 7.1 percent as “spiritual but not religious,” and 18.5 percent as “nothing in particular.” These proportions are comparable with trends identified by other nationally representative surveys (e.g., the 2014 GSS and the 2014 Pew Religious Landscape Survey). Our first research question asks about whether the social changes of the past decade—an increase in the number of non-religious Americans, increasing tolerance among younger cohorts, and the increasing visibility of “organized non-belief”—have reduced levels of anti-atheist sentiment. Table 2 shows that anti-atheist sentiment is still strong in the United States.

It is possible that the switch to a web-survey format in 2014 might have increased levels of *reporting* of anti-atheist sentiment, due to a decrease in the social desirability effect. The fact that there were increases in negative sentiment for other groups between waves 1 and 2 would support this interpretation. However, it is also consistent with a different interpretation—that it was more acceptable to express anti-atheist sentiment in both time periods than it was to voice negative sentiment about other groups. We believe the overall pattern of responses supports the second interpretation. First, responses regarding atheists did not move in the same direction for both of our questions. Second, the relative ordering of the responses to the groups is remarkably stable. While Muslims have surpassed atheists as the least-accepted group, Muslims and atheists still receive the most negative evaluations compared to all other groups in 2014, as they did in 2003. Overall, we find no support for the idea that the increasing visibility of non-religious persons, groups, and movements in American life has reduced anti-atheist sentiment in any significant way.

The BAM Survey also asked about attitudes toward the spiritual but not religious (SBNRs). As table 2 shows, Americans are less willing to exclude this group of non-religious Americans in both private and public life. However, attitudes toward the rising percentage of “nones” are also quite negative, with about 40 percent of respondents saying they think the increase in Americans without a religious identity is a bad thing; about 50 percent of respondents claimed this was “neither a good nor a bad thing,” and only 10 percent said this was a good thing.

Descriptive Results: Assumptions about Atheists

In the research for the original American Mosaic Project, in-depth interviews revealed three different ways in which respondents understood atheists to be morally problematic. Some associated atheism with criminality—a threat “from below” in the status hierarchy. Other respondents understood atheists as materialists or as unaccountable; these comprise a threat “from above” motivated by

Table 2. Dependent Variables and Outgroup Preferences

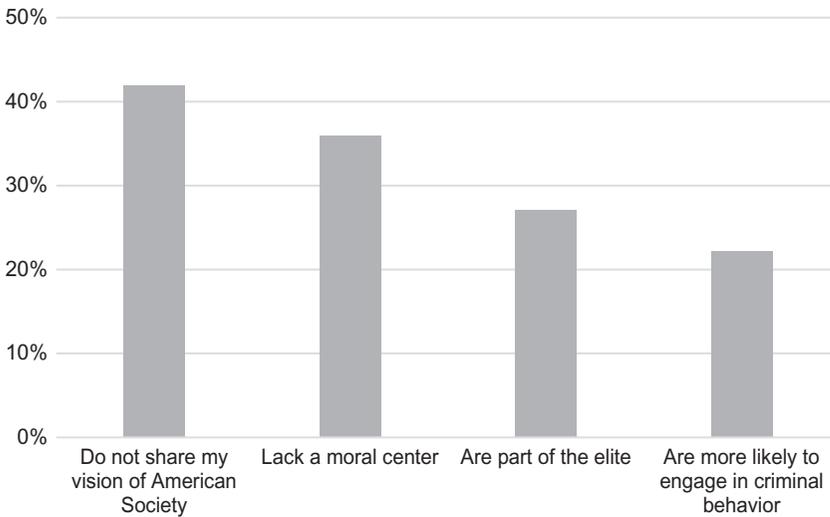
Dependent variable	2003 (AMP)	2014 (BAM)
This group does not at all agree with my vision of American society		
Atheists	39.6%	41.9%
Muslims	26.3%	45.5%
Homosexuals	22.6%	29.4%
Conservative Christians	13.5%	26.6%
Recent immigrants	12.5%	25.6%
Hispanics	7.6%	17.1%
Jews	7.4%	17.6%
Asian Americans	7.0%	16.4%
African Americans	4.6%	16.9%
Spiritual, but not religious	—	12.0%
Whites	2.2%	10.2%
I would disapprove if my child wanted to marry a member of this group		
Atheist	47.6%	43.7%
Muslim	33.5%	48.9%
African American	27.2%	23.2%
Hispanic	18.5%	12.6%
Asian American	18.5%	12.3%
Jew	11.8%	17.8%
Conservative Christian	6.9%	17.2%
Spiritual, but not religious	—	13.7%
Whites	2.3%	4.7%
Increasing numbers of Americans claim no religious identity. Is that...		
A bad thing	—	39.6%
A good thing, or neither good nor bad	—	60.4%

Source: American Mosaic Project 2003, Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: Data are weighted to correct for non-response bias and oversampling.

concern that atheists might show an arrogant lack of regard for the values and lifestyles of ordinary Americans. The BAM Survey included a series of items designed to follow up on the insights generated by the qualitative research conducted as part of the original American Mosaic Project, along with questions about the types of threats or problems associated with atheists and other groups.

Figure 1 shows that moral concerns about atheists are, in fact, relatively common in American society; for example, over a third of Americans (36 percent) either somewhat agree or strongly agree that atheists “lack a moral center.” The BAM Survey also asked people about seven problems that they might perceive to be associated with particular minority groups. Table 3 shows that

Figure 1. Percent of Americans saying atheists . . .**Table 3. Percent of Respondents Associating Social Problems with Minority Groups**

	Atheists	Muslims	African Americans	Recent immigrants
Don't share morals or values	27%	29.6%	9.3%	9.4%
Are intolerant of others	16.1%	28.9%	15.8%	6.6%
Want to take over political institutions	10.1%	18.2%	9.9%	5.9%
Don't contribute to community	8.7%	14%	8.8%	12.9%
Are a threat to public order and safety	8.3%	22.1%	12.6%	9.6%
Are dependent on welfare	6.8%	9.5%	34.4%	26.8%
Take jobs and resources	2.8%	6.9%	4.9%	19.9%

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: Data are weighted to correct for non-response bias and oversampling.

atheists are particularly associated with moral threat; for example, over one-quarter of Americans (27 percent) of Americans say that atheists “don’t share my morals or values.”

The data summarized in figure 1 and table 3 support the interpretation by Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) that Americans’ negative sentiments regarding atheists are rooted in moral evaluations. Americans can name few *specific* material or political problems that they associate with atheists. Even our items about criminality and elite status receive lower levels of agreement than the general question about atheists “lacking a moral center.” Rather, it seems that the term “atheist” denotes a cultural category that signifies a general and diffuse sense of moral threat.

Multivariate Results—Atheists

Table 4 reports the results from three logistic regression models examining the odds of respondents claiming that atheists do not share their vision of American society. Our first model replicates, to the extent possible, the models in [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#). African Americans are more than twice as likely to say atheists do not share their vision; being older also increases the odds. Religious involvement significantly increases the odds; every point of increase on the religious involvement scale represents an 8 percent increase. Biblical literalists are 59 percent more likely to say that atheists do not share their vision of American society. Exposure to diversity, measured by county-level variables, has few effects (a small effect for the percent below the poverty line). However, respondents who *perceive* their communities as diverse are about 26 percent less likely to say that atheists do not at all share their vision of American society. Respondents with higher levels of education are about 16 percent less likely to make this claim. Cultural values figure prominently in these attitudes; those who have high levels of sympathy toward African Americans are less likely to say atheists do not share their vision of American society, and those who agree with the statement that society's standards of right and wrong should be built on God's laws are 61 percent more likely. The significance of sympathy toward African Americans suggests that respondents who draw strong racial boundaries may be using similar cultural foundations about individual competence and morality posited by theories of symbolic racism to assess atheists ([Sears and Henry 2003](#)). These results are broadly consistent with those of [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann \(2006\)](#), with the exception of socioeconomic status and county-level context variables.

In our second model, we add variables that were not available in the 2003 AMP data, and find that those who believe that a good American is religious and those who hold religion to be personally important are 42 and 32 percent more likely, respectively, to say atheists do not share their vision of society. Hispanics and those who consider diversity as a strength are less likely to make this claim. Most of the variables in model 1 continue to be significant in model 2, with four exceptions: age, the percent below poverty line in the county, biblical literalism, and the subjective perception of diversity in one's own community. These results tell us that cultural values are strong drivers of anti-atheist sentiment and may explain the effect of biblical literalism.

Most notably, the introduction of assumptions about atheists in model 3 of table 4 eliminates the significance of desiring a society based on God's laws and reduces the significance of the assumption that good Americans are religious. This result suggests that broad cultural values are mediated by the assumption that atheists are immoral. Supplemental tests indicate this is indeed the case.⁷ Conversely, and surprisingly, the assumption that atheists are part of the elite associates with lower odds of saying atheists do not share one's vision of society, suggesting that respondents to the survey did not interpret elitism as a negative trait. This trend persists in other models discussed below (tables 5 and 8). [Baker and Smith \(2015\)](#) argue that as the most stigmatized non-religious identity,

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results for Atheists "Do Not Share My Vision of American Society"

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Age	0.01**	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Female	0.20	0.13	0.10	0.12	0.17	0.13
Education	-0.18***	0.05	-0.15**	0.05	-0.14**	0.05
Income	0.04	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.08*	0.04
Age < 35			-0.21	0.22	-0.11	0.23
Black	0.75***	0.20	0.50**	0.19	0.55**	0.20
Hispanic			-0.49*	0.19	-0.35	0.21
Other/mixed race			0.09	0.34	0.04	0.34
Cty. % Voting Democrat 2012	0.00	0.00				
Cty. religious adherence rate	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Cty. religious heterogeneity	1.85	1.83	1.38	1.22	0.99	1.27
Cty. % below poverty line	-0.03*	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Religious involvement scale	0.08**	0.03				
Personal religious importance			0.28**	0.10	0.28**	0.10
Religious service attendance			-0.02	0.04	-0.03	0.05
Volunteering at religious org.			0.24	0.18	0.30	0.18
Conservative Protestant	0.29	0.17	0.29	0.16	0.24	0.16
Catholic	-0.12	0.17				
Biblical literalism	0.47**	0.15	0.27	0.15	0.23	0.16
Non-religious identification			0.06	0.18	0.22	0.19
Political conservatism	-0.08	0.15	0.03	0.14	-0.09	0.15
Sympathy for African Americans	-0.12***	0.03	-0.11***	0.03	-0.13***	0.03
Everyone follows the rules	-0.17	0.15	-0.10	0.14	-0.03	0.15
Society based on God's laws	0.47***	0.08	0.28**	0.09	0.14	0.09
Freedom of religion	-0.15	0.11	-0.18	0.11	-0.21	0.12
Separation of church and state			-0.12	0.07	-0.11	0.08
Good Americans are religious			0.36***	0.08	0.26**	0.09
Values diversity	0.07	0.14	0.22	0.14	0.33*	0.15
Reports diversity in town	-0.30*	0.14	-0.21	0.13	-0.25	0.13
Considers diversity a strength			-0.17**	0.06	-0.14*	0.07
Atheists elitist					-0.30***	0.08
Atheists immoral					0.68***	0.10
Atheists criminal					0.16	0.10

(Continued)

Table 4. continued

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Constant	-2.79	2.41	-2.21	1.72	-2.78	1.81
N	1,882		2,169		2,169	
Wald chi square	226.17***		298.84***		329.43***	
McFadden R^2	0.16		0.19		0.23	
BIC	2285.18		2572.55		2468.295	
% Cases correctly classified	68%		71%		74%	
Hosmer–Lemeshow test	13.36		12.92		10.78	

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: All odds ratios, standard errors, and significance values reported for data weighted to correct for oversampling. BIC, chi square, and McFadden's R^2 were calculated for these weighted models. % Cases classified and HL tests were conducted for identical models with unweighted data.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

atheism is a label chosen by those with the most social power; to the extent to which people understand atheism as a privileged identity, this may reduce negative sentiment.

Table 5 repeats these analyses of respondents' propensity to say they would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. In these models, the respondent's own religious belief and practice matters consistently. Religious involvement, personal religious importance, and conservative Protestantism⁸ remained highly significant and positively related to odds of expressing disapproval toward one's child marrying an atheist across all three models, as did the expectation that society's standards of right and wrong should be based on God's laws. Biblical literalism and the expectation that good Americans are religious are significantly and positively associated with odds of disapproval until we introduce assumptions about atheists, while the effects of perceiving diversity in one's hometown persist throughout. Having no religious affiliation associates with lower odds of disapproval, but it too loses significance when we introduce assumptions about atheists; agreeing that atheists are immoral has a highly significant and positive effect that more than doubles the chance that a respondent will disapprove. Supplemental tests indicated that assumptions about atheists significantly mediate the effects of biblical literalism, believing good Americans are religious, and having no religious affiliation.⁹

Taken together, the results in tables 4 and 5 show that public distrust of atheists is primarily motivated by cultural values, and private distrust of atheists is motivated by cultural values and private religious beliefs, but both effects are substantially mediated by respondents' moral concerns about atheists.

Table 5. Logistic Regression Results for Disapproval of Child Marrying an Atheist

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01
Female	0.14	0.14	0.11	0.14	0.22	0.14
Education	-0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05	0.07	0.05
Income	0.04	0.04	0.05	0.04	0.06	0.04
Age < 35			0.03	0.24	0.14	0.27
Black	-0.10	0.22	-0.20	0.21	-0.19	0.22
Hispanic			-0.41*	0.21	-0.26	0.23
Other/mixed race			-0.34	0.37	-0.45	0.38
Cty. % voting Democrat 2012	0.00	0.01				
Cty. religious adherence rate	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Cty. religious heterogeneity	0.20	1.97	0.41	1.56	-0.35	1.50
Cty. % below poverty line	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Religious involvement scale	0.22***	0.03				
Personal religious importance			0.35**	0.10	0.37**	0.12
Religious service attendance			0.14***	0.04	0.16***	0.05
Volunteering at religious org.			0.27	0.19	0.35	0.20
Conservative Protestant	0.69***	0.18	0.44**	0.17	0.47*	0.18
Catholic	-0.06	0.18				
Biblical literalism	0.37*	0.17	0.33*	0.17	0.21	0.17
Non-religious identification			-0.36*	0.18	-0.16	0.20
Political conservatism	0.18	0.16	0.24	0.15	0.11	0.16
Sympathy for African Americans	-0.08*	0.03	-0.06	0.03	-0.09**	0.04
Everyone follows the rules	0.03	0.17	0.01	0.17	0.08	0.18
Society based on God's laws	0.74***	0.08	0.58***	0.08	0.42***	0.10
Freedom of religion	-0.08	0.15	-0.12	0.15	-0.17	0.18
Separation of church and state			0.01	0.09	0.06	0.10
Good Americans are religious			0.31***	0.08	0.14	0.10
Values diversity	-0.22	0.15	-0.21	0.16	-0.10	0.18
Reports diversity in town	-0.43**	0.15	-0.32*	0.14	-0.39**	0.15
Considers diversity a strength			-0.10	0.06	-0.03	0.07
Atheists elitist					-0.24*	0.10
Atheists immoral					0.89***	0.12
Atheists criminal					0.22	0.12

(Continued)

Table 5. *continued*

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Constant	-3.37	2.62	-3.81	2.18	-4.78*	2.25
N	1,887		2,177		2,177	
Wald chi square	341.12***		415.85***		457.85***	
McFaddenR ²	0.30		0.32		0.38	
BIC	1974.93		2240.93		2073.83	
% Cases correctly classified	76%		76%		79%	
Hosmer–Lemeshow test	5.33		7.23		9.91	

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: All coefficients, standard errors, and significance values reported for data weighted to correct for oversampling. BIC, chi square, and McFadden's R^2 were calculated for these weighted models. % Cases classified and HL tests were conducted for identical models with unweighted data.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Multivariate Results—SBNRs and Nones

Over the past decade, a set of high-profile organizations and spokespersons have worked to decrease stigma associated with atheism, increase self-identification, and engage in secular political causes (Cimino and Smith 2014). We investigate whether the same factors that drive anti-atheist sentiment also shape attitudes toward religious minority groups that are more amorphous and less politicized. We also examine “spillover” effects, analyzing whether moral concerns about atheists also drive attitudes toward other non-religious minorities.

Spiritual, but not religious

Tables 6 and 7 show the results of our analysis of respondents' attitudes toward Americans who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNRs). Table 6 assesses respondents' propensity to say SBNRs do not share their vision of American society. In contrast to our findings for atheists, these models generally support the theoretical meta-narrative of increasing religious pluralism and tolerance. Those with higher sympathy for African Americans, stronger personal religious importance, views of diversity as a social strength, and emphasis on freedom of religion are all less likely to make this claim about SBNRs. Conversely, religious service attendance, biblical literalism, and identifying as Black all associate with higher odds of respondents making this claim.

Turning to our measure of private acceptance, Table 7 shows that private religiosity and ideology matter for disapproval of intermarriage with SBNRs. Religious attendance and political conservatism both significantly associate with

Table 6. Logistic Regression Results for SBNRs, "Do Not Share My Vision of American Society"

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Age	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Female	-0.23	0.19	-0.18	0.17	-0.13	0.17
Education	-0.16*	0.07	-0.11	0.06	-0.10	0.07
Income	-0.05	0.04	-0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.04
Age < 35			-0.26	0.31	-0.22	0.31
Black	0.70**	0.27	0.78**	0.24	0.80**	0.24
Hispanic			0.07	0.28	0.17	0.28
Other/Mixed race			-0.64	0.49	-0.73	0.49
Cty. % Voting Democrat 2012	0.00	0.01				
Cty. Religious adherence rate	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Cty. Religious heterogeneity	0.34	2.38	1.77	1.84	1.72	1.87
Cty. % Below poverty line	0.02	0.02	0.03*	0.02	0.03	0.02
Religious involvement scale	0.02	0.04				
Personal religious importance			-0.33*	0.13	-0.35**	0.12
Religious service attendance			0.13*	0.06	0.14*	0.06
Volunteering at religious org.			-0.20	0.26	-0.18	0.26
Conservative Protestant	-0.28	0.26	0.09	0.24	0.06	0.25
Catholic	-0.47	0.25				
Biblical literalism	0.45	0.24	0.59*	0.24	0.54*	0.23
Non-religious identification			0.35	0.24	0.43	0.25
Political conservatism	0.17	0.21	0.14	0.19	0.11	0.20
Sympathy for African Americans	-0.15***	0.04	-0.10*	0.04	-0.12**	0.04
Everyone follows the rules	-0.06	0.21	0.02	0.20	0.06	0.20
Society based on God's laws	-0.15	0.11	-0.03	0.13	-0.13	0.14
Freedom of religion	-0.66***	0.13	-0.50***	0.14	-0.51***	0.14
Separation of church and state			-0.19	0.10	-0.17	0.10
Good Americans are religious			0.00	0.12	-0.04	0.12
Values diversity	-0.01	0.20	0.16	0.20	0.20	0.20
Reports diversity in town	0.17	0.19	0.17	0.18	0.15	0.19
Considers diversity a strength			-0.23*	0.09	-0.21*	0.09
Atheists elitist					-0.12	0.12
Atheists immoral					0.22	0.15

(Continued)

Table 6. continued

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Atheists criminal					0.22	0.15
Constant	1.13	3.18	-0.20	2.60	-0.72	2.66
N	1,884		2,172		2,172	
Wald chi square	104.26***		128.04***		144.59***	
McFaddenR ²	0.11		0.13		0.14	
BIC	1316.99		1517.3		1525.13	
% Cases correctly classified	89%		89%		90%	
Hosmer–Lemeshow test	13.36		10.8		10.99	

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: All coefficients, standard errors, and significance values reported for data weighted to correct for oversampling. BIC, chi square, and McFadden's R^2 were calculated for these weighted models. % Cases classified and HL tests were conducted for identical models with unweighted data.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

higher odds that a respondent will disapprove of her or his child marrying an SBNR throughout all three models. Age is significant in all three models, but the effects are not large. We also find spillover effects; respondents who think atheists are immoral are more likely to disapprove of their child marrying an SBNR.

The nones

Table 8 addresses a slightly different question with the same modeling strategy. Our dependent variable is a dichotomous measure for whether respondents claim that the increasing number of Americans with no religious affiliation is a bad thing. Here, the significance of race is reversed from previous models. Black and Hispanic respondents are less likely to make this claim throughout. Income is also a newly significant variable, where respondents with higher income are more likely to claim this cultural shift is a bad thing. Personal religious importance, and believing that society should be based on God's laws and that good Americans are religious, significantly increase the odds of negatively evaluating the increase in the non-religious, as does political conservatism; experiences with diversity make people less likely to make this claim. Once again, assumptions about atheists matter as well. Those who agree that atheists are part of the elite are less likely to claim the growth of non-religious Americans is bad. Those who claim atheists are immoral, on the other hand, are 49 percent more likely to say the growth of the non-religious is a bad thing.

Table 7. Logistic Regression Results for Disapproval of Child Marrying an SBNR

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Age	-0.03***	0.01	-0.03**	0.01	-0.02**	0.01
Female	-0.06	0.19	0.05	0.18	0.13	0.19
Education	0.05	0.07	0.03	0.06	0.05	0.07
Income	-0.02	0.06	-0.05	0.05	-0.03	0.05
Age < 35			0.14	0.32	0.26	0.32
Black	-0.58*	0.28	-0.47	0.28	-0.48	0.28
Hispanic			-0.36	0.30	-0.25	0.30
Other/mixed race			0.82*	0.41	0.71	0.42
Cty. % voting Democrat 2012	0.00	0.01				
Cty. religious adherence rate	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Cty. religious heterogeneity	-0.33	2.89	-0.41	1.58	-0.83	1.66
Cty. % below poverty line	0.00	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.02
Religious involvement scale	0.19***	0.04				
Personal religious importance			-0.15	0.16	-0.18	0.17
Religious service attendance			0.25***	0.06	0.26***	0.06
Volunteering at religious org.			0.14	0.21	0.16	0.22
Conservative Protestant	0.33	0.23	0.56**	0.21	0.59**	0.22
Catholic	-0.35	0.25				
Biblical literalism	0.40	0.22	0.48*	0.21	0.45*	0.21
Non-religious identification			-0.09	0.30	0.00	0.31
Political conservatism	0.57**	0.22	0.60**	0.20	0.56**	0.20
Sympathy for African Americans	0.03	0.05	0.04	0.04	0.02	0.04
Everyone follows the rules	-0.21	0.22	-0.17	0.20	-0.10	0.21
Society based on God's laws	0.32*	0.13	0.33**	0.12	0.20	0.13
Freedom of religion	-0.21	0.20	-0.22	0.20	-0.22	0.21
Separation of church and state			0.23*	0.11	0.22*	0.11
Good Americans are religious			0.29*	0.12	0.20	0.12
Values diversity	-0.17	0.21	-0.27	0.20	-0.20	0.20
Reports diversity in town	-0.06	0.21	-0.15	0.19	-0.19	0.19
Considers diversity a strength			0.02	0.09	0.06	0.09
Atheists elitist					-0.02	0.11
Atheists immoral					0.33**	0.12
Atheists criminal					0.23	0.12

(Continued)

Table 7. continued

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Constant	-2.37	3.89	-3.44	2.42	-3.99	2.56
N	1,889		2,178		2,178	
Wald chi square	147.16***		215.86***		219.87***	
McFadden R^2	0.19		0.22		0.25	
BIC	1382.24		1563		1550.44	
% Cases correctly classified	88%		88%		88%	
Hosmer–Lemeshow test	8.63		11.13		6.03	

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: All coefficients, standard errors, and significance values reported for data weighted to correct for oversampling. BIC, chi square, and McFadden's R^2 were calculated for these weighted models. % Cases classified and HL tests were conducted for identical models with unweighted data.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our analyses show that anti-atheist sentiment in the United States is persistent, durable, and anchored in moral concern. A substantial percentage of Americans see atheists as immoral, and are therefore significantly more likely to say that atheists do not share their vision of America and to disapprove of their son or daughter marrying an atheist. Mediation tests indicate that the effects of other cultural values that link religiosity, morality, and citizenship to anti-atheist sentiment operate through a perception that atheists are morally suspect. These attitudes are strongly driven by a belief that religiosity is central for civic virtue, that societal standards of right and wrong should be rooted in historic religious traditions, and that Christianity underpins American identity.

Moral concerns about atheists have consequences for how Americans perceive the overall decline of religious affiliation. Overall, the spiritual but not religious are more favorably perceived than are atheists; beliefs that atheists are immoral increase negative sentiment toward SBNRs. Experiences with diversity affect anti-atheist sentiment, but not attitudes toward SBNRs. Both findings suggest that the increasing organization, visibility, and political engagement of atheists may make some Americans understand them as relevant players in contemporary American identity politics, while the SBNRs are simply understood as less religious (a private matter). This increasing visibility has not reduced anti-atheist sentiment.

Our findings contribute to research on negative stereotypes and distrust of atheists (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011; Harper 2007; Johnson, Rowatt, and LaBouff 2012) by providing a nationally representative,

Table 8. Logistic Regression Results for Claiming Growth of Non-Religious Americans Is a Bad Thing

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Female	0.05	0.15	-0.14	0.15	-0.11	0.15
Education	-0.02	0.06	0.02	0.06	0.03	0.06
Income	0.15**	0.05	0.14***	0.04	0.15***	0.04
Age < 35			0.14	0.27	0.20	0.27
Black	-0.49*	0.25	-0.89***	0.23	-0.88***	0.23
Hispanic			-0.68**	0.22	-0.60**	0.22
Other/mixed race			-0.28	0.47	-0.27	0.47
Cty. % voting Democrat 2012	0.00	0.01				
Cty. religious adherence rate	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Cty. religious heterogeneity	2.40	2.11	1.36	1.64	1.13	1.62
Cty. % below poverty line	-0.01	0.02	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Religious involvement scale	0.23***	0.03				
Personal religious importance			0.56***	0.12	0.56***	0.12
Religious service attendance			0.10*	0.05	0.09*	0.05
Volunteering at religious org.			0.29	0.20	0.32	0.20
Conservative Protestant	0.75***	0.21	0.36*	0.18	0.31	0.18
Catholic	0.23	0.18				
Biblical literalism	0.22	0.18	0.09	0.18	0.07	0.18
Non-religious identification			-0.45*	0.22	-0.39	0.22
Political conservatism	0.50**	0.16	0.50**	0.16	0.45**	0.16
Sympathy for African Americans	-0.06	0.04	-0.06	0.04	-0.07	0.04
Everyone follows the rules	-0.02	0.18	0.00	0.18	0.02	0.18
Society based on God's laws	0.86***	0.10	0.70***	0.11	0.63***	0.11
Freedom of religion	0.16	0.14	-0.07	0.14	-0.08	0.14
Separation of church and state			-0.13	0.09	-0.11	0.09
Good Americans are religious			0.53***	0.09	0.48***	0.10
Values diversity	-0.13	0.18	-0.07	0.17	-0.04	0.17
Reports diversity in town	-0.36*	0.16	-0.37*	0.16	-0.39*	0.16
Considers diversity a strength			-0.08	0.07	-0.05	0.07
Atheists elitist					-0.23*	0.10
Atheists immoral					0.39***	0.11

(Continued)

Table 8. *continued*

	Model 1: 2006 replication		Model 2: best fit		Model 3: attitudes about atheists	
	Coef	SE	Coef	SE	Coef	SE
Atheists criminal					0.09	0.12
Constant	-8.63**	2.81	-6.96**	2.29	-7.30**	2.30
N	1,895		2,183		2,183	
Wald chi square	378.9***		435.12***		453.06***	
McFadden R^2	0.34		0.39		0.40	
BIC	1839.96		1989.70		1979	
% Cases correctly classified	78%		80%		80%	
Hosmer–Lemeshow test	4.39		2.84		7.85	

Source: Boundaries in the American Mosaic Survey 2014.

Note: All coefficients, standard errors, and significance values reported for data weighted to correct for oversampling. BIC, chi square, and McFadden’s R^2 were calculated for these weighted models. % Cases classified and HL tests were conducted for identical models with unweighted data.

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

quantitative analysis that includes measures of the specific moral concerns Americans have regarding atheists. While our study cannot speak to whether and how atheists experience discrimination in various arenas, we encourage the development of this important area of research that shows that moral boundaries can have material consequences (Cragun et al. 2012; Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014; Wright et al. 2013).

It is because religion has historically been the locus for social identity and civic association, and a pathway to assimilation, that the nonreligious are perceived as moral threats and remain persistent cultural outsiders. Symbolic boundaries define inherently relational categories of cultural membership (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Taylor 2001). Because religious identities are pluralistic, voluntary, and moral, the refusal to embrace a religious identity is a choice that others may understand in moral terms (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009). In such an environment, whether the non-religious reap the benefits of the more general embrace of multiculturalism (Kivisto 2012; Hartmann and Gerteis 2005) may depend on the identity labels they adopt.

The label “atheist” evokes a cultural category discursively counter-posed as negative in relation to other positively coded cultural categories (e.g., “citizen” and “neighbor”) that are constructed as constitutively moral—and historically, in the United States, as religious. A plurality of Americans may understand “nones” as cultural outsiders as well, complicating our understanding of the private acceptance of the non-religious that Putnam and Campbell (2010) find. In contrast, embracing a “spiritual” identity or practice may be today’s pathway to

acceptance, like adopting Protestant cultural forms was for Jews and Catholics in earlier generations; the SBNRs cause far less moral concern than atheists and the nones.

Future research should expand to examine how outgroups defined by racial, sexual, or social class distinctions may be excluded by the drawing of symbolic moral boundaries, whether subgroups of Americans differ in the way they draw symbolic boundaries, and how religion interacts with social location to shape boundary-drawing. Edgell and Tranby (2010) found that a preference for distance from homosexuals was driven by a desire to preserve the centrality of a Christian cultural heritage in American life. Likewise, religious and racial identities are intertwined and have implications for civic participation (Krysan 2000; cf. Bail 2008; Hartmann et al. 2011). Religious discourses that appear to be racially neutral (Emerson and Smith 2000) can in fact encode an underlying cultural preference for whiteness, obscuring the structural roots of inequality and leading to symbolic exclusion of African Americans (Becker 1998; Tranby and Hartmann 2008; Williams 2013; see also Bonilla-Silva 2013; Hartmann, Gerteis, and Croll 2009; Manning, Hartmann, and Gerteis 2015). Americans grant legitimacy to religious discourse because they generally believe that religious spokespersons are motivated by disinterested moral standards rather than political or economic interests (Williams and Demerath 1991). This suggests that religious discourse may be an ideal resource for the construction of moral boundaries in ways that systematically direct attention away from power and interests.

Our purpose in this analysis is neither to celebrate religion's role in American life nor to decry it. We understand why some argue that "America's grace" has been the combination of high rates of religiosity and high tolerance of religious pluralism, resulting in a vital civic sphere (Putnam and Campbell 2010). This is true. It is also true that religion has limits as a basis for symbolic inclusion in American society, and that these limits stem from the same factors that make religion a point of entry into civic life for so many. As with all symbolic boundary-markers, religion is simultaneously a basis for inclusion and exclusion. We believe it is important to continue our investigation into whether atheists and other non-religious groups, persons, and identities come to achieve increased acceptance over time in the United States, where religiosity has become central to the mutually constitutive relationship between cultural insiders and outsiders that is at the heart of American identity.

Notes

1. Several high-profile instances of Sikh-oriented hate crimes have been documented, leading the FBI to announce in March 2015 that they have updated their hate crimes database and will now track hate crimes against Sikh, Hindu, and Arab Americans (<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/hate-crimes-against-arabs-sikhs-hindus-will-now-be-tracked-n331306>).
2. Data in the BAM Survey are weighted using base and stratification weights from the KnowledgePanel sample combined with survey specific weights for the BAM sample.

The base weight corrects for undersampling of telephone numbers unmatched to mailing addresses, oversampling of certain geographic areas, oversampling of African American and Hispanic households, and ABS. Panel demographic post-stratification weights adjust for sample design, survey non-response, and Spanish-speaking populations in the United States. Post-stratification adjustments are based on March 2013 data from the Current Population Survey.

3. Our measures of religious adherence and heterogeneity are based on county-level percentages of eight major religious denominations: Baptist, Catholic, Episcopal, Jewish, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, and Presbyterian. We added these measures for the total rate of religious adherence, and we calculated the index of qualitative variation (IQV) across these measures to obtain a measure of religious heterogeneity. Data for these adherence rates come from the US Religion Census (<http://www.rcms2010.org/>), matched to the FIPS codes of BAM respondents.
4. We also included a measure of how important being Christian is for being a good American. However, these two variables were highly collinear and had similar direction and magnitudes when included in the analysis. We chose the question about religion in general because it captures a more expansive notion of the relationship between being a good American and being religious.
5. We use logistic regression in order to replicate the analyses from Edgell, Hartmann, and Gerteis (2006). Identically specified ordered logistic regression equations reveal no substantive differences using those models, and likelihood ratio tests demonstrate no loss of explanatory power by using these methods.
6. We also ran our models on data using multiple imputation with chained equations. We estimated variables with 100 or more missing cases that were of theoretical interest using ten imputations and ensured that Monte Carlo errors fell within acceptable levels (see White, Ian R., Patrick Royston, and Angela M. Wood. 2011. "Multiple Imputation Using Chained Equations: Issues and Guidance for Practice." *Statistics in Medicine* 30(4):377–99). The imputed data produced models with an N of 2,345 respondents, reducing missing data to only 7 percent of cases. The results of these models did not differ substantively from our list-wise deletion models, and are available from the authors upon request.
7. Since our data are ordinal, we used three KHB tests for mediation, following Breen, Karlson, and Holm (2013), to see whether the assumption that atheists are immoral mediated the individual relationship between the dependent variable, agreement that society's standards of right and wrong should be based on God's laws and that good Americans are religious, while holding all other variables in the model consistent. The KHB mediation package in STATA found significant differences between reduced and full models in each of these tests ($p < .001$). About 53 percent of the relationship between God's laws and the dependent variable was mediated, as was 36 percent of the relationship for the belief that good Americans are religious. Full results are available from the authors upon request.
8. Our analyses here focus on conservative Protestants, but we also ran supplemental analyses including a dummy variable for "Catholic" instead of "conservative Protestant," and found that Catholics are also less likely to approve of their children marrying both atheists (Coef = $-.41$, $p < .05$) and spiritual but not religious individuals (Coef = $-.64$, $p < .01$). Results are available upon request.
9. Again using KHB mediation tests in STATA, the belief that atheists are immoral mediates 47 percent of the effect of the belief that good Americans are religious on the odds of disapproving of one's child marrying an atheist ($p < .001$), 65 percent of

the effect of biblical literalism ($p < .001$), and 53 percent of the effect of being non-religious ($p < .001$).

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