

INTRODUCTION

Godless People, Doubt, and Atheism

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Abstract: In the introduction to this special issue, we set the agenda for researching the aspirations and practices of godless people who seek to thin out religion in their daily lives. We reflect on why processes of disengagement from religion have not been adequately researched in anthropology. Locating this issue's articles in the anthropological literature on doubt and atheism, we argue for the importance of a comparative investigation to analyze people's reluctance to pursue religion.

Keywords: atheism, disbelief, disengagement from religion, doubt, godless people, non-religion, unbelief

Being Godless

In the current climate of false prophecies of secularism and numerous theories of the resurgence of religions, it is rather unusual to study a way of disengaging from religion. A bulk of recent ethnographies tell stories about technologies of self and the adept cultivation of religious dispositions (Mahmood 2005), learning to discern God (Luhmann 2007), and enacting divine presences in physical rituals, speech acts, dream visions, or materials (Engelke 2007). Rituals of presencing the transcendent, the divine, or the immaterial (e.g., Orsi 2005) and well-rehearsed arguments about the resilience of religious spiritualities in politics (Bubandt and van Beek 2012) seem to be the order of the day. Building on the growing interest in researching how people demarcate the boundaries of religion and what falls outside (Engelke 2012b, 2014), this special issue suggests that 'being godless' is an important empirical reality that encompasses processes, aspirations, and practices that purposefully or inadvertently lead to the attenuation of one's religious life. Through ethnographies of 'godless people', we propose to explore modalities of disengagement from religion, such as aspirations to move away from one's religious tradition and attempts to maintain one's atheist sensibilities and dispositions in encounters



with religious phenomena and people. The contributors to this issue illuminate several moments and movements within such processes: the materiality and bodily consequences of atheist configurations (Copeman and Quack), questions of certainty and doubt (Tremlett and Shih), problems of defining a non-religious identity (Lee), and political narratives and ontologies (Blanes and Paxe). We also interrogate the non-religious construction of scientific scholarship (Luehrmann) and the atheism of anthropology and anthropologists (Oustinova-Stjepanovic). These contributions exemplify possible questions and itineraries in the empirical study of atheism and non-religion and raise anthropological questions beyond a specific sub-disciplinary scope. As Matthew Engelke brilliantly exposes in the afterword to this issue, this exercise is conceptually uncomfortable but can be productive for both a hypothetical anthropology of non-religion *and* an anthropology of religion. In this introduction, we set an agenda for the study of non-religion and atheism and critically review the work of our intellectual predecessors.

Achieving holistic religious devotion and terminating all religious connections are equally impossible tasks. Being godless connotes discourses and practices that aim to place limits on religion in one's daily life. In her study of Soviet-style secularism, Sonja Luehrmann (2011: 155) suggests that icons placed in the corners of Russian and Soviet houses would "simultaneously create a perceptible divine presence and help restrict that presence to a particular location and to ritually sanctioned occasions for interaction." Marilyn Strathern (1996) is also critical of the proliferation of idioms of hybrids, flows, and networks in ethnographic descriptions that cannot account for how networks and relations can stop. In other words, people appear to be anxious not only about maintaining relations with gods, spirits, and human-managed religious institutions, but also about terminating religious connections and cutting religious networks. Godless people, as introduced by our interlocutors in this special issue, seem to be motivated by disaggregating and abridging religious traditions, keeping them at bay.

Consider this ethnographic vignette. At the first sound of the call to prayer, a young Muslim in Skopje, a mystical leader (*shaykh*) by birth and the head of all Sufi orders in Macedonia, could be seen running away from mosques and his own religious lodge. As he sprinted across the yard and out the gate, the *shaykh* was watched by a handful of bitter followers, whom he was supposed to lead in prayer. During the clearly defined time of five daily prayers, the *shaykh* would feign stomach cramps or simply ignore the divine appeal to worship God, muffled by the blaring of a television set. Yet this *shaykh* did not renounce religion. On the contrary, he claimed that he was a "staunch believer" in God, angels, and demons as described in the Muslim Holy Book, the Qur'an. The young leader was eager to advertise and sell his services as a spiritual healer to Muslim and Christian clientele, but he was reluctant to reinvest his income into the leaning walls of the lodge and sweep the dirty carpets around the tombs of ancient saints. This *shaykh* turned a deaf ear to God's urgent demands to be worshiped and served. He also ignored the pleas of his religious followers (*dervish*) to join the religion-building social efforts

within their lodge. Bound by an oath of loyalty to the dead saints buried in the lodge, these followers continued to gather for rushed, disappointing rituals and took part in bitter debates over what their religious tradition was about and why their lodge was experiencing a rapid decline. At the same time, each *dervish* restricted his involvement in the religious and administrative life of the lodge to the practices he enjoyed most: reading books or praying in solitude or communal feasting at the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting. Under the roof of one *dervish* lodge in Skopje, these Muslims showed selective disinterestedness in different aspects of their religious tradition, be it prayer, ritual, administration, financial obligations, and so on. It seemed as if religion in its totalizing complexity had become a burden that these people actively sought to avoid.

These Macedonian Sufis did not identify as atheists in the sense of somebody who rejects the validity and efficacy of religion per se. Going beyond a study of articulate atheists alone, whose efforts are guided by their intellectual commitment to the elimination of religion from their own and other people's personal and social lives, we suggest that being godless can take multiple forms of partial indifference, unease, ambivalence, reluctance to be drawn in, and attempts at withdrawal from religious traditions—modalities that are sometimes fraught with tension between subjective and public loyalties. The tension arises because not every context creates enabling conditions for an unequivocal break away from one's religious tradition. This impossibility of open defiance is apparent in Louis Frankenthaler's (pers. comm.) incisive account of how ultra-Orthodox Jewish men gradually negotiate their way out of obligations and regulations imposed on them by their Haredi learning and sociality. For them, the disruption of habitual religious bonds entails the clandestine reading of books on politics and psychology that are banned as 'secular' subjects in the strictly religious Haredi education. Similarly, Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola (2010) have encountered atheist Christian priests, who hesitate to abandon religion completely. Some are not prepared to sever their social and professional relations for practical reasons. Others continue to see God as a significant symbol in their life but cannot agree with God's conventional representations in Christian discourses. Their lives are a struggle to hide or to articulate their opinions from the pulpit.

We suggest that anthropology has not paid enough attention to experiences of being godless, although there has recently been a modest upsurge of research on non-religious formations across disciplines (Bullivant and Lee 2012). Some studies explore correlations between gender, education, wealth, and non-religion, but the general demographic findings are too crude to understand the actual empirical complexities of withdrawal, indifference, or militant rejection of religious traditions (ibid.: 23). Currently, we still lack nuanced ethnographic and historical studies of varieties of meanings, claims, and practices of being disengaged from religion. The exception to the ethnographic silence around godless experiences is a somewhat better-documented history of Soviet and allied socialisms. It is not accidental that we have borrowed the term 'godless' from the early Soviet era when, during the first experimental decade after the

1917 October Revolution, the Communist Party created an organization called the League of the Militant Godless (*Soiuz voinstvuiushchikh bezbozhnikov*) to promote and teach atheism (Peris 1998). The League agitated against religious observance, published atheist leaflets, and convened numerous meetings, but it failed to create an unequivocally atheist population. Rather, the League's activities succeeded in inserting a degree of uncertainty about religious commitments among Soviet citizens. Pointing out how pre-socialist reforms were instrumental to the marginalization of religious institutions within the social and political administration of Uzbekistan, Kehl-Bodrogi (2008: 11) argues that theological ignorance, lax observance, and ritual neglect cannot be blamed on Soviet or other socialist religious policies without a careful analysis of previous and current forms of affective religiosity, both local and global. Awkward relations, embarrassment, and ironic reflexivity about being religious endure in post-Soviet spaces (Louw 2012). In post-Cold War Mongolia, some people are also apprehensive of renewing unknown and threatening contracts with shamanic forces exiled by socialist modernization (Højer 2009; Pedersen 2011). These relations are resisted because they suggest the darker possibilities of madness and spirit possession. This special issue brings together ethnographies that can further illuminate the historical and contemporary experiential complexities of thinning out religion.

'Being godless' is a descriptive ethnographic category rather than an analytical one because we are interested in the experiential quality of being godless. The adjective 'godless' is treated here as an attribute of different practices rather than a reified phenomenon and object of analysis. To illustrate our ethnographic orientation, it is easy to find fault with Marxist theories of religion as an ideology that conceals real life inequalities by promising salvation. However, it is a different matter to identify and ethnographically engage with people who live Marxist theories of religion in practice. Julie McBrien and Mathijs Pelkmans (2008: 89) describe how Marxist values and their unanticipated effects continue to play an important role among atheist Muslims of Kyrgyzstan who clash with Muslim and Christian missionaries eager to undo their socialist education. Atheist Muslims participate in life-cycle rituals that they interpret as non-religious—that is, these rituals are part of people's cultural ethno-national heritage rather than an expression of 'fanatical' or proselytizing motives of new Muslim and Christian missionaries. Muslims of Kyrgyzstan are atheist not because they do not believe in God but because they resist missionary proselytism. Although socialist secularisms have created conditions for openly professing atheism and unbelief, deterministic causal frameworks, such as socialist education in atheism or Western-style secularism, offer an inadequate explanation of the everyday meanings of being godless.

There are, of course, several concrete historical legacies that have been conducive to the appearance of godless people. These include Soviet secularism, post-colonial Angolan pragmatism, and British or Indian humanist movements. This special issue does not suggest that disenchantment, religious indifference, and godless dispositions are inevitable teleological outcomes of modernization or secularization campaigns. Rather, these are complex, troubled realities,

not only in the geographical West or post-Soviet spaces, but in other parts of the world as well. In the shadow of the publicized Islamic revival in today's Cairo, one can encounter Egyptians who question the basic premise of their faith, which others pronounce and practice conventionally, idiosyncratically, or impiously (Schielke 2012: 302). Falling short of Islamic ideals is commonplace, while accusations of infidelity to the Qur'an, hypocrisy, and apostasy are instrumental admonitions to Muslims to adhere to their faith. But the socially isolated and occasionally electronically connected lives of Muslim atheists—with their rhetoric of freedom from religious intolerance and cruelty, their critique of the presumed irrationality and inconsistencies of Islamic history, their trust in education, and their moral qualms about social injustice committed within religious frameworks—are becoming known only now (*ibid.*). To press the point, in this special issue, being godless is an attribute of cultural and subjective figurations rather than an entified state, system, or abstract concept of 'godlessness'. That is why we grapple with the problem of living a godless life comparatively and ethnographically, although through a lens of theories relevant to our ethnographic material.

We are reluctant to coin a new term—'godlessness'—and to provide a general, monothetic definition of it because what we learn from the above examples is that a single definition of atheism or godlessness would be misleading at the moment when these phenomenological realities in different parts of the world have been poorly explored. One particularly illustrative example of this has been Engelke's (2012b, 2014) recent work on how the British Humanist Association (BHA) engages in a complex definitional debate concerning its non-religious identity, revealing the multiplicity of the stakes involved in such definitional exercises. In his afterword, Engelke rightly introduces these complexities into the anthropological debate, questioning the pertinence of the negative term 'non-religion'. Therefore, we do not want to add 'areligion', 'irreligion', and 'non-religion' to the terminological confusion. Areligion and irreligion describe autonomous practices carried out without explicit reference to religion, although this raises the question about demarcating the boundaries between things religious or areligious. Currently, the term 'non-religion' has gained epistemological ground. As a rule of thumb, non-religion is defined in relation to religious phenomena. Non-religion can be understood narrowly in opposition to religion, or as a more inclusive term that encompasses the articulation of functional alternatives, such as humanism, scientific naturalism, and secular morality (Quack 2014). Nevertheless, we are not sure that this concept can act as an umbrella term for the diverse forms of cutting religious networks under discussion in this special issue. Rather, we feel that all these concepts—irreligion, non-religion, unbelief, and so on—describe specific empirical phenomena that might not be easily subsumed under one category.

Looking for a flexible analytical framework for this issue, we initially considered the concepts of secularism and secularity but found them restrictive. In our reading, the notions of secularism, secularity, and secularization refer to aspects of a political project that variously aims to define relations between

religious and political institutions with repercussions for mundane experiences of those arrangements. Needless to say, the empirical forms that these relations take are neither self-evident nor singular, and the growing body of literature on cultures of secularism addresses the internal contradictions, political implications, and experiential feel of plural secularisms (see, e.g., Bubandt and van Beek 2012; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). This special issue is not isolated from the debates on secularity, but we seek to break out of the binary logic of religion versus politics. One way to do so is by showing that this binary logic does not hold water under ethnographic scrutiny. Alternatively, and this is our take on the issue, we can search for original frameworks of analysis. That is why we position this issue in the recent studies of doubt and atheism rather than secularism. We find doubt and atheism to be particularly relevant concepts because they help us explore a situated relation between a self and religion instead of that between politics and religion. This is not to say that doubt and atheism cannot become a foundation for a political program, but we are interested in how people distance themselves from religion rather than how, for example, 'the state' engages with religion.

To pre-empt a charge of reification and ethnocentrism, we are aware that 'religion' is not an appropriate term in every context, and that not all religious traditions consist of worshipping 'gods'. For instance, our comparative agenda unavoidably raises concerns about the applicability and translation of the attribute 'godless' into non-monotheistic contexts or even its consistency across monotheistic denominations. From our definition above, it follows that being godless implies religious scarcity, having less contact with God and God's religious networks on earth. Yet God means very different things in theistic, deistic, pantheistic, or animistic religious traditions (Martin 2007b: 2). Such a loose definition suggests that our interlocutors might assume very different positions toward God or gods, depending on their definition (*ibid.*). God might figure as an engaged, aloof, or ubiquitous deity. This is not to forget that learned and everyday debates and speculations about the form and agency of monotheistic God fragment the notion even within a single, nominally uniform religious tradition. Non-monotheistic traditions pose additional challenges. For example, Johannes Quack and Jacob Copeman's ethnography (this issue) is set in India, where the spiritual pantheon consists not only of gods but also half-gods, ghosts, demons, human godmen, and even abstract principles such as truth, liberation, and pure consciousness. Some Hindu paths to liberation, such as Sāṃkhya, are necessarily 'a-theistic' as they are independent of relations with gods (Quack 2012a, 2013). To sidestep this thorny issue, we understand being godless broadly as the reluctance of humans to engage with any divinized beings or notions of transcendental agency, regardless of theories about a god's position in any given religious cosmology. The idea of God has a lot of mileage in anthropology, but in this issue it will, unfortunately, remain woefully under-researched. Instead, we focus on ways that humans disengage from the web of religious traditions, making them less immediate. Still, it would be productive to find out what kind of god people have in mind when they cut and attenuate their religious networks.

Religious Mentalities

So why do anthropologists tend to reiterate arguments for the abiding presence of religion instead of simply acknowledging that there are contexts in which religion plays an important role and other contexts, not necessarily geographical, in which religion is an unwelcome tradition? If we hark back to Malinowski's (1948: 9) critique of the 'primitive mentality' debate (see Lévy-Bruhl [1926] 1985), anthropological discomfort at demarcating partly autonomous spheres of non-religious routines and religious traditions can be traced to residual notions of the mystical holism of religious lives that do not differentiate between the admittedly Durkheimian dyad of the sacred and the profane. This concept of mystical holism is applied equally to non-Western indigenous traditions and to the European past. For instance, medieval Europe is painted as black as the Dark Ages, when 'superstitious' or 'ignorant' people inhabited a cosmic order alongside angels, demons, and other celestial and earthly bodies. Supposedly, this sense of immediacy (Taylor 1992: 3; 2007: 10–11) endured until scientific progress, secularization, and political modernization ripped this texture apart (Bennett 2001: 60–62). However, this mystical holism hypothesis obscures the extent to which the modernity that we live is an outcome of internal debates and tension within Christianity (*ibid.*: 67). Thus, an attempt to historicize modernity depends on the contrast between the Age of Faith and relentless secularization, which inconsistently refers to deinstitutionalization, the decline of personal piety and belief, and the separation of religion and politics (Stark 1999). Some might argue that in medieval Europe church attendance was nearly 100 percent, but this would be a poor indication of the scope of personal piety and the intensity of religious experiences (Casanova 1994: 16). Instead, it seems plausible that medieval knowledge of formal religious creed and observance might have been low and ambivalent for centuries before industrial and digital modernity (Stark 1999: 42ff.). People simply would not know their prayers or would misbehave or would not go to church at all, while understaffed parishes were managed in the most haphazard manner. In fact, our notions of an all-encompassing medieval Christianity are derived from anachronistic nineteenth-century images of medieval religion.

This mystical bias is especially apparent when it comes to non-Western contexts. For example, much African ethnography points out that witchcraft is a serious concern of people caught in webs of sorcery and anti-witchcraft rituals. An otherwise wonderful monograph by Harry West (2005) explores in detail the means of sorcery in Mozambique, its language and effects. We learn mostly about witches and witch doctors, but who were the people behind the ideologies and practices of the socialist ruling party FRELIMO, which famously condemned sorcery beliefs and counter-sorcery practices as false consciousness but simultaneously 'tolerated tradition' in order to enact neo-liberal reforms? What happened to them? Focusing on the intersections between ideological regimes, discourse, political agency, and social praxis, the article by Ruy Blanes and Abel Paxé (this issue) explores the historical moment when a top-down anti-religious stance was imposed in post-colonial Angola.

The authors examine the motivations behind such impositions, including the utopian association between independency and modernity, which produced a redefinition of the objects and subjects of belief and the legacies created by them with regard to the establishment of social values.

Doubt

Since Tylor's ([1871] 2008: 23) notorious definition of religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings," only the idea of belief itself has been an anthropological staple. The concept has been surrounded by controversies over its universal applicability and Christian genealogy, with its ethnocentric connotations of propositional meanings (Ruel 1982) and impenetrable qualities of cognitive dispositions (Needham 1972). There have also been arguments over the manifestation of beliefs in relational practices (Street 2010), material cultures (Keane 2008), and power relations (Asad 1993). However, in the heat of the debates for and against belief (see Lindquist and Coleman 2008), anthropologists are more likely to describe what people assert as propositional content within their theologies and cosmologies than what they reject, question, caricature, and avoid. Where uncertainty and doubt are incorporated into analysis, intrinsic instabilities of belief and the malleability of intellectual and ritual commitments to one's religious traditions are often seen as problematic only in the contexts of conversion and denominational switch (Kirsch 2004) and iconoclastic rejection of ancestral and popular practices in favor of authoritative global traditions such as Christianity and Islam. In sum, anthropologists have been far more interested in belief, whether as a socially significant phenomenon in its own right or a problematized field of relations within secular contexts (Agrama 2012; Cannell 2010; Starrett 2010).

Recently, several publications have engaged with the questions of doubt and atheism that constitute our inter-textual space for the study of godless people (Hecht 2003). We maintain that doubt is an intrinsic quality of most, maybe all, religious traditions, while atheism has historically acquired a reputation for rather extreme certainty about its anti-religious premises. Let us say that doubt is commonplace, while atheism is radical. With doubt and atheism as two reference points, it is important to bear in mind that in addition to routine questioning and outright rejection of some or all religious premises and practices, respectively, there are other experiential forms of being godless. These include finding no room for God in one's everyday life; being indifferent to the point of not even making a passing comment about divinities and institutions that mediate human-divine relations; and even mocking religions through spoof religious discourses and liturgies, such as the Church of the SubGenius, the Maradonian Church, and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (Cusack 2010).

Doubt is not an exclusively religious process (Kelly 2011); however, this special issue looks only at its religious manifestations. Doubt is located in relations between people, among people and spirits, and within people themselves in

specific socio-historical contexts. It is a thought process, a performative technique, and a social mechanism. It has been suggested that doubt has a material quality, but it remains to be seen how doubt is lodged in objects and how embodied activities, such as touching icons, kneeling, lighting candles, hearing church bells, and reading books, might be relevant (Naumescu 2013: 86). Although doubt is understood as a multifaceted phenomenon, it is usually located in the mind and given a social function. Thus, it has been argued that doubt implies a capacity for ‘religious reflexivity’, or casting a critical glance at one’s conventionally accepted beliefs and practices (Lewis 2002: 11). It is an agentive process of considering alternative values or actions that is distinct from uncertainty and skepticism, which do not entail a search for resolution (Pelkmans 2013b: 4). Doubt also indicates a choice between alternatives and trying to arrive at a decision (ibid.). As a process of thinking and judgment, doubt is implicated in belief. Jean Pouillon (1982) points out the inherent ambiguity of the French verb *croire* (to believe), which simultaneously expresses bonds of trust and uncertainty. Pouillon argues that if the existence of gods (and spirits) becomes an object of belief, doubt becomes a distinct possibility (ibid.: 2). Another early attempt to conceptualize doubt was made by Benson Saler (1968: 32), who sought to revive William James’s terminological distinction between belief, unbelief, and disbelief and differentiated firm rejection of theological propositions, or disbelief, from uncertainty, the gray zone of unbelief that is comparable to agnosticism. Even if the notion of unbelief has raised concerns about the negative analytical polarity between the presence and absence of something as vague as propositional beliefs (Quack 2010), the argument has a valid point that ‘a kernel of doubt’ (Goody 1996) is intrinsic to all human experiences.

Doubt features prominently in European history. For example, it is well-known that Hellenic ‘humanists’, like the sophists or Protagoras, claimed that ‘a man is the measure of all things’ and that gods played no role in human affairs (Goody 1996: 669). Although many classical Greek and Roman philosophers and Islamic and Indian scholars did not have the strength of conviction to believe or disbelieve in gods beyond doubt, some of them questioned liturgical, imaginative, and philosophical forms of being religious. The figure of the Devil in scriptural religions—a trickster who leads people astray and sows doubts—might be an incarnation of “a structural necessity” (ibid.: 674) to relate conviction and uncertainty. Furthermore, doubt is not a European monopoly. In the early twentieth century, Paul Radin (1927) raised a question of philosophical proclivities and skepticism among ‘primitive people’. Arguing against Lévy-Bruhl’s theory that ‘primitive’ societies are not capable of abstract, scientific thought, Radin insisted that every political, linguistic, and social formation has stakes in speculative philosophy and religious critique, even if indigenous philosophies do not necessarily take coherent, integrated forms along the lines of Greek philosophical traditions. Radin reviewed early ethnographic records of interaction with Winnebago of North America and Ewe of West Africa that had revealed cases of doubt about the potency and existence of their divinities and exposed people’s vented frustration with the gods’ failure to deliver the promised prosperity and justice (ibid.: 375–384).

Because expressions of doubt are invariably linked with larger social contexts, such as historical change, socio-political crisis (Pelkmans 2013b: 8), and conversion to global religions, and with mundane relations, including kinship and cultural politics of modernization, cosmopolitanism, progress, and local traditions versus global development (Pigg 1996), one can sweepingly argue that pervasive doubt about ritual efficacy, and even about the existence of gods in Western Africa, is caused by colonial and cultural encounters that transmit 'Western modernities'. Building on the contemporary example of renegotiation and rejection of ancestral customs among Manjaco in Guinea-Bissau, Eric Gable (1995: 249) suggests that people's interactions with spirits point to the existence of the "indigenous landscape" within which skepticism makes sense. During ritual interactions, people cajole spirits into action while questioning their ability to hear and respond to people's pleas. Manjaco display a profoundly pragmatic attitude toward their spirits, who are expected to work hard in return for a ritual sacrifice. Spirits' failure to do so inevitably casts a shadow of doubt over the utility of the human-spirit contract. Seeing no signs of successful intervention on behalf of humans suffering from droughts and hunger, some Manjaco speak of losing faith in spirits, even though the loss of faith in ancestral spirits could be coupled with belief in the Christian God.

Attitudes toward witchcraft and shamanic healing have always elicited complex responses. Public assertions of their efficacy co-exist with critical discussions about the validity of rituals, private doubts, and evidence of failure. Doubt is not strictly a cognitive mechanism, because it also has a social dimension. People often distrust inept and corrupt religious practitioners rather than turn their back on spirits and gods as such. During healing rituals, Iban shamans in Borneo work in the invisible realm and plead with their audiences to accept their actions as genuine and efficacious. But audience members can be divided in their opinion as to whether a shaman is a charlatan (Wadley et al. 2006: 44–46). For example, people can be selectively skeptical of practitioners and their ability to deceive spirits and restore health to an afflicted person. They might consult several religious experts and then dismiss their verdicts as invalid. In some contexts, the performative incompetence of a shaman can give rise to suspicions that a shaman plays tricks on the audience rather than on spirits. The circulation of popular comic tales about shamans who succeed in their rituals by luck and deception rather than extraordinary powers reinforces people's incredulity (ibid.: 45). A skeptical public can attempt to expose fraudulent shamans or parody their peregrinations. In essence, audiences need to be convinced by a sorcerer that his magic works.

Here, doubt is not simply a correlate of belief but a communicative technique of ritual professionals (Good et al. 2014). Although we have suggested that doubt is an intrinsic aspect of any religious tradition, it cannot be naturalized because it can be actively managed. Doubt can be generated and/or dispelled in the process of judgment, persuasion, decision making, and arbitration in religious and judicial settings. Doubt opens these processes to contestation and negotiation because it is imbricated in questions about legitimacy and the authority of predictions and verdicts.

Doubt, however, is not only situated intersubjectively in relations between people and among people and spirits; it is also an internal conversation with the self. For example, ritual experts seem to sustain their commitment to the efficacy of their actions even when they are fully aware of the staged, simulated qualities of their ritual practices (Houseman 2002). Feigning to kill novices during initiation rites or drugging a goat whose silent ‘death’ is a guaranteed sign of divine intervention is not a secret to initiated operators and participants in such rituals. Awareness of the ‘theatrical’ character of ritual routines and of their technological aspects is not detrimental to creating and recreating the relational contexts that we call religious traditions.

However, a sorcerer might question whether his or her own actions are genuine and efficacious. If a shaman or a sorcerer hides a stone in his mouth before spitting it out as tangible evidence of successful healing, “how does he justify this procedure in his own eyes?” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 168–169). How does self-persuasion take effect? Lévi-Strauss tells us a story about Quesalid, a sorcerer “driven by curiosity about [shamans’] tricks and by the desire to expose them” (ibid.: 172). Quesalid uses a shamanic technique on a patient who then is cured, despite the sorcerer’s skepticism. How can we account for doubts, misgivings, and confusion that cannot be easily overcome? Engelke (2005: 783) discusses Michael Lambek’s view that moments of self-questioning and self-denying among religious enthusiasts are not well-known. Engelke reminds us that these moments illuminate processes of coming under conviction or of developing an inwardly oriented language of persuasion that accompanies a religious transformation such as conversion. His work with the BHA highlights precisely the continuous process of producing conviction despite inward and outward questioning (see Engelke 2014).

Atheism

Anthropologists have highlighted that doubt about religious cosmologies and practices is intrinsic to all cultures, whether more or less saturated with religion. What is more, we know that religiously motivated people are often playful with their religious premises and practices. Members of the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, a neo-charismatic evangelical denomination, explained to Tanya Luhrmann (2012) that God is not imaginary, but his presence entails an act of imagination. For instance, by pretending to have God to dinner, people “behaved both as if God was foundationally real and as if their particular experiences of God were deeply satisfying daydreams that they had no difficulty recognizing as daydreams” (ibid.: 380). In other words, Vineyard Christians were wary of the possibility of disbelief in the reality of their religious world. It is an important ethnographic insight because the potential for doubt within religion is a premise that some atheists would deny. Among some well-known atheists, the notion that doubt is constitutive of religious subjectivities runs counter to the representation of religiously motivated people as deluded and ‘blinded’ by their faith. In order to engage with this problem productively and to avoid

essentializing and flattening out atheism, we need to address the question of who atheists are and what their ideas, practices, and everyday realities are like, ethnographically and historically rather than ideologically.

Unsurprisingly, there is no simple answer. Conceptually, atheism is often defined as the explicit denial of God's existence or simply the lack of belief in a god (Bullivant 2008: 363). Negatively, it is a conscious, articulated credo against God's existence. A positive value of self-described atheists is their conviction (or rhetoric, at least) regarding the supremacy of a scientific worldview over 'irrational' traditional beliefs. This has been the main stance underpinning the political project of the New Atheists, a movement of authors and prominent figures who have, through several controversial books and publicity campaigns, criticized the 'nonsense' of religion and its negative repercussions for society. Some New Atheists use the logic of natural science as an argumentative standpoint against the 'wrongness' of theistic belief in order to prove the 'failed hypothesis' of God's existence (see, e.g., Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris 2004, 2006; Hitchens 2007; Stenger 2007). Disregarding the problematic aspects of their arguments, which in any case are not new per se but instead reflect a long tradition of 'scientific enlightenment', the impact provoked by their initiatives has shown how specific conceptions of non-religion can become powerful and politically influential, without any discomfort concerning the self-ascribed trope of atheism.

In any case, as the articles in this issue also prove, 'being an atheist' differs across cultural and historical contexts. This places the New Atheism critique as but one chapter in a long history. Forms of atheism have existed for centuries, but the popularization of public denial of God's existence is the marker of the twentieth century (Hyman 2007: 32). Classical and later Hellenic Greece had a fair share of philosophers and playwrights who addressed the problem of atheism (Bremmer 2007). Yet long lists of philosophical atheists compiled in the second century BC did not mention any "practicing atheists" (ibid.: 20). Instead, the charge of atheism was wielded as a political labeling weapon. For some time, atheism was a convenient way of accusing somebody of disloyalty, as happened in the Roman Empire in the first to second century AD when atheism was imputed to early Christians by pagans and vice versa. Up until the sixteenth century, the writings of Christian fathers suggest that atheism denoted heresy. But by the seventeenth century, the meaning of atheism had changed: it emerged as a recognized phenomenon linked to Enlightenment reasoning and its notion of modernity, which was understood as rational and tied to the scientific mastery of reality (Hyman 2007: 28–29). In Britain and France in particular, several thinkers, including Hume, Diderot, Descartes, Locke, and Hobbes, began to question the religious premises of their cosmos and argued for a rational or empirical quest for truth—one that discredited or expelled God, metaphysics, and revelation as a "hypostatization of rational concepts or empirical realities" (ibid.: 35).

By the end of the nineteenth century, the historical conditions were ripe for atheism to acquire institutional legs, and several secular organizations in Britain and France made a case for explicit intellectual and moral commitment to atheism (Budd 1977). In 1876, prominent figures of the Society of Anthropology of Paris created what became known as the Society of Mutual

Autopsy (Dias 1991; Hecht 1997, 2003). This research group was firmly committed to the advancement of science, in particular by proving that the soul does not exist—thus embodying a particular form of evangelical atheism. Each of the society’s members would pledge to donate his or her brain to the society after death and agree to postmortem autopsy in order to investigate the relation between the human brain and an individual’s personal and intellectual qualities. The group did not outlive the world wars of the twentieth century. The case of the Society of Mutual Autopsy is particularly interesting, not only because it is a nod to our discipline’s historical self-conception as a secular, positivist science, but also because it highlights the thin line that separates belief from knowledge—a separation that is bridged precisely by the notion of certainty, in opposition to that of credulity.

Practices like this have never been confined to the geographical and cultural West and have contemporary purchase. A number of atheist, rationalist, and humanist associations in India emerged in the nineteenth century in interaction with similar British organizations (Quack 2012b: 70; see also Joshi 2012: 170). Frequently, atheists in India are activists who seek to promote literacy, science, ecological consciousness, social equality, sex and health education, and liberation from religious ‘superstition’, as well as an individual’s responsibility for his or her own life (Quack 2012b: 71–74). Many Indian atheists aim to expose miracles as tricks and miracle workers as charlatans as a means to effect a reform of their social milieu, but they must also transform their personal lives and offer alternatives to traditional rites and concepts in order to confirm their ‘genuine’ atheist convictions. Jacob Copeman and Johannes Quack (this issue) suggest that, for Indian atheists, body donation is a practice that stands in metonymic relation to atheism because it annuls the transcendental premises of Indian religions and foregrounds materialism as a moral and experiential quality of being an atheist. Here, atheism is less a matter of intellectual debates than of material practices, including the treatment of objects and dead bodies. For an Indian atheist, cadaver donation plays a dual role—ridiculing religious mortuary practices as wasteful and making an affirmation of constructive ‘god-less morality’, even in the face of imminent death.

Thus, atheists might present themselves as well-educated rational thinkers who disapprove of the presumed ‘prejudice’ of believers (see Engelke 2014, this issue). Indeed, the juxtaposition of uncritical ‘blind’ faith with scientific doubt informs the binary logic of New Atheists’ discourses in Britain, although New Atheists themselves are in pursuit of certainty; some of them proclaim, with confidence, that there is no God and promise ‘definitive evidence’ to prove it (see Engelke 2012a). In their contribution to this special issue, Paul-François Tremlett and Fang-Long Shih explore how discourse and texts of New Atheists, represented by Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and others, misconstrue religions as intellectual hypotheses about divinities that govern this empirical world. Because New Atheists interpret religions in terms of private cognitive beliefs that are allegedly immune to new scientific evidence, they remain insensitive to the imperatives of many religious traditions that prioritize experiential efficacy of their practices over cognitive convictions. Much of New Atheist

reasoning leads to a peculiar self-aggrandizing that casts New Atheists as critical and open-minded explorers in sharp contrast to stubborn, dogmatic 'believers'. This aggressive intellectual position of 'rational freethinkers', Tremlett and Shih emphasize, caricatures religiously motivated people as scriptural literalists and their practices as atavisms of modernity while failing to recognize the combination of continuity and innovation that goes into any religious tradition. Conversely, their religiously motivated opponents can caricature atheists as immoral deviants and puppets of authoritarian regimes, drawing a pernicious isomorphism between atheism and communist politics. Thus, atheists themselves might be subjected to stereotyping and moralizing discourses. In US opinion polls, atheists are associated with illegality, immorality, materialist values, and the lack of social obligations (Bainbridge 2005; Edgell et al. 2006). Even when tolerance of religious diversity is extended to numerous denominations, atheists test the limits of social acceptance. In American society, where religious belonging is conceptualized as a foundation of national unity (Edgell et al. 2006: 213), atheists are a category that is excluded from symbolic membership.

The antagonism between religiously and atheistically motivated people might give rise to mutual stereotyping, but the reality is even more complex. Apprehensive of the belligerent language of New Atheists, some godless people hesitate to subscribe to the name 'atheist' (see Engelke 2012b). Lois Lee (this issue) argues that, in Britain, institutional and overt forms of atheism are not the only modes of non-religion. Some people prefer to self-identify with a survey and census category of 'non-religious', thus differentiating their position from religious belonging and atheist cultures alike, yet making claims to legitimacy in their own right. What matters to these non-religious residents in north London boroughs is that their disengagement from religion does not signal that they endorse the more aggressive or militant atheist discourses and techniques of New Atheists. The fact that non-religious Londoners are ambivalent about representing themselves as atheists points to their problematic perception of New Atheists as intolerant castigators of religions. Moreover, this ambivalence is key to understanding how the refusal to be cast as an atheist generates and/or undermines the power to interpret or misinterpret non-religious personhood.

The presumed divide between believers and atheists goes so far as to impute to the latter the inability to 'know' religion. The religious and atheist positions are seen as incommensurable and untranslatable. This issue becomes critical with regard to the social sciences and anthropologists. Taking into consideration that atheists are often charged with ideological blindness and the failure to engage productively with religion, does the work of atheist Soviet scholars carry any epistemological value? Can non-religious anthropologists productively conduct ethnographic research in an intensely religious culture? Sonja Luehrmann (this issue) challenges the idea that Soviet scholarship on religion was a case of blatant propagandism. For several decades, the bureaucratic condition of mandatory scientific atheism constrained the interpretive possibilities of Soviet social scientists, but their bafflement with religious resilience led them to refine their methodological and theoretical tools. Never challenging the official critique of religious belonging, Soviet scholars had to pursue

increasingly sophisticated empirical research to explain the reasons why Soviet people continued to baptize their children and perform other life-cycle rituals. Their findings contradicted the Communist Party's assertions that only ignorant people held religious convictions. Their studies also pointed to polarization between younger and older generations, the city and the countryside, and different ethnic groups, as well as the role that religions might play in creating divisions. Soviet social scientists remained oblivious of their biases; for instance, they saw ritual and religious objects as mechanisms of religious propaganda. But their anti-religious stance allowed for many interesting insights into the complexities of religious traditions.

Luehrmann persuasively argues that antagonism and empathy are productive yet problematic ways of engaging with religious 'others'. By analogy with Soviet social scientists, she touches upon the methodological pressure to achieve ethnographic empathy in anthropological research that has sprung from an assumption that religious traditions might be alien to secularized scholars. While Luehrmann's work is historical in its scope, Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic's article (this issue) is motivated by the problem of being an atheist anthropologist among seriously religious people. In addition to reviewing the debates on methodological atheism in anthropology as a secularized—and potentially biased—discipline, Oustinova-Stjepanovic shows that reflexivity, intellectual sensitivity to our interlocutors' religious ideas and practices, and professional commitment to ethnographic empathy might crumble when an anthropologist is suddenly drawn into the physically and affectively demanding world of a religious ritual. It becomes apparent that the suspension of disbelief might be obstructed by the inability to participate bodily in a ritual. This line of inquiry complements and expands the analysis of atheism and New Atheism, which see religion in terms of beliefs (Tremlett and Shih, this issue), by disclosing visceral aspects of atheism as a disposition.

Conclusion

With this special issue, we hope to contribute to a critical understanding of the different ways of being godless and the manifestation of their problematics somewhere between mundane doubt and ideological atheism. Despite our reluctance to define (and essentialize) godlessness, we contend that the line of the ethnographic inquiry that we pursue here allows us to capture the experiential quality of being godless and perspectives of godless people on the role of religion in their personal and public lives. These articles recognize the historical, social, cultural, and political complexities that underpin the daily realities of godless people. All of us are familiar with the idea that being religious is difficult: one has to commit to theistic and social obligations, invest time and money, learn and polish ritual techniques, and much more. But being godless implies an equally unsettling endeavor: one must remove oneself from ancestral traditions, find rationalizations and ethical justifications for one's position, struggle against familial and institutional responsibilities, and look for ways

to insulate oneself from the potential encroachment of religious mysteries and compelling qualities of religious liturgies. Most people dwell somewhere in between total immersion and the unequivocal rejection of religion. By focusing on godless people, we hope to understand what some people do to disengage from religion and the challenges and paradoxes that they face.

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