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### On the Receiving End: Discrimination Toward the Non-Religious in the United States [post-print]

Ryan Cragun

Barry A. Kosmin

*Trinity College*, [barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu](mailto:barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu)

Ariela Keysar

*Trinity College*, [ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu](mailto:ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu)

Joseph H. Hammer

Michael Nielsen

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On the Receiving End: Discrimination Toward the Non-Religious in the United States

*Ryan T. Cragun, Barry Kosmin, Ariela Keysar, Joseph H. Hammer & Michael Nielsen*

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Discrimination Toward the Non-Religious in the U.S.**

Ryan T. Cragun\*  
University of Tampa  
401 W Kennedy Blvd.  
Tampa, FL 33606  
ryantcragun@gmail.com

Barry Kosmin  
Trinity College  
300 Summit Street  
Hartford, CT 06106-3100  
barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu

Ariela Keysar  
Trinity College  
300 Summit Street  
Hartford, CT 06106-3100  
ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu

Joseph H. Hammer  
Department of Psychology  
W112 Lagomarcino Hall  
Iowa State University  
Ames, IA 50011-3180  
hammer@iastate.edu

Michael Nielsen  
Department of Psychology  
P. O. Box 8041  
Georgia Southern University  
Statesboro, GA 30460-8041  
mnielsen@georgiasouthern.edu

\*Corresponding author.

## Author Biographies:

Ryan T. Cragun

Ryan T. Cragun is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Tampa. His research interests include: the sociology of Mormonism, the growth and decline of religions, secularization, and the sociology of the non-religious. This article is dedicated to his brother, Mark Earl Cragun (1974-2010), who always defended anyone experiencing discrimination.

Joseph H. Hammer

Joseph H. Hammer, M.Ed., is a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at Iowa State University. His research focuses on issues of diversity, with specific attention to bias and discrimination towards various cultural groups.

Barry A. Kosmin

Research Professor, Public Policy & Law Program and Director, Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture. Principal Investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) series 1990-2008.

Ariela Keysar

Dr. Ariela Keysar, a demographer, is Associate Research Professor of Public Policy and Law and the Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is also a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey.

Michael Nielsen

Michael Nielsen is Professor and Chair of Psychology at Georgia Southern University. His research focuses on the psychology of religion, and has been published in such journals as *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, and *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*.

## **On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-Religious in the U.S.**

### **Abstract**

The present study examines perceived discrimination faced by religious "nones". After distinguishing between atheists, agnostics, and "nones" who are deists or theists, we use nationally representative data from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey to study the contexts in which these various types of religious "nones" have reported experiencing discrimination. The strongest predictor of such discrimination was not theological atheism or agnosticism but self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic when asked what one's religion is. Context-specific predictors of discrimination are age, region of the country, rural versus urban location, parents' religious identifications, educational attainment, ethnicity and race. Results are consistent with the view that people who hold more pronounced views are more likely to report discrimination.

## Introduction

Atheism predates Christianity and is probably as old as is belief in a god or gods (Bremmer 11). Prejudicial attitudes about and discriminatory behavior towards atheists is likely just as old, given that the term “atheist” originated as a label for one's enemies (Bremmer 12). A number of previous studies have found negative attitudes towards atheists (D'Andrea and Sprenger 157; Ehrlich and Van Tubergen 125; Harper 549; Jenks 786; Newport 1; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 3). Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (230) cogently illustrated the general ethos in the US toward atheists: Americans, in general, report more antipathy toward atheists than they do toward religious groups such as Muslims, conservative Christians, and Jews; toward racial and ethnic groups such as recent immigrants, Hispanics, Asian Americans, or African Americans; or toward homosexuals. Despite the disdain directed toward atheists there are somewhere between 3.6 and 5.2 million people who are theological atheists in the US today (Kosmin et al. 11; Lugo 26). Edgell et. al. explain the antipathy toward atheists as a “boundary-marking” issue: American civic culture puts religion at the heart of the “good society.” Thus, atheists run counter to what Americans generally think of as culturally acceptable because they do not, as a group, endorse religion. As a result, they are one of the most despised groups of people in the US today. Of note, however, Edgell et. al. assert that, “...attitudes toward atheists tell us more about American society and culture than about atheists themselves...” (230).

The studies described above focus on attitudes toward atheists. Atheists, however, are a subset of another, larger group: the nonreligious or “religious nones” (Vernon 226), i.e., individuals who do not identify with a religion.<sup>1</sup> Atheism and agnosticism describe positions toward deity, and not religious affiliations (Cliteur 2). One can, of course, be a theological atheist

or agnostic but still identify with a religion, as Sherkat (455) and Kosmin, Keysar, Cragun, and Navarro-Rivera (11) find. Similarly, many religious nones do believe in a god or some form of higher power (Kosmin et al. 11; Sherkat 455).

This raises the question of distinguishing between different uses of the terms. Some individuals, when asked what their religion is, respond by saying “atheist,” “agnostic,” “humanist,” or “secular” (Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans* 22; Lugo 26). Given current, widely used definitions of both religion (Lundskow 15) and atheism and agnosticism (Cliteur 2; Smith 15), describing one's religion as “atheist, agnostic, humanist, or secular” does not actually make sense as these are either positions towards deity (atheist and agnostic), personal philosophies that may or may not include the supernatural (humanism), or the very essence of non-religion (secular). Despite the fact that it is not always clear what these self-assigned labels mean, researchers typically assign individuals who identify their religion as “atheist, agnostic, humanist, or secular” to the “religious nones” category (Kosmin and Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans* 22; Lugo 26).

In this article we examine discrimination toward religious nones. However, we find that the subset of individuals who report their religion as “atheist, agnostic, humanist, or secular” are substantively different from individuals who report their religion as “none” and thus examine them as an important subset of religious nones. Specifically, we address three questions in this article: (1) What percentage of the non-religious in America report discrimination? (2) In what contexts (e.g., family, workplace) does this discrimination take place? (3) And what other factors predict whether a nonreligious individual will experience discrimination in various contexts?

## Literature Review

While it is clear that there is antipathy toward atheists, it is less clear if there is a general sense of dislike toward all religious nones. Neither Edgell et. al. (230) nor one of the only other representative U.S. surveys, the 2002 Religion and Public Life Survey, asked specifically about attitudes toward religious nones or agnostics, but only about atheists. Thus, it is not clear whether people hold negative attitudes toward religious nones generally. Additionally, no previous research has asked a representative sample of religious nones in the US whether or not they have experienced discrimination (we address this second lacuna).

There are a number of anecdotal and non-systematic illustrations of discrimination reported by religious nones, agnostics, and atheists (Dawkins and Flynn iii; Goodstein 1; Heiner 17; Hunsberger 135; Koproske 1; Pollitt; Reisberg A43; Zorn). For instance, Army Specialist Jeremy Hall sued the military in 2008 after his life was threatened by fellow soldiers when he revealed his atheism (Kaye). Margaret Downey (41) has been documenting acts of discrimination against the nonreligious since 1995 through the Anti-Discrimination Support Network, a committee of the Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia. She has received reports of hundreds of instances of discrimination against the nonreligious, ranging from shunning, to job firings, to death threats, to physical violence. She also notes that many more instances go unreported out of fear of more severe repercussions. While there are numerous anecdotal reports of such discrimination, there is no systematic assessment of discrimination perceived by the nonreligious.

Because the primary question of interest in this article is not attitudes toward the nonreligious but rather the discrimination perceived by the nonreligious, the most logical literature to explore is research examining perceived discrimination experienced by other



minority groups. One such comparison would be to other religious minorities that are known to have experienced discrimination, including: Jews (Rosenfield 440; Shapiro 16), Mormons (Messner), Sikhs (The Pluralism Project 3), Muslims (Bloul 20; El Hamel 305; Montgomery 1600), Catholics (Hirschman 1230), and many more (Davis 218). Members of virtually every religious group that has ever been a minority have experienced discrimination (Hewstone, Islam, and Judd 789). However, we have been unable to find systematic data on how widespread perceived discrimination is against any of these religious minorities (e.g., 20% report discrimination in any given year). Additionally, many religious minorities are not directly comparable to the non-religious as the non-religious are not outwardly identifiable in everyday life, unlike, say, Hasidic Jews or Sikhs. Thus, the lack of systematic data on discrimination against religious minorities and the fact that many religious minorities are more like racial/ethnic (Wilson 20) and gender (Black and Rothman 130; Casper, McLanahan, and Garfinkel 601) minorities in that they are outwardly identifiable make them less than ideal for comparisons to the non-religious.

A better comparison group for the nonreligious may be lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (Herek and Glunt 240; Meyer 692), as the characteristic that invites prejudicial attitudes and subsequent discrimination is not necessarily visible: both homosexuals/bisexuals and the nonreligious have to be “out” or “outed” in order for others to know about the characteristic that leads to discrimination against them (Corrigan and Matthews 245; Silverman; though see recent research by Rule, Ambady, and Hallett 1246 that suggests otherwise). Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) are more likely than heterosexuals to have experienced discrimination, though how much more varies by the context of discrimination (Mays and Cochran 1871). Mays and Cochran report that more than half of homosexuals have experienced some form of prejudice or

discrimination in their lifetimes, compared to just over one-third of heterosexuals. LGBs earn less than their heterosexual colleagues and they are at least twice as likely to experience discrimination as heterosexuals in work contexts (Meyer 692). The discrimination experienced by LGBs is also more severe than that experienced by heterosexuals. A study of LGB adults in Sacramento, California, reports high rates of victimization (including sexual assault, physical assault, robbery, and property crime) related to their sexual orientation (Herek, Gillis, and Cogan 948). LGB youth report comparatively high levels of harassment, which they attribute to their sexual orientation, and which leads to poorer physical and mental health (Meyer 692).

Discrimination against minorities also varies by context, which is not surprising as there are some contexts over which individuals have greater control. For instance, a young gay male born into a family that identifies with a religion that views homosexuality as a sin will likely experience more discrimination based on his sexual identity in the family context than a male born into a less prejudicial family, as he has little control over who his parents are while he is growing up. In contrast, he may have the opportunity to attend an institution of higher education—environments that may tend to be more liberal and open-minded—and thus experience less discrimination in the school context (R. Wilson 2). Given that both atheists and LGBs are stigmatized minorities, it is reasonable to hypothesize that atheists should experience varying levels of discrimination in different contexts as well. And, if attitudes toward the nonreligious are similar to those toward atheists, the nonreligious may also experience varied levels of discrimination in different contexts.

Additionally, the predictors of discrimination are likely to vary by context. For instance, the age of a nonreligious individual may affect the odds of discrimination in the family context as young people have less control over their family situation than do older people, who form

their own families and have the option to cut off contact with prejudiced parents if needed (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 438). However, age may have the opposite effect in the work context, as older people are more likely to experience discrimination in that context (Gee, Pavalko, and Long 286). Likewise, discrimination in general social contexts (e.g., night clubs, sports games) might vary as a function of the region of the country in which the nonreligious individual resides (e.g., American South versus New England; Ellison and Musick 395), but may not vary within the family context (Heiner 16; Sherkat 455; Stump 220). Thus, not only will the amount of discrimination the nonreligious experience likely vary by context, it is also likely that other contextual factors will influence the experience of discrimination within each context.

Another predictor that is important to consider when thinking about antipathy toward the non-religious is the varied ways people disidentify from religion. When individuals are asked whether or not they identify with a religion, reporting “none” does not necessarily suggest personal opposition to religion but rather a sense of dissatisfaction with the array of religions in the religious marketplace (Moore 12). It also says little about belief in god or about religious beliefs generally. However, reporting one's religious identification as “atheist” or “agnostic” is usually taken to suggest something beyond dissatisfaction with the available religions: in the minds of those who hear the label, it suggests a general lack of morality and danger to the public order (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 230). This represents a more pronounced outgroup status than one would have as merely an irreligious person or a disbeliever. In the mind of the person meeting the “atheist” or “agnostic,” they aren't just meeting someone who is “not religious,” but someone who doubts the existence of god. This does not mean that individuals who identify themselves this way more strongly identify with irreligion than do people who simply say “none.” But self-identification as something beyond none may heighten attention to one's

outgroup status among those who are hearing about one's irreligious identity. As a result, one might reasonably expect more discriminatory treatment to accompany a more pronounced outgroup status and its implicit threat to the status quo (Levin et al. 558). In fact, research has found that those who more strongly identify with their minority status are more likely to be victims of prejudice as they threaten the values and hegemony of those in power (Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt 440). Identifying with the more pronounced outgroup status of “atheist” may, to those in the dominant group, represent a stronger identification with the minority identity of nonreligiousness, leading to greater discrimination.

Also of note in discussing discrimination against the non-religious is the growing body of research that focuses on the role of religion on prejudice. For example, religious fundamentalism scores predict homophobic attitudes in both Canadian and Ghanaian samples (Hunsberger, Owusu, and Duck 190). The importance of religion is highlighted by findings that when prejudice is proscribed (e.g., race) by religion, highly religious people are less prejudiced. When religious beliefs do not proscribe prejudice (e.g., sexual orientation), however, highly religious people are more prejudiced (Duck and Hunsberger 176). Many religions do not proscribe prejudice against the non-religious and, in fact, may openly advocate such prejudice (Harris 127; Hitchens 78). An early emphasis on religion in one's family appears to serve as a template producing an us-them framework for addressing religious differences (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 25), which may contribute to the use of religious beliefs as a marker for indicating whether or not individuals are part of one's ingroup.

Religiosity variables correlate differently with group membership and moral judgment dimensions of outgroups that violate moral norms. Notably for the present study, religious people's attitudes toward homosexuals (but not toward aboriginals, women, or abortion) were

predicted both by their membership in an outgroup and their morality (Mavor and Gallois 370). Highly intrinsically religious people react negatively toward actions that violate their values, but not toward the individuals who perform that action (Mak and Tsang 388). But this raises the interesting question of how religious individuals might react toward people whose beliefs represent a violation of religion itself?

The non-religious will fall in the out-group of almost 80% of Americans, which would suggest that many Americans will not look favorably upon them. But self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic adds a second out-group to the attitude equation; rather than just not being religious, self-identified atheists and agnostics have also indicated that they do not believe in a god. As Hewstone, Islam, and Judd (790) illustrate, doubling the number of out-groups a person belongs to substantially increases the prejudicial attitudes against those individuals. Thus, the double out-group identification of atheists and agnostics may help explain why atheists and agnostics are so disliked in the U.S. today.

In summary, general attitudes of Americans toward homosexuals and atheists tend to be negative. The non-religious are like LGB individuals in that the characteristic that makes them minorities and disliked by a large segment of the population is generally not visible. Individuals in both groups can attempt to “pass” in everyday life by simply avoiding topics that might raise awareness of their minority status (Garfinkel 113). However, when the minority status of these individuals is known, this increases their exposure to potential discrimination. There is evidence to suggest both groups experience discrimination, though the degree to which they experience discrimination is likely to vary by context. It is also important to note that the stress of being closeted or discriminated against is likely more intense for LGB individuals than the non-religious<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, there is no systematic evidence of what percentage of the non-religious

experience discrimination. Finally, it is likely that individuals who identify with multiple outgroups and/or a more strongly pronounced outgroup status will be more likely to experience discrimination as a result of their greater perceived threat to the status quo. This suggests the following hypotheses, which we test:

- *Hypothesis 1: The percentage of nonreligious individuals who experience discrimination will vary by context (e.g., work, family, social life, etc.).*
- *Hypothesis 2: Individuals who identify as atheist or agnostic will report more discrimination than individuals who do neither of these.*

## **Data/Methods**

Data for this project come from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS; Kosmin and Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, 4). ARIS 2008 was fielded during February-November 2008 and included answers from 54,461 adult respondents who were questioned in English or Spanish (for additional information on the ARIS methodology see Kosmin and Keysar, *American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, 4). Included in the 2008 ARIS were five silos, or subsets, of respondents: Catholics (n=1,023), Evangelicals (n=1,008), those who self-identify as having “no religion” (n=1,106), which includes individuals who reported “atheist,” “agnostic,” or “humanist” (n=116), Protestants (n=1,079), and a random national sample (n=1,015). The silo of interest in this article is those who self-identify as non-religious.<sup>3</sup>

Not all the participants in each silo were asked the same questions. However, all participants in the 2008 ARIS were asked basic demographic questions, including: sex (male; female), educational attainment (less than high school, high school, some college, college, graduate school, technical school), race (white non-Hispanic; black Non-Hispanic; white Hispanic; black Hispanic; Asian; Native American; Pacific Islander; unspecified; other race),

marital status (single, never married; cohabiting; married; separated; widowed; divorced), household income (recoded into less than \$50,000 and \$50,000+),<sup>4</sup> political affiliation (other; Republican; Democrat; Independent), and age (coded as actual age and recoded into the following groups: 18-29; 30-49; 50-69; 70+). Additionally, regional and rural/urban data are included in the dataset based on the location of the respondent. Region is based on census divisions (New England, Mid Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific).<sup>5</sup> Rural/Urban is based on a metro/non-metro distinction (Center City, Center City County, Suburban, Non-Center City, Non-Metro). Finally, all individuals in the ARIS were asked their religious identity. Those included in the “no religion” silo included individuals who self-identified as “none,” “no religion,” “atheist,” or “agnostic.”<sup>6</sup> Table 1 presents descriptives of each of these variables for the non-religious and national random sample groups.

Individuals in the non-religious silo were asked several additional questions. They were asked to describe their theological belief regarding the existence of god: “there is no such thing” (i.e., atheist), “there is no way to know” (i.e., hard agnostic), “I’m not sure” (i.e., soft agnostic), “There is a higher power but no personal god” (i.e., deist), and “There is definitely a personal god” (i.e., theist).<sup>7</sup> They were also asked the religious identifications of their parents when they were growing up (both identified with the same religion, they identified with different religions, one identified with a religion but the other did not, or neither identified with a religion) and the age at which they left religion (if they were raised in a nonreligious home this was marked as missing).

The dependent variables in this study are a series of questions that were asked exclusively of the non-religious: “In the past 5 years, have you personally experienced discrimination

because of your lack of religious identification or affiliation in any of the following situations”: in your family; in your workplace; at school or college; in the military; socially; in volunteer organizations or clubs. The religious identifications reported in the random sample of the non-religious are reported in Table 2, along with basic descriptives for the other questions asked of the non-religious.

## Results

The bi-variate analyses of the descriptives in Table 1 indicate that non-religious individuals are not significantly different from the national random sample in their educational attainment. However, religious nones are significantly younger and more likely to be white, more likely to be male, more likely to be political independents and substantially less likely to be Republicans. They are also more likely to be single and never married, and they make more money than the average American adult. They are also significantly less likely to live in the South Atlantic, East South Central, or West South Central states, but more likely to live in New England, the Mid Atlantic, or Pacific states.

[Insert Table 1 here.]

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 provide additional information about the non-religious. When asked their religious identification, 4% report “atheist;” an additional 6% report “agnostic.” Just under 90% report “no religion” or “none.” Self-reported identification, when contrasted with belief in god, provides an intriguing comparison. When one asks about theological beliefs rather than religious identification, the picture of the non-religious changes dramatically. While only 4% report their religious identification as “atheist,” 10% of the non-



religious are atheists based upon their theological non-belief in god. Likewise, only 6% of the non-religious report their religious identification as “agnostic,” but 22% are theologically hard agnostics (i.e., there is no way to know) and an additional 20% are theologically soft agnostics (i.e., I’m not sure). Using theological classification, then, 51% of the non-religious are atheists and agnostics. Another 25% hold a deistic or new age understanding of god, while 24% believe in a personal god.

[Insert Table 2 here.]

Table 2 includes similar questions for a random sample of the general population. In the general American adult population, 3% are theological atheists; another 10% are theological agnostics, and 12% hold deistic or new age views of god. Just under 70% of Americans believe in a personal god (6% don't know what they believe or refuse to answer the question; not shown in Table 2).

Also of interest is the disparity between self-reported religious identification and theological classification. In the nonreligious silo, of those who report their religious identification as “atheist,” 56% report that they do not believe in a god. Thirty percent of self-identified atheists are theological agnostics, 5% are deists, and 9% are theists. Among self-identified agnostics, almost 60% are theological agnostics, 30% are deists, 3% are atheists, and 5% are theists. In short, even if someone responds to the question “What is your religion, if any?” with “none”, that does not mean they do not believe in a god, don't think you can know if a god exists, or don't know. They may believe in a higher power or god.

Table 2 also includes basic descriptives on the discrimination the non-religious report experiencing as a result of their lack of a religious identification. The percentages that report

experiencing discrimination vary significantly<sup>8</sup> and substantially by context, supporting Hypothesis 1. Only 1.8% of the non-religious report having experienced discrimination in the military (this is only for those who said it was relevant; a large percentage said this context was “not applicable” to them). The context in which the largest percentage of people report having experienced discrimination is socially, where 14.4% report having experienced discriminatory behavior. Individuals can, of course, report experiencing discrimination in multiple contexts. Twenty-two percent report having experienced discrimination in one or more contexts; only one person reported experiencing discrimination in all six contexts. That means a majority - 78.4% - of the non-religious do not report experiencing discrimination as a result of their lack of a religious identification in the last 5 years in any of these contexts.

What predicts reported discrimination as a nonreligious individual? One possibility is that discrimination is not related so much to being non-religious as it is based on one's belief in a god. We test this idea using chi-square; the results are shown in Table 3. The top portion of the table contrasts the different beliefs in god with a dummy code indicating whether or not an individual reported experiencing discrimination in any context over the last five years. Although there is variation in the rate of perceived discrimination by belief in God, the differences are not statistically significant.

[Insert Table 3 here.]

The second portion of Table 3 replicates the first part, but does so using self-reported religious identification rather than theological classification (i.e., belief in god). This was done on the assumption that self-labeling as “atheist” or “agnostic” when asked one's religion reflects multiple out-groups and/or a more strongly pronounced outgroup status. If that assumption is accurate, comparing the levels of reported discrimination allows us to test the idea that those who

identify with a more strongly pronounced outgroup status are more likely to report experiencing discrimination. The numbers in Table 3 support this idea. Forty-one percent of individuals who report their religious identification as “atheist” and 44% of self-identified agnostics report experiencing discrimination in at least one of the contexts we asked about over the last 5 years. Only 19% of those who say “no religion” or “none” report having experienced discrimination in any context over the last 5 years. Additional support for the importance of self-identification can be seen in Table 2 where the percentage of atheists/agnostics (combined) who report experiencing discrimination in the six contexts we asked about are listed. Self-identified atheists and agnostics report almost double the discrimination (42.9%) as do the non-religious generally (21.6%).

Multivariate analyses allow us to hold constant some of the variables that distinguish the nonreligious from the general population (although all of the multivariate analyses are conducted on the nonreligious silo) in order to determine whether those demographic differences contribute to reporting discrimination. To do so, we employed logistic regression analyses. Table 4 presents the results of four logistic regressions: one for each of the four contexts in which the nonreligious could perceive discrimination due to their not being religious: family, workplace, school, and socially. There are no models shown for reporting discrimination in the military or in voluntary organizations as there are no variables that significantly increase the odds of reporting discrimination in either context in our data. The key independent variable in these models for testing Hypothesis 2 is the first variable, a dummy code indicating whether or not individuals self-identify as atheist or agnostic.

[Insert Table 4 here.]

Model 1 in Table 4 regresses a dummy variable indicating whether or not someone reported experiencing discrimination in the family context on the independent variable and various demographic variables. Only two variables in the model are statistically significant, though the independent variable approaches significance. Relative to having two nonreligious parents, having parents with different religions significantly increases the odds of reported discrimination in the family context ( $B=1.035$ ,  $p<.05$ ). There are also significant regional variations. Relative to the South Atlantic states, individuals who live in New England, East North Central, West North Central, and Pacific states are all more likely to report experiencing discrimination. While the relationship between self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic and reporting discrimination in the family context is in the direction of greater discrimination, the relationship is not statistically significant at the generally accepted alpha (i.e.,  $.05 < p < .10$ ). One item that is noteworthy is the overlap in variance explained between age and marital status. With marital status in the equation, age is not significant, but with it removed (not shown), it nears significance. Bivariate analyses between perceived discrimination in the family context and both age and marital status (not shown) show significant relationships with never married singles and young people both being more likely to report discrimination in this context.

Model 2 in Table 4 repeats the above analyses but with reported discrimination in the workplace context as the dependent variable. One variable stands out – self-identifying as atheist or agnostic. Self-identified atheists and agnostics are three times as likely to report experiencing discrimination in the workplace as are those who identify as “nones” ( $p<.001$ ). There is also some regional variation, with individuals in the East North Central states reporting more perceived discrimination relative to individuals living in South Atlantic states. Removing marital status from the equation (not shown) has a similar effect on age as it did in the family context,

indicating the colinearity between age and marital status.

Model 3 repeats the analysis using reported discrimination in a school or college context as the dependent variable. Two variables stand out as notable. Self-identified atheists and agnostics are 3.4 times as likely ( $p < .001$ ) to report discrimination in this context as are self-identified religious nones. The second variable is income: individuals who make less than \$50,000 per year are 2.4 times as likely to report experiencing discrimination than are individuals who make more than \$50,000 per year in a school or college setting for not being religious ( $p < .01$ ). In separate models (not shown), we included educational attainment, which attenuated the relationship between income and discrimination, suggesting colinearity. We include only income in the model as a result. In an additional analysis with marital status removed (not shown), age becomes significant, again illustrating the colinearity between age and marital status.

Model 4 repeats the analysis but with reported discrimination in the social context as the dependent variable. Three variables stand out as significant. Self-identified atheists and agnostics are 2.5 times as likely to report experiencing discrimination socially as are self-identified religious nones ( $p < .001$ ). Younger people are significantly more likely to report experiencing discrimination socially than are older individuals ( $p < .01$ ). Relative to individuals living in South Atlantic states, individuals living in East South Central and East North Central states are significantly more likely to report experiencing discrimination socially. This is also the only context where rural/urban differences are noteworthy, though the increase in reported discrimination in non-center city areas relative to non-metro areas is not significant.

## Discussion

In support of our first hypothesis, we find that the percentage of nonreligious individuals who report experiencing discrimination varies by context. Nonreligious people are substantially more likely to report experiencing discrimination in family settings and socially than they are in the workplace, school, the military, or voluntary organizations. The non-religious are most likely to report experiencing discrimination socially; roughly one in seven non-religious individuals reported experiencing discrimination in that context over the last five years.

Also supportive of our first hypothesis are the findings in Table 4. The variables that predict perceived discrimination vary by context. In the family context, the only variables that significantly predicted perceived discrimination were parental religious identification and region. Having parents with two different religions significantly increases the odds of reported discrimination in the family context relative to having two parents who have no religion. This makes intuitive sense as parental disapproval of a child's nonreligious stance is much less likely when both parents are nonreligious themselves. This also supports the finding that religiously heterogeneous relationships experience more conflict than religiously homogeneous relationships (Lehrer and Chiswick 400); that appears to include conflict beyond just that experienced by the partners themselves.

That identifying as an atheist or agnostic did not substantially increase reported discrimination in the family context is somewhat surprising. However, what this may reflect is another in-group/out-group divide. Family members retain at least one in-group membership with self-identifying atheists and agnostics. Cross-categorization of group memberships – i.e., having one in-group and one out-group in common with someone – attenuates prejudice (Hewstone, Islam, and Judd 789). Thus, self-identifying atheists and agnostics may report less

discrimination in a family context because they retain family membership. Additionally, the closer relationships with family members may allow for greater understanding of what the agnostic/atheist label means, which is less likely in other contexts. As a result, family may be less likely to be affronted by such labels.

Another explanation for why identifying as an atheist or agnostic may not significantly alter reported discrimination in this context could be due to our question wording. Since “coming out” as an atheist or agnostic often occurs in adolescence (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 100; Fitzgerald 13; Hunsberger 56; Hwang 20), this is a time when one is still living in the family home and more vulnerable to discrimination from one’s family of origin if the family is religious. Just over 90% of the participants in the non-religious silo are over 24 years old. This has two implications. First, older people have the opportunity to form their own families and may have the option to cut off contact with their family of origin. This could reduce the amount of discrimination experienced by these atheist and agnostic individuals in the family context as they age. Second, and perhaps more importantly, participants were instructed to only recount discrimination experiences that occurred within the past 5 years of their life. Therefore, while these atheists and agnostics may have reported experiencing discrimination in the family context when they were younger, living with their parents, and “came out”, for those over 24 years of age it may have been more than 5 years since they were in such a situation.

In the workplace, self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the odds of reporting discrimination relative to those who self-identify as religious nones. This finding is supportive of both hypotheses 1 and 2 as it is those who identify with the more strongly pronounced out-group status who are at greatest risk of experiencing perceived discrimination and it illustrates variation in predictors of discrimination in different contexts. That self-

identifying as atheist or agnostic is significant in the workplace is not surprising as there are many subtle ways to discriminate against people that can be masked using other explanations (e.g., showed up late, called in sick, etc.; Huang and Kleiner 130). Also, individuals living in East South Central and East North Central states are at increased risk of experiencing discrimination in the workplace context than individuals living in South Atlantic states, which is consistent with at least some other studies on regional differences in religiosity (Ellison and Musick 395; Heiner 16; Sherkat 455; Stump 220).

Also supportive of both hypotheses 1 and 2 is the finding that self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the odds of reported discrimination in the school or college context. While it is not uncommon for conservatives to claim a liberal bias on college campuses (Wilson, there are a number of studies that suggest college campuses are not as liberal, inclusive, and/or open-minded as conservatives often suggest (Ancis, Sedlacek, and Mohr 182; Ellis 735; Faia 198; Goodman and Mueller 60). Ellis (735), examining the experiences of LGBTs on campuses in the UK, found that the participants in her research did not consider college campuses “safe” places as they still experienced discrimination in that setting. Goodman and Mueller (60) make the same argument for atheists. Our findings support this conclusion: discrimination against atheists and agnostics occurs on college campuses.

That older participants were less likely to report discrimination for their lack of religious identification in the school or college context may be due to the increased ability to control one's social network as one ages (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 438). It is well-understood that social networks grow more homogeneous with age. Young individuals in a school or college context have little control over who their instructors and classmates are. Older individuals are likely to be the instructors, professors, or administrators, which means they have chosen to work



in this context.

One additional and rather complex finding appears in the school/college context: the significant increase in reported discrimination resulting from lower income. Interpreting this finding is difficult as it is not clear who is reporting discrimination in this context. There are several possibilities. First, it may be the case that students with a lower SES fall lower in the social hierarchy, making it more acceptable to discriminate against them for their non-religion. These may also be non-traditional, more mature students. However, only 8% of the 62 individuals reporting discrimination in this context indicate they are full-time students.

Alternatively, this may reflect higher amounts of discrimination against younger faculty and staff who are non-religious, as younger faculty and staff are particularly vulnerable when they first arrive in these settings (48% of the individuals reporting discrimination in this context are employed full-time; 19% are part-time and 11% are retired). Or it may be the case that this reflects a subclass of people in this context: individuals with lower incomes could include the janitorial and groundskeeping staff in schools or colleges. As there is some evidence to suggest individuals with a lower socioeconomic status encounter higher rates of prejudice and discrimination (Halperin, Pedahzur, and Canetti-Nisim 194; Pettigrew et al. 396), it may be the case that individuals with a lower SES in school and college settings who are nonreligious experience more discrimination as a result of who they are around while in these settings. However, 45% of the individuals reporting discrimination in this context make more than \$40,000 per year and 15% make more than \$100,000, suggesting that these individuals may be located in specific disciplines, like law or business, where academic salaries are higher and other faculty tend to be more religious. In short, it is not very clear why there is a significant relationship between income and reported discrimination based on nonreligion in school

contexts.

Self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic significantly increases the odds of reporting discrimination socially, offering further support for our hypotheses. As is the case with adolescent LGBs, young religious nones are at higher risk of experiencing discrimination socially as a result of their being nonreligious. This may be attributable to younger individuals having less control over the environments in which they socialize, as well as less personal power with which to discourage such discrimination. Additionally, this may be an illustration of how homophily changes over the life course (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 438). As individuals age, the similarity of their friends to themselves increases substantially (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 438). Regional variations in reported discrimination are also significant in the social context with individuals living in East South Central states having the greatest odds of reported discrimination.

It is also noteworthy that we found very little perceived discrimination in the military and in voluntary organizations, but substantially greater rates socially and in the family context. Reported discrimination is lowest in contexts where it is possible to file suit against those doing the discriminating. This seems to suggest that the American public is growing more sensitive to possible legal ramifications for discriminating in specific contexts. As a result, discrimination is occurring outside of those contexts and in contexts where lawsuits are substantially more difficult to pursue, like in everyday social interactions or in the family. It may also be the case that individuals are less likely to reveal their religious identities in these contexts.

Additional evidence supporting Hypothesis 2 comes from the descriptive statistics in our sample: 21.6% of nonreligious individuals report having experienced discrimination in one or more contexts (e.g., family, workplace, school, military, socially, or in voluntary organizations)

over the last five years as a result of their non-religiosity. Aggregated, that number hides the fact that certain subgroups of the non-religious are substantially more likely to report discrimination than are others. Those who report their religious identification as “atheist” or “agnostic,” whom we argue identify with a more strongly pronounced outgroup status, are significantly more likely to be on the receiving end of discrimination as a result of not being religious than are individuals who simply report their religious identification as “none.” Roughly 2 out of every 5 self-identifying atheists and agnostics report having experienced discrimination in one of the six contexts we examined over the last 5 years and nearly 1 in 4 atheists and agnostics have reported discrimination socially in the last 5 years as a result of their nonreligion. This supports the findings of both Hewstone, Islam and Judd (789) and Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt (440) that it is individuals who are very different from and threaten the legitimized worldview of the majority who are at greatest risk of experiencing discrimination.

One aspect of our findings we find intriguing has to do with self-identifying as “atheist” or “agnostic.” As noted in the introduction, “atheist” and “agnostic” are not religious identifications but rather theological positions toward a divinity. While many of the individuals who self-identify as atheists and agnostics are, in fact, atheists and agnostics in their beliefs toward divinity, many are not. What motivates these people to self-identify this way? The most likely explanation is that these individuals are identifying with a particular sub-group in order to derive fulfillment and self-esteem. This is known as the “distinctiveness principle” and has been postulated to be an innate human drive (Vignoles, Chryssochoou, and Breakwell 350). Humans do not want to be too different from everyone else, but neither do they want to be the same as everyone else. This appears to be particularly true in Western cultures that emphasize individualism (Vignoles, Chryssochoou, and Breakwell 350). Thus, despite the fact that “atheist”

and “agnostic” are not religions, identifying your “religion” as such may enhance self-esteem by illustrating one's distinctiveness at the individual level while simultaneously showing allegiance with a deviant group. However, our explanation of this phenomenon warrants further investigation.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although anecdotal accounts of perceived discrimination exist (Downey 41), and qualitative research has documented cases of discrimination (Heiner 17; Hunsberger 135; Tetlock et al. 865), this study provides a systematic, representative sample documenting perceived discrimination due to religious disbelief. Respondents in this study are reporting their perceptions, of course, and it is possible that the actions that they perceived as discriminatory were minor aggressions based on factors other than the person's religious belief or affiliation. This same criticism of self-reported discrimination, while a legitimate concern, can also be leveled at research examining the self-reported discrimination of other minority groups (Mays and Cochran 1871). Although it can be difficult to ascertain the motivation behind discrimination (Sue et al. 283), experimental research may yield insights beyond those available in a survey. For instance, one laboratory study found that when asked to rank people on a waiting list to receive a kidney, respondents gave significantly lower priority to patients with atheist or agnostic views than to patients who identified themselves as Christian (Furnham, Meader, and McClelland 740). Research manipulating such factors may provide additional insights into the motivation behind differential treatment.

Another limitation of our data is that the atheists and agnostics group is relatively small, just 116 individuals (out of the total nonreligious silo of 1,106). However, this sample of

individuals does not differ in any substantive ways from the other 612 atheists and agnostics interviewed in ARIS 2008. Rudimentary statistical comparisons suggest no significant differences in demographics between the two groups.

Our data are also not directly comparable to that of Mays and Cochran (1971) and other researchers on the prevalence of discrimination experienced by LGBs, in that Mays and Cochran asked about “lifetime” discrimination while we asked about discrimination over the last five years. Rather than see this as a limitation, however, we are inclined to believe that our approach offers some advantages over theirs. Asking about discrimination experienced over one's lifetime increases the chances of recall bias. It also means individual responses are less comparable as older individuals will have a much longer period of time to draw upon for examples of discrimination than will younger individuals. As a result, older individuals will probably always report more discrimination than younger individuals, when it may, in fact, be just the opposite – as our data indicate. Lastly, asking about a specific time period allows for comparisons over time. If scholars repeat the question every five to ten years, they can compare levels of discrimination at Time 1 with levels of discrimination at Time 2. Such comparisons are much more difficult if the question asks about lifetime experiences of discrimination. Thus, while we cannot directly compare our data to that of Mays and Cochran, we believe our method for measuring perceived discrimination has important advantages.

Also, a limitation of the present study is that we do not know who is doing the discriminating. It is likely that this, too, varies by context: In the workplace it is likely bosses, co-workers, or perhaps even subordinates doing the discriminating. In the family setting it is likely parents, siblings, partners, or extended family members. In school settings it is likely other students, faculty, or administrative staff. And socially it is likely acquaintances, but may include

authority figures like the police, or just people the nonreligious meet. The frequency of discrimination in each of these contexts may vary as well. Addressing these two issues of discrimination against the non-religious would be good topics for future research.

Another concern with this paper is that we do not report the types of discrimination. This is a concern as it may be the case that some of the participants in this study report incidents of discrimination that independent parties may not consider discriminatory. In a separate paper currently under review (Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang) this limitation is addressed by examining the types of discrimination reported by the non-religious.

Another issue of note is that the nonreligious may have different strategies for answering a question about their self-identification (e.g., “What is your religion, if any?”). Some may see themselves as atheists (i.e., private self-identification), but may or may not choose to disclose to others (i.e., public self-identification) how they see themselves. This is an important distinction, as some participants who privately self-identify may not feel comfortable publicly disclosing their self-identity over the phone to a study interviewer who is a complete stranger. Thus, these reported numbers may underestimate the number of individuals who personally identify as atheists or even disclose this fact to a few trusted confidants (but who are not willing to do so with a stranger over the phone). On the other hand, this is also important because while some atheists may feel comfortable telling a study interviewer their private self-identification, they might not publicly disclose this identity to certain groups of individuals, such as parents, coworkers, or social acquaintances. Thus, some individuals who were classified as identifying as atheists in this study may not actually identify as such to others, thereby potentially avoiding certain forms of discrimination.

Finally, an important limitation of this study is the idea that self-identification as “atheist”

or “agnostic” necessarily indicates a stronger identification with non-religion. We have tried to be clear throughout this manuscript that self-labeling as atheist or agnostic may heighten the out-group status of these individuals in the minds of those hearing the labels, thus increasing the odds of discrimination, but we do not mean to suggest that these labels indicate stronger identification with irreligion. Whether or not that is the case is an empirical question: Does self-identification as an atheist or agnostic when asked one's religion necessarily mean that someone more strongly identifies with non-religion? This is obviously a question that future research should explore.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the above limitations, what this paper has established is that non-religious individuals perceive discrimination and a subset of the non-religious, those who self-identify as atheists and agnostics, report more discrimination than those who simply self-identify as nones. Additionally, this paper establishes that discrimination varies by context. While by no means a comprehensive or conclusive study on discrimination against the non-religious, this study should serve as a launching point for addressing the shortcomings outlined above. Future research should explore: types of discrimination reported, frequency of discrimination, a comparison of discrimination rates between the non-religious and the religious, and more closely examine the centrality of self-identification as atheist or agnostic to one's irreligious identity.

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Table 1. Crosstab (percentages shown) and Chi-Square Comparisons of Non-Religious with National Random Sample.

Education	n	< High School	High School	Some College	College	Graduate School	Technical School	Chi-Square			
Non-Religious	1104	7.8	25.9	23.2	24.2	17.4	1.5	6.41			
Random Sample	1006	7.6	27.3	20.5	26.6	15.6	2.4				
Race	n	White	Black	Hispanic	other	Chi-Square					
Non-Religious	1088	83.0	6.5	3.4	7.1	10.57	**				
Random Sample	1003	81.7	7.3	5.9	5.2						
Marital Status	n	Single, Never Married	Cohabiting	Married	Separated	Widowed	Divorced	Chi-Square			
Non-Religious	1104	22.3	6.8	51.2	1.7	6.6	11.4	30.14	***		
Random Sample	1010	16.8	4.1	55.0	1.7	11.4	11.1				
Household Income	n	< \$50,000	\$50,000+	Chi-Square							
Non-Religious	993	45.9	54.1	8.68	**						
Random Sample	868	52.8	47.2								
Political Affiliation	n	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Other	Chi-Square					
Non-Religious	1033	12.5	33.8	51.5	2.2	133.87	***				
Random Sample	934	33.1	32.3	33.5	1.2						
Sex	n	Male	Female	Chi-Square							
Non-Religious	1106	62.9	37.1	36.86	***						
Random Sample	1015	49.9	50.1								
Age (4 groups)	n	18-29	30-49	50-69	70+	Chi-Square					
Non-Religious	1106	16.5	37.6	33.5	12.4	47.63	***				
Random Sample	1015	10.8	31.3	35.9	22.0						
Census Division	n	New England	Mid Atlantic	East North Central	West North Central	South Atlantic	East South Central	West South Central	Mountain	Pacific	Chi-Square
Non-Religious	1106	8.0	15.9	13.9	5.6	17.7	3.5	6.2	9.6	19.5	59.54
Random Sample	1015	4.4	11.5	15.2	9.4	22.2	7.0	7.9	8.9	13.6	**
Rural/Urban	n	Center City	Center City Country	Suburban	Non-Center City	Non-Metro	Chi-Square				
Non-Religious	1106	29.1	22.3	21.2	4.2	23.2	12.87	**			
Random Sample	1015	26.9	18.6	21.9	3.3	29.3					



Table 2. Descriptive statistics for questions asked of the non-religious and random national sample.

Self-Reported Religious Affiliation	Non-Religious Silo (%)	Random National Sample Silo (%)
Atheist	4.1	0.8
Agnostic	6.2	0.6
Humanist	0.2	0.0
No religion/None	89.5	14.6
n	1106	1015
Belief in God		
There is no such thing.	9.6	2.7
There is no way to know	22.0	4.5
I'm not sure	19.5	5.4
There is a higher power but no personal God	24.6	12.2
There is definitely a personal God	24.4	68.9
n	1022	1015
Context	Experienced Discrimination	
	All non-religious (%)	Atheists/Agnostics (%)
Family	9.1	12.9
Workplace	7.0	14.2
School	5.9	13.0
Military	1.8	3.4
Socially	14.4	26.1

Table 4. Experiencing discrimination in specific contexts and overall regressed (logistic) on predictor and control variables.

	Model 1-family		Model 2-workplace		Model 3-school		Model 4-socially	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Atheist/Agnostic <sup>^</sup>	0.563	1.756 †	1.121	3.069 ***	1.219	3.385 ***	0.933	2.541 ***
Age (continuous)	-0.010	0.990	-0.008	0.992	-0.015	0.986	-0.016	0.984 **
Sex <sup>^</sup>	0.042	1.043	-0.191	0.827	-0.114	0.893	-0.104	0.901
Income <sup>^</sup>	0.270	1.309	0.247	1.280	0.863	2.370 **	0.059	1.061
Race <sup>^</sup>								
White	-0.962	0.382 †	-0.614	0.541	-0.251	0.778	-0.508	0.602
Black	-0.420	0.657	0.595	1.803	-0.053	0.948	0.022	1.022
Other	-0.877	0.416	-0.523	0.593	0.367	1.443	-0.175	0.839
Marital Status <sup>^</sup>								
Single, never married	0.130	1.138	-0.355	0.701	0.545	1.724	0.205	1.228
Single, cohabiting	0.111	1.117	0.290	1.336	0.324	1.382	0.270	1.310
Separated	0.941	2.562	0.908	2.479	1.103	3.013	0.271	1.312
Widowed	-0.146	0.864	-0.788	0.455	-0.885	0.413	-0.893	0.409
Divorced	0.359	1.433	-0.411	0.663	0.234	1.264	0.102	1.107
Parents' Religion <sup>^</sup>								
Both same religion	0.551	1.735						
Different religions	1.009	2.744 *						
One relig./One not	0.507	1.660						
Rural/Urban								
Center city	-0.272	0.762	-0.529	0.589	0.392	1.481	0.208	1.231
Center city county	-0.453	0.636	-0.217	0.805	0.160	1.173	-0.158	0.854
Suburban	-0.253	0.777	-0.236	0.790	0.207	1.229	0.013	1.013
Non-center city	-0.137	0.872	0.126	1.135	-0.636	0.529	0.818	2.267 †
Densus Divisions <sup>^</sup>								
New England	1.183	3.265 *	0.269	1.308	-0.890	0.411	0.362	1.436
Mid Atlantic	0.848	2.334	0.513	1.670	-0.815	0.443	-0.188	0.829
East North Central	1.656	5.238 ***	1.168	3.216 **	0.034	1.035	0.748	2.113 *
West North Central	1.236	3.440 *	-0.143	0.866	-0.837	0.433	-0.455	0.634
East South Central	1.267	3.550 †	1.123	3.075 †	0.824	2.278	1.488	4.429 ***
West South Central	1.128	3.088 †	0.795	2.215	-0.610	0.543	0.579	1.784
Mountain	0.720	2.055	0.569	1.767	-0.757	0.469	0.613	1.845
Pacific	1.274	3.575 **	0.732	2.076	0.063	1.065	0.576	1.780 †
constant	-2.654	0.862 ***	-2.201	0.111 **	-2.768	0.063 **	-1.218	0.296 *
-2 Log Likelihood		534.39		461.84		375.02		751.73
Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup>		0.040		0.039		0.051		0.063
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>		0.085		0.094		0.139		0.111

†p<.10, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

<sup>^</sup> Each of the nominal variables includes a comparison group that is reflected in the constant. The variables are coded as follows, with the variable reflected in the constant indicated by italics: atheist/agnostic: 0=atheist/agnostic/humanist, 1=*none/no religion*; sex: 0=female, 1=*male*; income: less than \$50,000=1, more than \$50,000=2; race: 1=white, 2=black, 3=other, 4=*Hispanic*; marital status: 1=single, never married, 2=single, cohabiting, 3=separated, 4=widowed, 5=divorced, 6=*married*; parents' religion: 1=both same religion, 2=different religions, 3=one relig./one not, 4=*neither religious*; rural/urban: 1=center city, 2=center city county, 3=suburban, 5=non-center city, 5=*non-metro*; census divisions: 1=New England, 2=Mid Atlantic, 3=East North Central, 4=West North Central, 5=East South Central, 6=West South Central, 7=Mountain, 8=Pacific, 9=*South Atlantic*.

Table 3. Percent Experiencing Prejudice or Discrimination by Belief in God and Self-Reported Religious Identification.

Belief in God	Discrimination
There is no such thing.	25.0
There is no way to know	27.4
I'm not sure	15.6
There is a higher power but no personal God	23.9
There is definitely a personal God	20.1
Chi-Square	7.553
Self-Reported Religious Identification	
Atheist	41.2
Agnostic	44.0
No religion/None	19.1
Chi-Square	25.073***

\*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

- <sup>1</sup> We use “nonreligious” and “religious none” interchangeably in this paper.
- <sup>2</sup> While it is an empirical question which group experiences more discrimination, LGBs or atheists/agnostics, we believe LGBs are subject to greater discrimination. We do not want to suggest in this paper that the non-religious experience as much discrimination as do LGBs.
- <sup>3</sup> There are weights available in ARIS 2008 that transform the silos into their respective populations (e.g., the nonreligious go from a sample of 1,106 to a population of 35 million). As the goal of the weights is to inflate the sample to national representativeness, we use the unweighted data. There are some minor differences in the results (available upon request).
- <sup>4</sup> Income is recoded into above and below \$50,000 due to a data collection issue. Participants in ARIS 2008 were initially offered more standard income categories (e.g., \$30,000 but less than \$40,000), but were given an additional option if they refused the more specific categories – “less than \$50,000” or “more than \$50,000.” In order to maximize the number of people we could include in our analyses, we used the less specific income categories despite the fact that doing so reduces specificity and variation.
- <sup>5</sup> New England = Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island; Middle Atlantic = New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania; East North Central = Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio; West North Central

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= Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas; South Atlantic = Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, District of Columbia; East South Central = Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi; West South Central = Arkansas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas; Mountain = Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico; Pacific = Washington, Oregon, California, Alaska, Hawaii.

- <sup>6</sup> There was one person who responded “humanist.” That person is grouped with the atheists and agnostics in the logistic regressions.
- <sup>7</sup> The theological classifications in quotes are the options that were presented to participants. The labels are how we refer to these groups in this study.
- <sup>8</sup> Simple proportions tests indicate significant differences; not shown.