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# Atheists As “Other”: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society

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*Despite the declining salience of divisions among religious groups, the boundary between believers and nonbelievers in America remains strong. This article examines the limits of Americans' acceptance of atheists. Using new national survey data, it shows atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups. This distrust of atheists is driven by religious predictors, social location, and broader value orientations. It is rooted in moral and symbolic, rather than ethnic or material, grounds. We demonstrate that increasing acceptance of religious diversity does not extend to the nonreligious, and present a theoretical framework for understanding the role of religious belief in providing a moral basis for cultural membership and solidarity in an otherwise highly diverse society.*

Who is like me and who is not? What kind of relationship do I have to those who are different? These are questions about boundaries, the symbolic distinctions that we make along multiple dimensions between ourselves and others. Such distinctions have social implications when they are widely recognized and accepted as legitimate dimensions of difference, and when they organize access to resources and opportunities (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Symbolic boundaries both include and exclude—by separating out those who do not belong, they draw together those who do (Alexander 1992; Taylor 2002).

Symbolic distinctions drawn along lines of race, gender, sexuality, or social class are often

studied because they lead to social exclusion for those in marginalized groups, and these distinctions form the basis for social inequality (Epstein 1988; Lamont and Fournier 1992). By contrast, religious boundaries are often seen by sociologists as a basis for inclusion, forming meaningful subcultures and motivating political mobilization of the marginalized (Warner 1993). Moreover, increasing religious pluralism in postwar America has coincided with an ecumenical movement and a decline in the salience of the boundaries between particular religious groups (Hout and Fischer 2001).

Yet what about the boundary between the religious and the nonreligious? Do Americans make invidious distinctions (c.f. Epstein 1988) between believers and nonbelievers? If so, what are the bases for these symbolic distinctions? More broadly, what can that tell us about the sources of solidarity in American society and the limits of religious acceptance?

In this article, we situate Americans' attitudes toward atheists within the literature on religion in America. The reaction to atheists has long been used as an index of political and social tolerance. While important, this literature does not tell us why there is so strong a reaction to such a small, hard to identify, and disorgan-

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ized category of persons. The broader literature on the historical connection between religion and civic life in America sheds more light on the cultural bases for this symbolic exclusion, particularly on assumptions about what Americans think they have (or should have) in common. Americans' views of atheists tell us little about atheists themselves—who they are, where they live, or what they are like. We believe, however, that these views reveal a great deal about dominant conceptions of national unity as well as fears of moral decline.

Using data from a new national survey (2003,  $N = 2081$ ), we show that Americans draw symbolic boundaries that clearly and sharply exclude atheists in both private and public life. From a list of groups that also includes Muslims, recent immigrants, and homosexuals, Americans name atheists as those least likely to share their vision of American society. They are also more likely to disapprove of their children marrying atheists. Using logistic regression models, we show that these attitudes are driven by religious affiliation and involvement as well as by social context and broader moral outlook.

We show not only that atheists are less accepted than other marginalized groups but also that attitudes toward them have not exhibited the marked increase in acceptance that has characterized views of other racial and religious minorities over the past forty years. Rather than treating atheists as akin to other out-groups, we reveal the unique social and cultural bases underlying attitudes toward this group, leading us to rethink some core assumptions about Americans' increasing acceptance of religious diversity and to consider how the weakening of internal boundaries between religious groups may heighten awareness of the external boundary between the religious and the nonreligious. We argue that attitudes toward atheists clarify why and how religion forms a basis for solidarity and collective identity in American life through its historical association with morality and citizenship.

## RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES AND BELIEFS IN AMERICA

In the context of the modern United States, social scientists have generally concentrated on the inclusive aspect of religious boundaries, placing at the forefront what Parsons (1951)

would have called the functional or integrative aspects of religious belief and practice. In private life, scholars concentrate on how religion provides values and a sense of meaning, fosters supportive and caring relationships (Sherkat and Ellison 1999), and gives “a framework for seeing oneself as a good person and one's life as basically good, independent of the success that one has in acquiring money, fame, or power” (Hart 1986:52). In public life, religious institutions have been studied for their role in preserving ethnic and subcultural identities (Eck 2001; Smith 1998), providing the material resources and social connections that foster social capital and civic participation (Herberg 1960; Putnam 2000; Verba, Scholzman, and Brady 1995; Wuthnow 1998) and supporting organized demands for political change or social justice (Gusfield 1986; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Morris 1984; Warner 1993). In this context, religion is framed as both pluralistic and empowering (Warner 1993:1059), and aspects of religion that may be contested or foster inequality receive relatively less attention.

One can, of course, find references to the exclusionary consequences of religious boundaries in scholarship on American religion—for example, work on the history of anti-Semitism, on the anti-Catholic movements of the nineteenth century (Dolan 1985; Gleason 1980; Higham 2002; Lipset and Raab 1978), and on anti-Muslim violence post 9/11 (Wellman and Tokuno 2004; Wuthnow 2004). However, in a society in which religion is voluntary, pluralistic, and separate from the state, scholars have tended to understand religion as “a fundamental category of identity and association” that is “capable of grounding both solidarities and identities” (Warner 1993:1059), a boundary that fosters belonging.

The meta-narrative of scholarship on religion in American life is woven together from three strands. First, America has historically been a religious nation. Since the mid-nineteenth century there have been consistently high levels of religious belief, affiliation, and involvement (c.f. Warner 1993), and over our history observers have noted a close connection between religion and democracy. Alexis de Tocqueville was moved by the Christian piety of Jacksonian America. “It is religion that gave birth to the Anglo-American societies. . . . Christianity . . . reigns not only as a philosophy

that is adopted after examination, but as a religion that is believed without discussion," he wrote. "In the United States, Christian sects vary infinitely . . . but Christianity itself is an established and irresistible fact" (Tocqueville [1992] 2000:405–6). Tocqueville thought that Christianity (or at least the dominant Protestantism of the era) provided the "habits of the heart" necessary for good citizenship, drawing people out of the private realm of family life into vital civic association (Tocqueville [1992] 2000:275ff.; see Weber 1946 for a different interpretation).

Others have concluded that a more ecumenical version of Tocqueville's thesis still holds true in post–World War II America. According to Herberg's classic *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960), each of these historic faiths has provided a way of being, and becoming, a good American. Similarly, in *Habits of the Heart* (1985) and *The Good Society* (1991), Bellah and his coauthors observed that the Biblical (Judeo-Christian) religions have provided a cultural repertoire of citizenship and solidarity. This scholarly tradition argues that religion gives a sense of personal identity and meaning, leading to public engagement and effective citizenship (see also Glock and Stark 1965; W. L. Warner 1961; R. S. Warner 1993).

The second strand of the meta-narrative is the claim that a religious convergence has occurred during the twentieth century, which may be the basis for the trust that Americans have in those who are religious. When Caplow and his coauthors revisited Muncie, Indiana, in the 1970s to replicate the Lynds' earlier Middletown study, they found a set of religious ideas and actions shared across religious groups that they called "the common creed" (Caplow, Bahr, and Chadwick 1983). More recent quantitative work suggests that Muncie is, in this regard, unexceptional. Using General Social Survey (GSS) data, Hout and Fischer (2001) found faith in God and the regular practice of prayer to be widely shared across religious groups in America, along with the belief that there is a strong connection between religious faith and personal morality.

This convergence suggests that religion in general—if no longer Christianity in particular—is one basis for private and public trust in American society. In the 1998 GSS, only 15 percent of respondents agreed that the United States "would be a better country if religion had less

influence." A recent report by Public Agenda summed up its own survey findings this way: "If more Americans were more religious, people believe that crime would go down, families would do a better job raising their children, and people would be more likely to help each other. Indeed, most Americans fear that the country would decline if people lost their religious faith" (Farkas et al. 2001:10). In the Public Agenda poll, 74 percent agreed that "[i]t is a bad idea for families to raise children without any religion." When asked to identify the most important meaning of being religious, 53 percent of respondents said "making sure that one's behavior and day-to-day actions match one's faith." The authors conclude that for many Americans "[t]o be religious . . . means to be a moral human being" (Farkas et al. 2001:10–11).

The third strand of the meta-narrative is the argument that increasing religious pluralism has coincided with increasing tolerance of religious difference, declines in religiously based prejudice, and processes of assimilation to erode many of the long-standing divisions among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews (Alwin 1986; Glock and Stark 1965; Herberg 1960). Declines in anti-Semitism and anti-Catholic sentiment mirror the scholarly claim that piety and plurality increasingly go hand in hand in American life (Gleason 1980; Smith 1993). Indeed, the idea of a unified "Judeo-Christian" tradition—once considered a radical myth—is now widely accepted by conservatives and liberals alike as a core aspect of American culture (Hartmann, Zhang, and Windschadt, 2005). Taken together, these three strands of the scholarly literature weave a story of religion's declining significance as an exclusionary boundary in American life.

New divisions became salient at the same time that traditional forms of religious prejudice were waning, including a division between liberals and conservatives. Most sociologists, however, argue that America as a whole is not well characterized by the image of a monolithic Christian conservative camp or an ongoing "war" between liberals and conservatives (see DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996). The religious pluralism stemming from immigration and globalization is another source of new boundaries. Hout and Fischer (2001), however, argue that this diversity poses no threat of serious social conflict, inequality, or intolerance

because of the convergence around a common set of religious beliefs and practices (or “the common creed”), and because America’s diverse and voluntaristic religious institutions are well equipped to absorb diversity without being torn apart by it (c.f. Warner 1993). Also, a “rapidly rising tolerance for (and maybe even preference for) religious difference . . . facilitates religious coalitions on some issues and respect for [the] fellow religious on all issues” (Hout and Fischer 2001:4). Similarly, Diana Eck (2001; c.f. Smith 2002) argues that the expansion of religious pluralism associated with post-1965 immigration will continue to follow the pattern that Will Herberg (1960) documented, summarized by the phrase *e pluribus unum*—from many, one (c.f. Wolfe 1999).

More tolerance of religious diversity, however, does not necessarily mean that the salience of religious identity itself is declining. To the contrary, if acceptance of religious diversity in the United States is indeed based upon increasing convergence around a core set of religious beliefs and practices, then this may reinforce intolerance of those who reject religion. In such an environment, religious acceptance may be driven largely by assumptions that religious people, of whatever faith, are “like me” in two ways. In private life, they are understood to be moral people, worthy of the trust that is the basis for close personal relationships. In public life, the boundaries that separate religious identities (for example, evangelical versus mainline Protestant versus Catholic or Jew) are understood to be encompassed by and to constitute a broader identity—being a good American. In such a setting, how do Americans view those who reject religion, and what does that tell us about how Americans view their nation and themselves?

## ATHEISTS AS OTHER

By any measure, there are not many atheists in America. While about 14 percent of Americans name no religious preference (Hout and Fischer 2002; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 2001), most of these religious “nones” also say that they believe in God and pray regularly (Hout and Fischer 2002). In the 2000 GSS, only about 3 percent of Americans affirm that “I don’t believe in God,” perhaps the best direct indicator of being an atheist, while another 4.1 percent agree

with the statement “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out.” Taken together, these “skeptics,” as Hout and Fischer (2002) call them, make up only 7 percent of the population. In fact, only about 1 percent of Americans self-identify as “atheist” or “agnostic,” according to Kosmin et al. (2001). This gap may indicate that many skeptics do hold some form of religious belief, or it may signal the stigma attached to the atheist label.

We argue that it is important to understand Americans’ attitudes toward atheists even though they are few in number—and not an organized and self-conscious group—and even though individual atheists are not easily identified. Our focus is not on mistreatment of atheists, but on attitudes that mark them as outsiders in public and private life, that may even designate them as unworthy of full civic inclusion (c.f. Alexander 1992).<sup>1</sup> For our analysis what is important is that other Americans respond to “atheist” as a meaningful category. Such a distinction is symbolic, but that is not to say it is not “real.” In fact, the contrast between “real” and symbolic is not all that helpful in this case, because symbolic boundaries are deeply meaningful and because symbolic categories motivate behavior and organize resources (Sewell 1992). This understanding draws on a tradition of work on the relational nature of social identities, including civic and national identity (e.g., Alexander 1992; Anderson 1991; Taylor 1989).

We assess the degree to which atheists represent a symbolic “other” against which some Americans define themselves as good people and worthy citizens. This allows us to explore what attitudes about atheists reveal regarding the nature of cultural membership and moral solidarity in American society. Do Americans feel that atheists are “like me”? Do they see them as moral people and good citizens?

<sup>1</sup> Mistreatment of atheists and atheists’ own perceptions of their place in American society are beyond the scope of this article. These important topics have perhaps received too little attention from scholars, though they receive occasional attention in the popular media (see Blumer 2004). Scholarly treatment of atheists is largely historical (see Jacoby 2004; Turner 1985; McGrath 2004; and Feldman 2005).

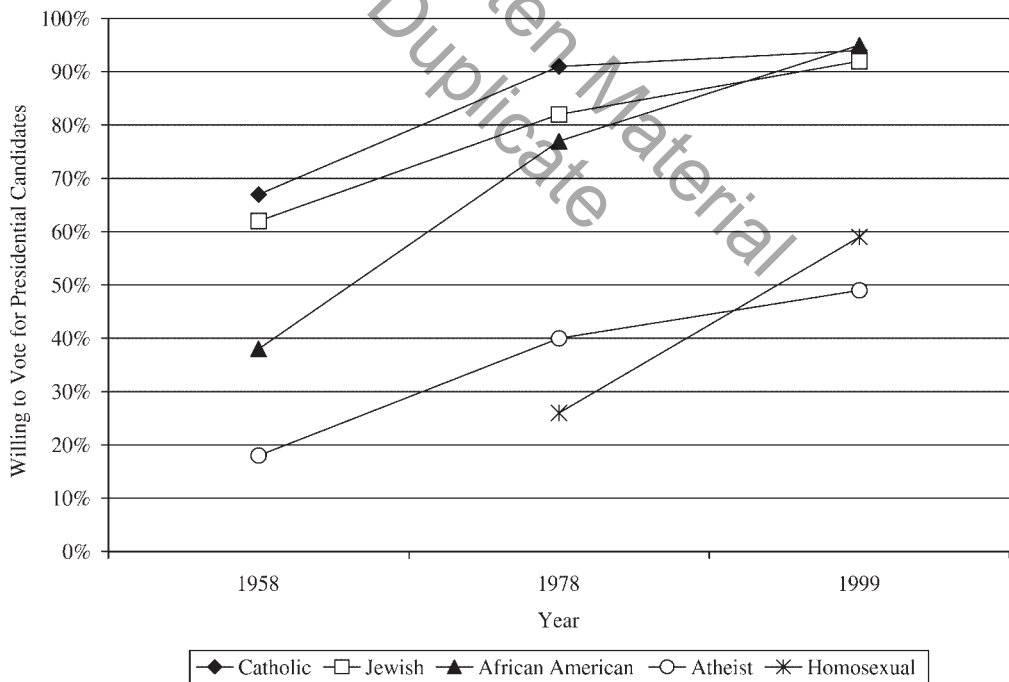


To date, empirical work on how Americans view nonbelievers (and particularly atheists) has focused on issues of prejudice and political tolerance, rather than cultural membership (Stouffer 1955). In the Public Agenda report cited earlier, 54 percent of respondents said that they would be unlikely to vote for a political candidate who is “open about not believing in God.” In a 1999 Gallup poll, only 49 percent of Americans say that they would be willing to vote for a presidential candidate who is an atheist—compared to 59 percent willing to vote for a homosexual candidate and over 90 percent professing willingness to vote for a female, Jewish, or black candidate. Farkas et al. (2001:100) conclude that widespread political rejection of atheists and others who profess no religion provides a “glaring exception” to the general rule of increasing social tolerance over the last thirty years of the twentieth century. Citing the same Gallup data but reviewing changes from 1937 to 2000, Hout and Fischer (2001) come to a startlingly different conclusion. Because tol-

erance increased for all groups, they report that the overall pattern of tolerance of atheists is not an exception to the general rule.

Figure 1, drawn from the same Gallup data on willingness to vote for various presidential candidates, shows that both claims are true. Using this measure, political tolerance toward atheists has indeed moved in the same direction as has tolerance for other groups. Yet Farkas et al. (2001) are also right—the gap in willingness to vote for atheists versus other religious minorities (Catholic or Jewish) is large and persistent.

What this literature does not address adequately is why atheists continue to be the least accepted group, despite their small numbers. It is worth pointing out that the only group measured that was less accepted was homosexuals, and yet by 1999 this group was also more tolerated than were atheists. As Loftus (2001) argues, political tolerance for a minority group is distinct from and varies independently of attitudes about the morality of members of that group and from feelings toward members of



**Figure 1.** Gallup Data, Willingness to Vote for Presidential Candidates

*Source:* Report based on answers to Gallup question, “If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be (INSERT HERE), would you vote for that person?” Response categories: yes, no, no opinion (data retrieved July 1, 2005 at <http://gallup.com/poll/content/print.aspx?ci=3979>). The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ.

the group. While understanding political tolerance is quite important, it is not clear whether that research can help us to answer the questions about boundaries and cultural membership posed at the beginning of this article.

In contrast to the political tolerance literature, we examine Americans' willingness to recognize and accept atheists in both public and private life. We asked people to say whether members of particular minority groups "Share your vision of American society," a question about public acceptance designed to shed light on the question of cultural membership that we posed earlier. We also asked about willingness to accept one's own child marrying someone from a particular religious, ethnic, or other minority group—a private matter. These questions go beyond tolerance to capture the importance and nature of symbolic boundaries and the distinctions that people use to define their own identity and worth.

We find that out of a long list of ethnic and cultural minorities, Americans are less willing to accept intermarriage with atheists than with any other group, and less likely to imagine that atheists share their vision of American society. We find that Americans' willingness to draw a boundary that excludes atheists is influenced by certain demographic factors that are more generally associated with levels of tolerance, but it is also influenced by religious identity and practice, by social context and exposure to diversity, and by broader value orientations. We argue that atheists provide an important limiting case to the general narrative of increasing tolerance of religious pluralism in the United States, and that this exception is a useful lens through which to understand Americans' assumptions about the appropriate role of religion in both public and private life. We find that in private life, many Americans associate religiosity with morality and trustworthiness; religion forms a basis for private solidarity and identity (c.f. Warner 1993). In public life, many Americans believe now, as in Herberg's (1960) time, that affirming a religious identity is an important way of "being American," a basis for citizenship and a source of a common American identity.

## DATA AND DESIGN

Our data come from the American Mosaic Project, a multi-year, multi-method study of

diversity and solidarity in American life with particular emphasis on race and religion (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, principal investigators Hartmann, Gerteis, and Edgell). The research includes a nationally representative random-digit dial (RDD) telephone survey ( $N = 2081$ ) conducted during the summer of 2003. In addition, in-depth interviews and fieldwork were conducted in four U.S. cities (Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Atlanta, and Boston) by a team of graduate students in the summer of 2004. For this article, we also review contemporary public discourse on atheists in American society.

The core data for this article are drawn from the telephone survey we designed and fielded through the Wisconsin Survey Center. Households were randomly selected, then respondents were randomly chosen within households. The survey, on average, took slightly more than 30 minutes to complete. Additionally, African Americans and Hispanics were over-sampled to provide complete data on these populations; to facilitate this over-sampling, the survey could also be conducted in Spanish if the respondent preferred. Our response rate, using a calculation that includes only known households, is 36 percent.<sup>2</sup> This response rate compares well to other recent RDD samples. The Council on Market and Opinion Research (CMOR) maintains an ongoing study of response rates; this study demonstrates that in 2003, the year our survey was conducted, the mean response rate for RDD telephone surveys was 10.16 percent, although carefully conducted social science surveys, such as ours, typically have somewhat better rates (AAPOR 2004). A good point of comparison here is the 2002 American National Election Study (ANES), which included a fresh RDD sample with a response rate of 35.24 percent, using a calculation that included only known households. The comparison with the ANES is even more favorable when we consider that they

<sup>2</sup> This calculation includes only known households and corrects for the stratified sample to ensure the closest comparison to other RDD surveys, such as the American National Election Study (for full documentation, see <http://www.soc.umn.edu/amp/ampindex.htm>).

compensated their respondents, while we did not.

Response rate is not the only or even the most important indicator of data quality. The more important issue is the potential for non-response bias. The few available systematic treatments of this issue reveal few differences between RDD surveys with higher and lower response rates on key measures when standard sampling and survey techniques are employed (Keeter et al. 2000; Pew Research Center for People and the Press 2004). To investigate non-response bias in our sample, we checked many of our variables against the same measures in two surveys known to be of high quality, the General Social Surveys (GSS) and the much larger Current Population Survey (CPS). Our data are quite closely aligned with both. In the few instances where our data differ notably from the GSS figures, they tend to align more closely with the CPS figures (see Table S1, Online Supplement on *ASR* Web site). Two items from our survey capture one's willingness to draw boundaries separating oneself from others in both public and private life. The first question is akin to the "thermometer" questions familiar to survey researchers, where respondents are asked about various groups and asked to rate them on a scale of feelings, from 100 (very warm) to 0 (very cold). Rather than ask about feelings in general, the question we constructed and fielded asked about the degree to which members of particular groups share one's "vision of America"—the response categories were "almost completely agree," "mostly," "somewhat," and "not at all."<sup>3</sup> This question was asked of all respondents. While based on standard measures we designed this item to capture what Lamont and Molnár (2002:187–88) call "cultural membership." Someone who does not share your vision of American society may not value the same things

about America or understand what it means to be an American citizen in the same way. A positive answer is thus an indicator of moral solidarity. In the negative answers, symbolic boundaries become visible.

The second question asked whether the respondent would approve or disapprove if his or her child wished to marry a member of each of a list of groups.<sup>4</sup> This item is a standard measure of group prejudice, with reluctance to accept intermarriage typically interpreted as an indicator of underlying intolerance. It was part of a series of questions given in a split-half format to investigate views of a wider range of groups within survey time constraints; the item on intermarriage with atheists was asked of half of our respondents. We interpret it here as a measure of personal trust and acceptance, an evaluation of who is thought to be capable of being caring and moral, able to make one's child happy, and to treat other family members well.

### DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS—ATTITUDES TOWARD ATHEISTS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE

We asked about a number of racial, ethnic, and religious groups on both questions. Regarding public boundaries we also asked about two additional groups that have been central to recent, controversial public debates—immigrants and homosexuals. Table 1 shows the responses to these questions, in rank order from the least accepted group to the most accepted. For both of our measures, atheists are at the very top of the list of problematic groups. Americans are less accepting of atheists than of any of the other groups we asked about, and by a wide margin.

The next-closest category on both measures is Muslims. We expected Muslims to be a lightning-rod group, and they clearly were. This makes the response to atheists all the more striking. For many, Muslims represent a large and mostly external threat, dramatized by the loss of

<sup>3</sup> Wording was as follows: "Now I want to read you a list of different groups of people who live in this country. For each one, please tell me how much you think people in this group agree with YOUR vision of American society—almost completely, mostly, somewhat, or not at all?" Note that these groups were posed separately and the order was randomized, so that theoretically each group could have received equally high or low levels of acceptance.

<sup>4</sup> Wording was as follows: "People can feel differently about their children marrying people from various backgrounds. Suppose your son or daughter wanted to marry [a person in given category]. Would you approve of this choice, disapprove of it, or wouldn't it make any difference at all one way or the other?"



Table 1. Public and Private Acceptance, Ranked Groups

Responses	%
This Group Does Not At All Agree with My Vision of American Society	
Atheist	39.6
Muslim	26.3
Homosexual	22.6
Conservative Christian	13.5
Recent Immigrant	12.5
Hispanic	7.6
Jew	7.4
Asian American	7.0
African American	4.6
White American	2.2
I Would Disapprove if My Child Wanted to Marry a Member of This Group	
Atheist	47.6
Muslim	33.5
African American	27.2
Asian American	18.5
Hispanic	18.5
Jew	11.8
Conservative Christian	6.9
White	2.3

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

life in the World Trade Center attacks and the war in Iraq. By contrast, atheists are a small and largely silent internal minority. When the “some-what” and “not at all” responses are combined for the public acceptance measure, atheists (78.6 percent) and Muslims (77.6 percent) appear nearly equally problematic—the vast majority of Americans reject both groups.

Tables 2a and 2b show the factors correlated with rejection of atheists. One’s own religious identity and involvement shape attitudes toward atheists. Church attenders, conservative Protestants, and those reporting high religious saliency are less likely to approve of intermarriage with an atheist and more likely to say that atheists do not share their vision of American society. It should surprise no one that the lowest level of rejection of atheists comes from the nonreligious, measured here as those who do not go to church, do not claim a religious identity, and report that religion is “not at all” salient to them. A notable proportion of even this group, however, does not accept atheists. About 17 percent of the nonreligious say that atheists do not at all share their vision of America, while about one in ten indicate that they would not approve of their child marrying an atheist.

Attitudes toward atheists also are related to social location. White Americans, males, and

those with a college degree are somewhat more accepting of atheists than are nonwhite Americans, females, or those with less formal education. Party affiliation matters, especially on our intermarriage item. Those in the South and Midwest are also less accepting of atheists in both public and private life than are those in the East or West (results not shown). Across all of these categories, however, rates of non-acceptance of atheists range from about one in three (34 percent) to three in five (60 percent).

Are attitudes toward atheists meaningfully patterned vis-à-vis other out-groups? Using our public acceptance measure—the degree to which respondents said that members of a social group are in agreement with their own “vision of American society”—we calculated the correlations between responses about atheists and other social groups.

Table 3 reports these correlations, showing only those that are above .3 and are statistically significant. Across all of the groups we examined, negative attitudes toward atheists are correlated with negative views of homosexuals and, for most, Muslims; none of these correlations is large. We believe this indicates that the boundary being drawn vis-à-vis atheists is symbolic, a way of defining cultural membership in American life, and not the result of a simple,

**Table 2a.** Public and Private Acceptance of Atheists by Religious Characteristics

Question	Non-Church Attendees %	Church Attendees, %	Non- Conservative Protestants, %	Conservative Protestants, %	Non- religious, %	Religious, %	Low Religious Saliency, %	High Religious Saliency, %
Agree with Vision of America?								
Almost complete agree	12.7	4.4	8.8	3.8	18.6	6.0	11.4	4.4
Mostly agree	16.8	12.6	16.1	10.0	19.2	13.9	19.3	10.3
Somewhat agree	45.7	35.3	43.0	27.9	45.3	37.6	48.2	32.1
Not at all agree	24.8	47.7	32.1	58.3	16.9	42.5	21.1	53.2
Approve of Inter-marriage?								
Approve	18.6	9.2	15.1	6.6	30.8	10.8	19.1	7.5
No difference	58.8	29.6	46.7	22.9	58.7	37.0	59.9	24.1
Disapprove	22.6	61.1	38.1	70.5	10.6	52.1	21.0	68.4

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

Note: All relationships are  $p \leq .001$  level. Church Attendee = attending church monthly or more; Nonreligious = all those who are not church attenders, report low religious saliency, and claim no religious identity.

**Table 2b.** Public and Private Acceptance of Atheists by Social Location

Question	Nonwhites, %	Whites, % <sup>a</sup>	Male, % <sup>b</sup>	Female, % <sup>b</sup>	Less than College Degree, %	College Degree or More, % <sup>c</sup>	Republicans, %	Democrats, % <sup>d</sup>
Agree with Vision of America?								
Almost complete agree	8.6	7.0	8.5	6.8	6.9	8.4	5.0	6.7
Mostly agree	12.0	14.8	14.3	11.7	10.9	16.1	11.2	12.8
Somewhat agree	36.2	39.7	39.5	36.3	30.4	41.3	31.1	32.6
Not at all agree	43.3	38.5	37.8	45.2	51.4	34.2	42.5	36.4
Approve of Inter-marriage?								
Approve	14.2	12.1	11.7	9.5	14.3	10.2	11.9	10.2
No difference	35.4	41.3	43.8	35.2	36.7	43.1	26.5	39.9
Disapprove	50.4	46.6	42.5	54.9	50.1	45.8	60.9	48.2

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

<sup>a</sup>  $p \leq .01$  for Worldview question;  $p \leq .05$  level for intermarriage question.

<sup>b</sup>  $p \leq .05$  for Worldview question;  $p \leq .001$  level for intermarriage question.

<sup>c</sup>  $p \leq .001$  for Worldview question; not significant for intermarriage question.

<sup>d</sup> Not significant for worldview question;  $p \leq .001$  level for intermarriage question.

**Table 3.** Correlations between Attitudes Towards the Worldview of Atheists and the Worldview of Other Groups, by Gender, Religiosity, and Race

	Homosexuals	Muslims	Jews	African Americans	Asian Americans
All Americans	.472***	.341***	—	—	—
Women	.402***	.302***	—	—	—
Men	.570***	.385***	.322***	—	.307***
Church Attenders	.463***	.402***	—	—	—
Non-Church Attenders	.432***	—	—	—	—
High Religious Saliency	.453***	.360***	—	—	—
Low Religious Saliency	.447***	.306***	—	.328***	—
Whites	.474***	.350***	—	—	—
African Americans	.351***	—	—	—	—
Hispanics	.455***	.344***	—	.332***	—

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

Note: Correlations are included if they are  $>.3$  and statistically significant.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (Kendall  $\tau\beta$  test).

irrational unwillingness to tolerate small out-groups.

Again, it is important to note that by calling this rejection “symbolic” we do not mean that it is “not serious” or “not real.” Cultural membership is so passionately contested because symbolic categories are so dearly held. The parallel with homosexuality is instructive. For example, many Americans believe that homosexuals pose a threat to the family and to marriage, a threat that has increased with the same-sex marriage movement. This is a symbolic threat—gay and lesbian activists are not lobbying to abolish heterosexual marriage, and no existing heterosexual marriage would be legally invalidated were the same-sex couple next door to wed. Nonetheless, it is experienced by many as a real threat because to them the cultural *meaning* of marriage would change if same-sex marriage were permitted (c.f. Hull 2006). This is true whether one knows any actual same-sex couples or not, and regardless of the behavior and morality of actual same-sex couples.

### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS— MODELING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE ACCEPTANCE

To explore the effects of different kinds of factors on people’s willingness to draw a strong boundary around atheists, we perform logistic

regression analyses on both of our measures. We use binary logistic regression instead of ordered logistic regression because we believe that this better captures the conceptual distinction we want to make, allowing us to identify those who draw a definite boundary (not at all agree/does not approve).<sup>5</sup> We include a table with standardized beta coefficients to examine the relative size of the effects of different independent variables on attitudes toward atheists. In these analyses we use weighted data to adjust for our strategy of over-sampling African Americans and Hispanics. We impute values for missing cases to the sample mean on all independent variables except for income, for which we use an imputation method (hot-deck) accounting for gender, employment status, age, and education. In the discussion, we also draw on in-depth interview data from our fieldwork to help us interpret respondents’ attitudes toward atheists.

We include four blocks of variables in our models: demographics, personal religiosity,

<sup>5</sup> Supplemental analyses using ordered logit models show similar results; coefficients in these models display generally the same directions and patterns of significance (see Table S2, Online Supplement on ASR Web site: <http://www2.asanet.org/journals/asr/2006/toc050.htm>).

social context, and political and social values (Table 4). We argue that attitudes toward atheists serve as an index for how one thinks about the importance of personal morality in both private and public life. If so, then social context should affect attitudes toward atheists by shap-

ing one's experience with religion as a basis for association and civic life. Political and social values should also matter if attitudes toward atheists are embedded within larger worldviews that differently privilege the role of religiously based morality in American life.

**Table 4.** Description of Independent Variables

Variable	Description	N	Mean or %	SD
Age	Age in years (18 to 93)	2061	44.436	16.536
Female	Female index variable (1 = female, 0 = male)	2081	51.6%	—
Education	Level completed (1 = some HS or less to 6 = post-graduate)	2081	3.797	1.538
Father's Education	Level completed (1 = some HS or less to 6 = post-graduate)	1948	2.821	1.765
Income	Family income 2003 (1 = <\$10,000 to 8 = >\$100,000)	1883	5.438	1.878
African American	African American index variable (1 = African American, 0 = other race)	2081	12.0%	—
Religious Involvement	Religious involvement scale (0 to 13, least to most involved)	1597	6.42	3.850
Conservative Protestant	Denomination (attend/prefer, 1 = conservative Protestant)	2035	27.3%	—
Catholic	Denomination (attend/prefer, 1 = Catholic)	2081	24.9%	—
Biblical Literalism	1 = "Bible is the literal word of God"	2029	33.2%	—
God Determines Life Course	"The course of our lives is determined by God" (1 = SA)	2036	44.9%	—
% Voted Democratic	% of respondent's county voting Democratic, 2000 presidential election	2068	49.781	12.523
Religious Adherence Rate	Per thousand in the county of residence	2081	500.229	132.368
Below Poverty Line	Percent of county population below poverty line, 1999	2081	11.367	5.057
Diversity in Community	Respondent reports diversity in community (1 = "A lot")	2081	47.9%	—
Religious Heterogeneity	Religious heterogeneity among respondent's friends	1967	0.365	0.325
Social Conservative	Self-identified (1 = social conservative; 0 = moderate/liberal)	2081	33.0%	—
Values Diversity in Community	Respondent values diversity in own community (1 = "A lot")	2081	64.0%	—
Sympathy for African Americans	Scale (3 to 12, least to most sympathetic)	1996	5.767	2.394
Follow Same Rules	"It's fine for Americans to have different lifestyles and values so long as they all follow the same rules" (1 = SA)	2035	51.0%	—
God's Law	"Society's standards of right and wrong should be based on God's laws" (1 = SA)	2040	40.4%	—
Government Guarantees Equal Treatment of Religions	Government should guarantee equal treatment of all religions (1 = SA)	2081	45.9%	—
		2081	45.9%	—

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

Note: N = number; SD = standard deviation; HS = high school; SA = strongly agree.

### INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

**DEMOGRAPHICS.** The demographic variables include age, gender, and race, as well as measures for economic capital (income) and cultural capital (education, father's education). Studies of prejudice and tolerance suggest that age, gender, and race may all relate to negative attitudes toward minority groups, including atheists (Golebiowska 1999). Economic and cultural capital may influence the drawing of moral boundaries through their shaping of class-based "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984; c.f. Lamont 1992). We treat these demographic variables as controls.

**RELIGIOSITY.** Religious involvement, religious identity, and religious beliefs may also shape reactions to atheists (Wilcox and Jelen 1990). We include a scale measure for religious involvement, a 14-point scale that combines church attendance, religious saliency, and participation in other religious activities ( $\alpha = .79$ ). This measure goes beyond the standard use of church attendance to measure religious involvement, which has been critiqued by some scholars as an inadequate index of involvement (Hinojosa and Park 2004). We also include variables for religious identity (conservative Protestant and Catholic), based on the RELTRAD scheme (Steensland et al. 2000). We construct our variable "conservative Protestant" by including all those denominations that Steensland et al. (2000) identify as "evangelical." We also classify some black Protestant denominations as "conservative" Protestant. While we agree with Steensland et al. that black Protestants are a distinctive religious tradition, we also agree with Smith (1987) that some black church traditions share with the evangelical subculture important elements of history, culture, and belief.<sup>6</sup> We use the label "conservative Protestant" rather than "evangelical" to connote what we believe to be a broader range of religious belief and tradition among those in

this category (e.g. Assemblies of God, which is a Pentecostal denomination; see Woodberry and Smith 1998). Our items labeled "Biblical Literalism" and "God Determines Life Course" are commonly used measures of attitudes toward religious authority and religious determinism, respectively.

**SOCIAL CONTEXT AND ASSOCIATIONS.** Our context measures do not capture exposure to atheists per se, but instead allow us to examine the effect of general experience with those who are different than one's self (c.f. Allport 1954). We include measures for distinctive aspects of diversity in one's environment, including exposure to poverty and religious diversity as measured by both the rate of religious adherence in the surrounding area and the presence of religious diversity among one's own network of friends. We also explore the effects of one's self-reported perception that one "lives in a diverse community." Finally, we include a measure of county-level Democratic voters, since political and religious identities are intertwined (Hout and Fischer 2002).

**VALUES.** If feelings about atheists indicate a more general sense of who can be a good citizen, a good neighbor, and a worthy member of one's family, then we expect them to be connected to broad social and political value commitments. We include a measure of self-reported social conservatism and of the value one places upon diversity as indicators of willingness to respect different values and moral claims. Drawing from the research using atheism as an index of tolerance and prejudice generally, we expect those who express sympathy for African Americans also to be less willing to exclude atheists, and so we include a measure of this.

Finally, we believe that feelings about atheists may be shaped by beliefs about what draws our nation together, including beliefs about the appropriate role of religion in society. We include a measure of having a procedural view of democracy (a belief that diversity is not a problem as long as everybody follows the same rules). To capture views of religion's appropriate role in society, we include a measure of how strongly one believes in the equal treatment of religious groups under the law and a question about whether society's standards of right and

<sup>6</sup> In our initial models, we included an interaction term for black\*conservative Protestant, which proved not to be significant, and so was dropped from our final models.



wrong should be based on God's laws. These three measures, taken together, capture the degree to which one understands procedural norms or substantive morality to be foundational for the good society.

### **MODELING PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE**

The analysis of public acceptance of atheists is provided in Table 5. We include the variables discussed earlier in successive blocks in a logistic regression model of our item on whether atheists share the respondent's vision of American society (1 = "not at all," 0 = other responses). As noted previously, we believe that this captures a strong sense of atheists as "other"; responding "not at all" means identifying atheists as not sharing in the common cultural membership of American society.

Our initial model shows that women, African Americans, and older people are more likely to reject atheists, while those with more education, and whose fathers had more education, are more accepting of them. Several of these demographic factors are no longer significant once our other blocks of variables are included, but the effects for African Americans and the more educated continue to be significant, while those with higher income emerge as less accepting of atheists. In initial models we included an interaction term to investigate whether conservative Protestants who are African American are especially likely to reject atheists; this term was not significant and was dropped from final models.

In Model 2, four of our measures of religiosity are associated with attitudes toward atheists. Religious involvement, being conservative Protestant, biblical literalism, and a belief that God determines the course of our lives all predict a lack of public acceptance of atheists. In our final model, three of these effects remain significant—religious involvement, religious determinism, and conservative Protestant, all three of which are reduced by including our cultural values items. Religious identity (conservative Protestant) and religious determinism influence attitudes toward atheists largely because they foster beliefs about the appropriate role of religion in society. When these items are included, much of the direct effect of one's own religious belief and practice disappears, which helps us to understand how religious

identity and involvement shape attitudes toward the nonreligious.

Models 3 and 4 show that our social-context measures are related to public rejection of atheists, although they work in different ways. Those living in more Democratic-leaning counties are less likely to reject atheists as not sharing their vision of America, as are those who reported more religious diversity in their own social networks. Unexpectedly, so are those who live in places with more religious adherents; this relationship is quite small, but it is stable. Those living in poorer and more diverse communities are more likely to reject atheists; this may be because in such contexts trust and acceptance are more problematic in general. In our following discussion, we draw upon in-depth interviews to explore this possibility.

Finally, our measures of social and cultural values clearly shape the public rejection of atheists, controlling for demographic variables, religious belief and involvement, and social context. Those who say that they *value* diversity in their community (as opposed to merely perceiving such diversity) and those who hold sympathetic views of African Americans are less likely to reject atheists, which may indicate a more general unwillingness to perpetuate any form of group prejudice or rejection. Similarly, those who hold a procedural understanding of democracy (America is strong as long as we all "follow the same rules") are less likely to reject atheists, as are those who believe that the government should guarantee equal treatment of all religions. Those who have a more substantive vision of a nation based on common religious belief (society's laws should be based on God's laws) are more likely to reject atheists.

### **MODELING PRIVATE ACCEPTANCE**

We also regressed the same blocks of predictive variables on our measure of private acceptance, the respondent's approval of a child marrying an atheist. Many of the relationships mirror those found in our previous analysis of public acceptance, but a few stand out as different. A marked difference is the generally weaker power and significance of our demographic factors. In Model 5, women, older people, and blacks are more likely to disapprove of their child marrying an atheist, while those whose fathers had more education are less likely to disapprove. In

Table 5. Logistic Regressions of Responses to "Atheists Do Not At All Share My Vision of America"

Independent Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Demographic Controls								
Age	.013	.003***	.011	.004**	.013	.004***	.007	.004
Female	.236	.100*	.066	.109	.061	.111	.073	.119
Education	-.185	.037***	-.164	.040***	-.160	.041***	-.126	.043**
Father's education	-.078	.032*	-.036	.035	-.019	.036	.022	.038
Income	.024	.029	.067	.032*	.087	.032**	.068	.034*
African American	.606	.148***	.080	.164	.138	.170	.506	.185***
Religious Belief and Practice								
Religious involvement	—	—	.107	.017***	.098	.098***	.079	.019***
Conservative Protestant	—	—	.447	.167***	.425	.140***	.348	.146*
Catholic	—	—	.062	.135	.152	.139	.187	.145
Biblical literalism	—	—	.471	.128***	.401	.130**	.252	.138
God determines life course	—	—	.757	.119***	.785	.121***	.591	.134***
Social Context								
Percent voted Democratic	—	—	—	—	-.021	.005***	-.018	.005***
Rate of religious adherence	—	—	—	—	-.001	.000***	-.001	.000**
Below poverty line	—	—	—	—	.027	.011*	.032	.011**
Diversity in community	—	—	—	—	.375	.110***	.449	.117***
Religious heterogeneity	—	—	—	—	-.670	.176***	-.587	.182***
Cultural Values								
Social conservative	—	—	—	—	—	—	.157	.128
Values diversity in community	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.543	.120***
Sympathy towards African Americans	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.155	.027***
Follow same rules	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.247	.113*
God's law	—	—	—	—	—	—	.672	.140***
Government guarantees equal treatment of religions	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.398	.007***
Constant	-.388	.242	-2.014	.297***	-.752	.436	.491	.478
$\chi^2$	92.912***	6	352.361***	11	405.546***	16	535.000***	22
Cases Correctly Classified, %	60		68.3		70.0		71.3	

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.  
Note: N = 1,844,  $\beta$  = Beta value; SE = standard error.  
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

Model 8, however, the only effect that remains significant is that for age, and it is quite small.

One's own religious belief and involvement affect attitudes toward intermarriage with atheists; in the final model, those who are the most religiously involved, conservative Protestants, and those who believe that the course of life is determined by God all disapprove of their child marrying an atheist. Social context also matters less for attitudes toward intermarriage, with a small effect for those living in a Democratic county and a large effect for those with religiously diverse friendship networks; both are less likely to disapprove. Cultural values also matter, with social conservatives and those who believe that society's standards of right and wrong should be based on God's laws being more likely to disapprove of having an atheist for a son- or daughter-in-law. Those who believe that the government should guarantee equal treatment for all religions, who value diversity in their community, and who believe in procedural norms of democracy (follow the same rules) are less likely to disapprove of their child marrying an atheist.

## SUPPLEMENTAL ANALYSES AND INTERPRETATIONS

These analyses allow us to begin to identify the factors that predict the symbolic and cultural exclusion of atheists from both public and private life. To help us interpret the relative strength of these factors in shaping acceptance or rejection of atheists, we recalculated the final models for public and private rejection with standardized independent variables, which allows us to compare directly the size of the effects. Table 7 shows these results. For both models, the largest effects are denoted with footnotes.

The comparison shows that somewhat different factors drive the two types of boundaries. For our measure of public acceptance, the strongest effects are divided between one's own religious belief and involvement, living in a diverse community, and three of our cultural values variables. For intermarriage, religious involvement is by far the strongest predictor of attitudes, and cultural values also have large effects. It makes sense that one's own religious involvement would have the most effect on the measure of private acceptance. It also, though,

affects public acceptance, highlighting the importance of the social and communal aspects of religion for attitudes toward the nonreligious.

It is notable that having a conservative Protestant identity does not emerge as one of the stronger predictors of attitudes toward atheists in our final models, which include specific items that measure attitudes toward religion's role in public life. While much research has pointed to the strength of the conservative Protestant subculture, few studies have contained measures that allow one to specify the mechanisms that link individual participation in this subculture with broader views of public issues. What matters for public acceptance of atheists—and figures strongly into private acceptance, as well—are beliefs about the appropriate relationship between church and state and about religion's role in underpinning society's moral order, as measured by our item on whether society's standards of right and wrong should be based on God's laws. In understanding how other Americans view atheists, being conservative Protestant matters because of beliefs that reject the possibility of a secular basis for the good society.

It is worth exploring who our respondents were thinking of when they reacted to questions about atheists. Were they thinking of the 14 percent of Americans who claim no religious identity or the 7 percent who tell the General Social Survey that they either do not believe in God or are not sure? Or were they thinking of the 1 percent who explicitly describe themselves as atheist or agnostic?

Our in-depth interviews shed some light on this. These interviews did not contain any direct questions about atheists because they were designed to gather information on how respondents experience diversity in local contexts, including neighborhoods and community organizations, ecumenical groups, and cultural festivals. Discussion of atheists, however, emerged in some of the interviews in the context of answers to other questions; the richest of these discussions occurred in the Los Angeles field-site, and those are the discussions we draw upon here (see also Wolf-Meyer 2005).

Respondents had various interpretations of what atheists are like and what that label means. Those whom we interviewed view atheists in two different ways. Some people view atheists as problematic because they associate them

Table 6. Logistic Regressions of Disapproval of One's Child Marrying an Atheist

Independent Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Demographic Controls								
Age	.016	.004***	.015	.005**	.017	.005***	.011	.005*
Female	.369	.130**	.062	.153	.027	.155	.121	.166
Education	-.075	.048	-.059	.056	-.049	.056	-.012	.060
Father's education	-.088	.043*	-.038	.051	-.013	.052	.014	.054
Income	.021	.039	.060	.046	.077	.047	.081	.049
African American	.973	.199***	.245	.234	.382	.241	.469	.260
Religious Belief and Involvement								
Religious involvement	—	—	.203	.024***	.198	.024***	.186	.026***
Conservative Protestant	—	—	.624	.197**	.591	.201**	.443	.212*
Catholic	—	—	.263	.184	.334	.190	.322	.197
Biblical literalism	—	—	.536	.183**	.504	.187**	.358	.197
God determines life course	—	—	.785	.167***	.796	.170***	.639	.189***
Social Context								
Percent voted Democratic	—	—	—	—	-.016	.006*	-.016	.007*
Rate of religious adherence	—	—	—	—	-.001	.001	-.001	.001
Below poverty line	—	—	—	—	.016	.015	.024	.016
Diversity in community	—	—	—	—	-.180	.156	-.088	.166
Religious heterogeneity	—	—	—	—	-.714	.240**	-.524	.249*
Cultural Values								
Social conservative	—	—	—	—	—	—	.542	.181**
Values diversity in community	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.700	.170***
Sympathy towards African Americans	—	—	—	—	—	—	.004	.037
Follow same rules	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.398	.160*
God's law	—	—	—	—	—	—	.673	.190***
Government guarantees equal treatment of religions	—	—	—	—	—	—	-.577	.160***
Constant	-.735	.338*	-3.016	.444***	-2.056	.605***	-1.400	.677*
$\chi^2$	62.394***	6	336.152***	11	355.240***	16	425.768***	22
Cases Correctly Classified, %	59.8		73.3		74.2		76.7	

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.  
Note: N = 1,076.  $\beta$  = Beta value; SE = standard error.  
\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

**Table 7.** Standardized Logistic Regression Coefficients of Final Model of Worldview and Inter-marriage Regressions

Independent Variables	Worldview		Inter-marriage	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
<b>Demographic Controls</b>				
Age	.113	.061	.185	.088*
Female	.037	.059	.061	.083
Education	-.194	.067**	-.018	.093
Father's education	.038	.065	.023	.092
Income	.129	.064*	.153	.092
African American	.164	.060**	.152	.084
<b>Religious Belief and Involvement</b>				
Religious involvement	.299a	.072***	.704a	.100***
Conservative Protestant	.153	.065**	.196	.094*
Catholic	.081	.062	.139	.085
Biblical literalism	.117	.064	.167	.092
God determines life course	.291a	.066***	.315a	.093***
<b>Social Context</b>				
Percent voted Democratic	-.225	.059***	-.205	.084
Rate of religious adherence	-.178	.057**	-.111	.080
Below poverty line	.159	.057**	.121	.081
Is diversity in community	.224 a	.058***	-.044	.083
Religious heterogeneity	-.186	.057***	-.166	.079*
<b>Cultural Values</b>				
Social conservative	.074	.060	.255a	.085**
Values diversity in community	-.262a	.058***	-.337a	.082***
Sympathy towards African Americans	-.361a	.062***	.009	.087
Follow same rules	-.123	.056*	-.198	.080*
God's law	.327a	.068***	.327a	.093***
Government guarantees equal treatment of religions	-.198	.057***	-.287a	.080***
Constant	-.540	.057***	-.094	.079
Number		1,844		1,076
$\chi^2$	535.079***	22	425.768***	22
Cases Correctly Classified, %	71.3			76.7

Note:  $\beta$  = Beta weight; SE = standard error. Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

a The largest effects seen for both models.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests).

with illegality, such as drug use and prostitution—that is, with immoral people who threaten respectable community from the lower end of the status hierarchy. Others saw atheists as rampant materialists and cultural elitists that threaten common values from above—the ostentatiously wealthy who make a lifestyle out of consumption or the cultural elites who think they know better than everyone else. Both of these themes rest on a view of atheists as self-interested individualists who are not concerned with the common good.

One woman, KW, a Republican in her mid-60s, told our interviewer that belief in something

transcendent is necessary to move beyond “the me,” the narrowly self-interested consumerism that she sees as rampant. This interview excerpt shows how she linked together the ideas of consumerism, arrogance, atheism, and American identity:

It's that same arrogance again. I'm an American, I can do anything I want, and to heck with the rest of the world. [Interviewer: Do you see religion fitting into it very well?] These people aren't very religious, you'll notice that. There's a real, “I'm an atheist” attitude among people with major money. You don't see this nice balance . . . I'll say it again, some religious belief, I don't care who or what you worship, just something to give you that stability.



If you're going all through life, "I'm an atheist, I don't believe in anything except the almighty dollar," this is definitely a destructive attitude and the rest of the world sees it.

Other respondents were also very specific to make the link between atheism and those who had no larger concept of the common good. One man, DD, a Democrat who is also a pastor involved in social justice outreach, told our interviewer,

You know, anybody can effect change but it has, most non-faith-based organizations do it much more from the perspective of what's in it for me, and it's more [a] possible takeover situation, "I'm gonna force you to do whatever I want to do" . . . [I]t's a healthy faith-based tradition that I always recognize as being fixed in community, and working together, and looking out for the well-being of the other person just as much as myself.

Another respondent, an interior designer very involved in his neighborhood association, brought up the issue in a portion of the interview not focused explicitly on religion or the lack thereof. Our interviewer asked this man, one of the few Republicans in his community group, if he was concerned that the visibility of the Christian Right might dismay those who otherwise would identify with Republican values. He responded,

Only by perception because you know, being a Republican, it doesn't bother me in the least. Yeah, because I would say . . . the prisons aren't filled with conservative Republican Christians. The prisons are probably filled with people who don't have any kind of a spiritual or religious core. So I don't have to worry about . . . , a conservative Christian, you know, committing a crime against me, chances are.

In these interviews, the atheist emerges as a culturally powerful "other" in part because the category is multivalent (Turner 1974), loaded with multiple meanings. For all these respondents, atheists represent a general lack of morality, but for some, this lack was associated with criminality and its dangers to safety and public order, while for others the absence of morality was that of people whose resources or positions place them above the common standards of mainstream American life. To put it somewhat differently, atheists can be symbolically placed at either end of the American status hierarchy. What holds these seemingly contradictory views together is that the problem of the atheist was

perceived to be a problem of self-interest, an excessive individualism that undermines trust and the public good. In this, our respondents draw the same link between religion and the taming of self-interest that Tocqueville wrote about over a century ago (Tocqueville [1992] 2000, see especially volume 2, parts I and II). It is important to note that our respondents did not refer to particular atheists whom they had encountered. Rather they used the atheist as a symbolic figure to represent their fears about those trends in American life—increasing criminality, rampant self-interest, an unaccountable elite—that they believe undermine trust and a common sense of purpose.

In recent public discourse, atheists take on a similar symbolic role. We found that the figure of the atheist is invoked rhetorically to discuss the links—or tensions—among religion, morality, civic responsibility, and patriotism. In particular, the association of the atheist with a kind of unaccountable elitism has surfaced in recent public debates. The civically engaged atheists' awareness of the negative stereotypes of atheists has led to the coining of a new term, "Brights," around which to identify and organize and thus, according to one prominent Bright, to challenge the association between atheism, immorality, and lack of civic commitment. One of those advocates has gone so far as to claim the following:<sup>7</sup>

Many of the nation's clergy members are closet brights, I suspect. We are, in fact, the moral backbone of the nation: brights take their civic duties seriously precisely because they don't trust God to save humanity from its follies (Dennett 2003).

In a review of the book *The Twilight of Atheism*, Charlotte Allen (2004) not only associates atheism with totalitarianism but also sees this notion of the "Brights" as particularly troubling because of the intersection of science with big money and the ability to influence public policy. She worries if atheism, "may yet be experiencing a new dawn: a terrifying new alliance with money and power, of a kind even Marx could not have foreseen" (Allen

<sup>7</sup> Intellectual and philosophical treatments of atheism often start with the assertion that morality is possible without belief in God, knowing that this is something that is often called into question (Martin 2002; see also Dawkins 2003).

2004:51ff). Moreover, it is not only political conservatives who are uncomfortable with atheists. Commentators like Alan Wolfe—himself a professed nonbeliever—have claimed that atheism's close cousin secularism is a position almost exclusively held by a small, white, professional elite and that the Democratic Party must distance itself from secularists if they want to have any hope of regaining leadership of a country that is deeply religious, and if they want to be authentically responsive to the moral concerns that drive the majority of American voters (see Wolfe 2004, 2005).

Nonbelief has come to be not only a lively subject for cultural commentary but also a matter of political rhetoric and debate. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, former Attorney General John Ashcroft gave a speech to the National Religious Broadcaster's Annual Convention on February 19, 2002, in Nashville. Peter Beinart (2002) reported on it in *The New Republic*. In that speech, Ashcroft says the following:

Civilized individuals, Christians, Jews, and Muslims, all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator. Governments may guard freedom. Governments don't grant freedom. All people are called to the defense of the Grantor of freedom, and the framework of freedom He created.

Ostensibly intended to unify the nation, Ashcroft's comments caused controversy because of their apparent disavowal of nonbelieving Americans. It was an approach many critics held to be endemic for an administration that had come to power in no small part on the basis of its moral claims and emphasis on faith-based policy initiatives. The centrality of values-talk in the 2004 campaign did nothing to lessen such concerns, to such an extent that in the year following his reelection the president found it necessary to reach out to nonbelievers even at the risk of offending his core constituents. On April 28, 2005, for example, President Bush put it like this: "The great thing about America. . . is that you should be allowed to worship any way you want. And if you choose not to worship, you're equally as patriotic as somebody who does worship."<sup>8</sup> This comment makes no sense

unless the patriotism of the nonbeliever has effectively been called into question, revealing the tension between the belief that religion provides the basis for morality in American life and the belief in pluralism and freedom of conscience.

No matter how we read the President's remarks, the contrast between those who celebrate "the Brights" and those, like Ashcroft, who emphasize the centrality of faith is stark, and sheds light on why atheism becomes, in the American context, something that is understood and discussed as more than simply a private choice. Williams (1995) has distinguished two competing cultural models of the public good in American society. One is a *covenant* model that sees society's welfare as dependent upon individuals having a "right relationship" with God and social institutions that reflect God's laws. The other is a *contract* understanding, in which the locus of morality, trust, and accountability are in our relationships to one another and not referential to a higher being or power. Contracts and covenants not only operate according to different norms and procedures, but they also imply different ontologies that specify different relationships between individuals and the state and different bases for belonging and trust.

Williams argues that *both* of these models of the public good are deeply moral and that historically, in the United States, religious traditions have provided the cultural resources that construct both the contract and the covenant understanding. Originally this religious basis was largely Protestant; then it was expanded to the Judeo-Christian core, and now it is, perhaps, more inclusive still, as Hout and Fischer (2001; c.f. Eck 2001) have pointed out. The basis is still religious, however, if not strictly Christian; and while liberal democratic social theory has conventionally argued that American democracy is exceptional because of its religious vitality and the central role of religion in public life, recent developments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America suggest that a covenantal model—rather than the secular vision of state-society

<sup>8</sup> President Bush reiterated this point in an interview with *Christianity Today* on May 26, 2004:

"There's nothing more powerful than this country saying you can worship any way you want, or not worship at all" (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/12/51.0.html>).

relations that grows out of the Western enlightenment—may be more the rule than the exception, at least for the development of democracy on a global scale.

If this argument is correct, then those who have a covenant understanding of the public good may see the symbolic figure of the atheist as marking the boundary between those who accept the covenant and those who reject it. For those who hold a contract understanding, religious belief is in theory irrelevant to civic participation and solidarity. Even the contract view, however, rests on underlying assumptions about the morality and trustworthiness that make the contract possible, which may lead to some unease regarding the figure of the atheist, given the association of religion with private morality affirmed by many Americans.

## CONCLUSION

The core point of this article can be stated concisely. Atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent. It is striking that the rejection of atheists is so much more common than rejection of other stigmatized groups. For example, while rejection of Muslims may have spiked in post-9/11 America, rejection of atheists was higher. The possibility of same-sex marriage has widely been seen as a threat to a biblical definition of marriage, as Massachusetts, Hawaii, and California have tested the idea, and the debate over the ordination of openly gay clergy has become a central point of controversy within many churches. In our survey, however, concerns about atheists were stronger than concerns about homosexuals. Across subgroups in our sample, negative views of atheists are strong, the differences being largely a matter of degree.

We believe that in answering our questions about atheists, our survey respondents were not, on the whole, referring to actual atheists they had encountered, but were responding to “the atheist” as a boundary-marking cultural category. Unlike members of some other marginalized groups, atheists can “pass”: people are unlikely to ask about a person’s religious beliefs in most circumstances, and even outward behavioral signs of religiosity (like going to church)

do not correlate perfectly with belief in God. Moreover, acceptance or rejection of atheists is related not only to personal religiosity but also to one’s exposure to diversity and to one’s social and political value orientations. So while our study does shed light on questions of tolerance, we are more interested in what this symbolic boundary tells us about moral solidarity and cultural membership. We believe that attitudes toward atheists tell us more about American society and culture than about atheists themselves, and that our analysis sheds light on broader issues regarding the historic place of religion in underpinning moral order in the United States.

If we are correct, then the boundary between the religious and the nonreligious is not about religious affiliation *per se*. It is about the historic place of religion in American civic culture and the understanding that religion provides the “habits of the heart” that form the basis of the good society (Bellah et al. 1991, 1985; Tocqueville [1992] 2000). It is about an understanding that Americans share something more than rules and procedures, but rather that our understandings of right and wrong and good citizenship are also shared (Hartmann and Gerteis 2005). To be an atheist in such an environment is not to be one more religious minority among many in a strongly pluralist society. Rather, Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether. Over our history, other groups have, perhaps, been subject to similar moral concerns. Catholics, Jews, and communists all have been figures against which the moral contours of American culture and citizenship have been imagined. We suggest that today, the figure of the atheist plays this role—although we emphasize that this is for contingent historical and institutional reasons, and we also emphasize that this is the case regardless of the morality and patriotism of actual atheists.

Durkheim ([1893] 1984) argued that the formation of solidarity is always predicated on symbolic boundaries that designate insiders and outsiders, and that these boundaries are always, to some extent, about designating those who are worthy of membership as defined against those who are not (c.f. Taylor 2002). That is, they are always about a moral order that defines rela-

tionships of obligation and status and that undergirds a sense of trust (c.f. Wuthnow 1987). Symbolic boundaries are effective only in promoting a sense of solidarity and identity by virtue of imagining an “other” who does not share the core characteristics imagined to be held by those who are legitimate participants in the moral order; the imagined community must have outsiders as well as insiders (Anderson 1991). In the United States, the historic place of religion in providing moral solidarity is what led Tocqueville ([1992]2000) and Herberg (1960) to designate first Protestants, and then Catholics and Jews, as good Americans. In democratic societies, these concerns with moral order may be particularly heightened because citizenship rests on the assumption of the ability of individuals to act responsibly to exercise rights, an ability based in character and in capacities of mind that enable civic action (Bellah et al. 1991; Tocqueville [1992]2000). Alexander (1992) argues that the category of the “citizen” is itself a moral category that depends for its meaning on the designation of some persons as morally unworthy of it.

Theoretically, this implies that in addition to understanding where symbolic boundaries are drawn, and whether they are positive or negative, we also need to understand the cultural basis for the distinctions made and the content of the categories that our distinctions designate. We also cannot assume that boundaries simply reflect material interests. Instead, we must understand how boundaries create and are created by identities that shape perceptions of interest even as they form the cultural bases of solidarity. Thus, we must understand the resulting cultural landscape that boundaries define, including definitions of moral worth and substantive claims about identity. It means that if we want to understand the symbolic logic of exclusion, we have to shift our analytical focus away from what members of marginalized groups (the “other”) share, and toward what members of those inside the boundary share – and what they imagine themselves to share. This is why we have focused throughout our analysis not on atheists *per se* but rather on what attitudes about atheists reveal regarding American society and culture.

More broadly, our analysis also suggests that if we start asking about the substantive, cultural basis for acceptance into various private and

public arenas, we can reformulate our understandings of other social divisions. For example, how would we understand racial boundaries differently if we asked not only about prejudice or political tolerance, but also about the cultural content of what Americans perceive themselves to share with those who are racially other (c.f. Becker 1998; Edgell and Tranby 2004)? What kinds of cultural distinctions designate people as “like me” or “not at all like me” across racial categories, and how does that affect solidarity, trust, belonging, and identity in different contexts?

Some have argued, we believe correctly, that as religious diversity has increased in America, tolerance of small or previously marginalized religious groups has also increased. Historically this has been the case, for Catholics in the nineteenth century and Jews in the twentieth, and scholars like Eck (2001) and Hout and Fischer (2001) are probably right that this pattern of increasing tolerance of diverse religious identities will continue. The work on symbolic boundaries and moral order suggests, however, that the creation of the other is always necessary for the creation of identity and solidarity. Our analysis shows that attitudes about atheists have not followed the same historical pattern as that for previously marginalized religious groups. It is possible that the increasing tolerance for religious diversity may have heightened awareness of religion itself as a basis for solidarity in American life and sharpened the boundary between believers and nonbelievers in our collective imagination. It is also possible that the prominence of Christian Right rhetoric in the public realm has played the same role. It is always risky, however, to predict how history will unfold, and it is too soon to say that atheists will always be a symbolic other in our society. Perhaps acceptance of atheists would increase were a pluralist, contract understanding of the public good to gain political and cultural ascendancy. In any case, we believe it is vital to continue to analyze the dynamics of symbolic inclusion and exclusion as religious diversity continues to increase and as religious identities are made salient by both internal developments and by changes in America’s global relationships.

We already know that Americans draw boundaries in private life based on morality. Our findings suggest that moral boundaries are



also drawn in public life, and these findings help us to understand why and how they are drawn. In this case, the symbolic boundaries drawn around atheists help us to understand the problem of moral solidarity in a diverse society. They point to a specific cultural content, and to a specific historical and institutional basis for the intersection of religion, morality, and models of the public and the private good. They shed light on the shared or fractured nature of cultural membership, and also on the content of the culture that is shared. We call for more work that investigates the range and depth of meanings associated with the term "atheist," how moral worth is linked discursively with citizenship, and how the construction of cultural membership in American society proceeds through the drawing of symbolic boundaries.

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young adulthood, the connection of race and sport in midnight basketball leagues, and American pluralism through the lenses of race and religion.

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