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Nonreligious Imaginaries of World Repairing

Edited by
Lori G. Beaman
Timothy Stacey

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Timothy Stacey is Lecturer in Area Studies at Leiden University. He holds an MA in Philosophical Theology from the University of Nottingham and a PhD in the Sociology of Religion from the Faiths and Civil Society unit, Goldsmiths, University of London. Tim critically explores religious, emotional and practice-based means of triggering transformation towards political, economic and ecological solidarity. He is the author of *Myth and Solidarity in the Modern World* (2018) and *Saving Liberalism From Itself* (2022). And he is the co-founder of AltVisions.org.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Timothy Stacey and Lori G. Beaman

Abstract In this opening chapter, we outline the dual contribution of this book, designed simultaneously to speak to scholars of nonreligion and academics, policy makers and activists interested in how to garner interest in what we, following others, call world repairing work: the work of bringing people together across differences and of making the world liveable for human and other-than-human beings. The last two decades have seen a groundswell of research into nonreligion. But this has been focused almost exclusively on the "non" part of nonreligion. Instead, our contribution is to focus on the positive content of nonreligious imaginaries as they are lived out in both extraordinary and everyday practices of world repairing. We argue that this work is vital for those seeking to foster world repairing work because it tells us something about the way the world is already imagined by those on the frontline and, in so doing, speaks to the distance

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and direction of ideational travel that is required for more widespread social and political transformation.

Keywords Religion • Nonreligion • Imaginaries • World repairing

It often seems that we are still in the throes of a battle for the human "soul". One side assures us that without religion there is no morality. The other side holds religion responsible for the exploitation of people and planet that has characterised recorded history. Not only do such pronouncements mischaracterise the diverse, pragmatic and creative ways that humans imagine and interact with the world around them, but they foreclose the modest work of starting where people are at, and understanding from their perspectives what motivates them to find ways of living well with one another and with other-than-human beings. The role of this book is to shine a light on nonreligious imaginaries as they inspire world-repairing work. The reason for this is not because we consider either religion or nonreligion more valid but because nonreligious identities are rapidly rising in many parts of the world and we want to know more about those iterations that will serve to promote cooperation and solidarity.

There has been a flourishing of research into nonreligion over the last ten years. Lois Lee's landmark *Recognizing the Non-religious* (Lee, 2015) brings much of this research together. Lee notes a distinct lack of research into what nonreligious people actually believe in. The need for research in this area was recognised in the development of her *Understanding Unbelief* programme (John Templeton Foundation), as well as more recently in Lori Beaman's *Nonreligion in a Complex Future* programme (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada).

Both of these programmes of research respond to the fact that quantitative research in particular is almost exclusively focused on the 'non' part of nonreligion and very little attention is paid to its substantive content (Cragun, 2019; Smith & Cragun, 2019). This is troubling because, with nonreligion on the rise across the Western world, it is important to gain a better understanding of what this group believes in, gains a sense of belonging from and is willing to fight for. For many, not being religious may not be a very important part of their identity.

The focus on what nonreligion is not is partly sustained through research that focuses on beliefs held by people who self-describe as nonreligious. Although such research offers an important window into this emerging group, it can lead to too-hasty conclusions and generalisations

about who the nonreligious are. And context is everything as the implications of identifying as nonreligious vary. By way of an alternative, a number of authors in this volume choose in different ways to study political, social or ecological practices as potentially informative about nonreligious imaginaries. While sometimes these practices involve explicitly rejecting or reforming religion (e.g. the campaigners for gender and sexuality rights explored by Rabbia and Vaggione), in other cases neither religion nor nonreligion is mentioned. For the authors highlighting these cases, we see varied, subtle attempts to simultaneously identify participants according to the negative identifiers they are trying to get beyond (nonreligion, secularity), while nonetheless focusing on the causes and practices to which they are committed, which may have little to do with their nonreligious identity. Itel chooses to include only people who identify as 'not religious but spiritual' while focusing broadly on their feelings about the economic and ecological world as a whole. Although Salonen and Stacey work with participants who have identified themselves as being nonreligious and 'for whom religion is of no more than a secondary concern', respectively, they deliberately steer observations away from overtly religious or nonreligious elements. Salonen is not interested in people's nonreligiosity as such but in the role that food plays in their lives. Similarly, Stacey is interested in how people locate meaning in the practice of solidarity. And Beaman does not ask for people's religious or nonreligious identity at all but rather explores sea turtle conservation initiatives as a prism through which to understand religion and nonreligion.

The focus on what nonreligion is not may also stem partly from a difficulty of finding the right words for labelling the content we are trying to study. Some scholars have tried to 'format' (Arsheim & Hovdkinn, 2020) this content, bringing it into the fold alongside religion. Taves (2018), for example, has proffered the term 'worldviews' as a broader subset into which both religion and nonreligion can fit. This work is important in fields such as migration, marriage and labour in which people have immediate needs to claim rights on the basis of their beliefs (Beaman et al., 2018). On the other hand, there is a risk that in the name of recognition, this process distorts nonreligious identity, making it look like religion (Asad, 2003; Scott, 1999). The use of terms like 'worldviews' potentially conjures a robust, systemic or dogmatic way of thinking that neglects the complexity of the ways that many nonreligious people engage with the world—and this just at a time when research on religion has finally made the shift from dogma to identity (Stacey, 2020). Drawing on the work of

Benedict Anderson and Charles Taylor, we prefer the term imaginaries. Taylor uses the term to mean 'the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, [which] … is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories and legends' (Taylor, 2007, p. 23). Anderson used the notion of imagined communities to understand nationalism, which captures the possible political implications of some of the ways in which the nonreligious people understand what matters to them.

We add materials and practices to Taylor's ideational list. Over the last 20 years, a pool of researchers have sought to 're-materialize scholarly conceptualizations of religion by approaching it as irreducibly corporeal and physical' (Meyer, 2019, p. 620). Theirs has been an arduous task of deconstructing a centuries-old Protestant bias that prioritises beliefs and ideas at the expense of materials, rituals and practices. As we turn to study nonreligious people, it is crucial that this prioritisation be challenged.

The power of the term imaginary, in our view, is in its ability to traverse distinctions between religious and nonreligious ways of understanding the world while avoiding thinking of either as unified systems. Focusing on imaginaries allows for a scholarly reappraisal of the power of certain stories, relations, rituals and practices in giving shape to nonreligious lives. In turn, we hope scholarly work can make a small contribution to the public reclaiming of ways of engaging with the world. There is a compulsion to discover the ways that people are 'good without god' which of course reifies the assumption that there is somehow a correlation between religion and goodness. This is not our project. Rather, we seek to explore how people engage with the world around them, including the stories they tell, the people they admire and socialise with and the projects they undertake.

The Contribution of Studies of World Repairing to the Study of Both Religion and Nonreligion

In paying attention to these aspects, we build on a wealth of recent research that seeks to relocate the study of belief away from dogma and towards practice and everyday lived nonreligion. We develop this tradition by moving beyond lifecycle rituals to world-repairing behaviours. In other words, rather than exploring how and why people celebrate birth, marriage and death, we explore how and why people engage in particular activities that seek to put the world right. We argue that such activities reveal a great deal