

# The conceptual placement of atheism in secularist and post-secularist conceptions of society

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## Abstract

This paper draws a comparison between the intellectual placement afforded to atheism in social contexts with a foundationally secularist reflex and in those that are now moving beyond such secularist impulses. Describing these two kinds of contexts ideal-typically, that is, by placing them phenomenologically shows that atheism can be seen as occupying either a default no-religion position, placed *above* faith orientations, or a religious orientation within available alternatives, hence placed *amongst* faith orientations. The relevance of this issue for Africa is that many of these underlying assumptions about the treatment of atheism remain unacknowledged in Africa (as is the case in other democratic geographies). These assumptions thus exert influence via legal, political and social processes, without these effects being critically weighed.

## Keywords

Atheism, modernism, secularism, post-modernism, conceptual placement.

## 1. N/aye-theism

Atheism remains frequently prominent in the news. For instance, *The Times of Israel* recently published two blogs by physicist Richard Kronenfeld on “Why are so many scientists atheists?” (Kronenfeld 2022a; Kronenfeld 2022b). In my own South African<sup>2</sup> and church contexts, a book on becoming an atheist, written in

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2 The South African and especially the Afrikaans news and related mass media have long viewed religion more favourably than the media in e.g. the UK (see Connolly-Ahern and Golan 2007:63-76). That is re-

evangelising format by a former church minister (Retief 2022<sup>3</sup>), received much media attention (e.g. Eybers 2022, Burgess 2022). In popular book format internationally, the so-called “four horsemen” of atheism (Hitchens 2019, with reference to Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett; cf. respectively Dawkins 2006, Harris 2005, Hitchens 2007 and Dennett 2007) may have attracted the widest readership, but more academic analyses (such as Burton 2020, Grey 2018 and White 2014) show that the topic of unbelief remains intellectually attractive and not limited to those publications that display perhaps a touch of either *Schadenfreude* or self-righteous anger.

Naturally – as often stated orally by sociologist Michael Burawoy, though to my knowledge he has not published this quotable expression – what is *now* is not necessarily *new*, and this is the case also with atheism. This phenomenon is recorded for almost as long as religion has been recorded (see notably Whitmarsh 2015);<sup>4</sup> unbelief is by no means, as is often assumed, a modern invention or a Modernist manner.

What is different about the past two-plus centuries in Western societies, though, is first that a religiously-oriented society (more or less) cooperatively permitted within its socio-political purview what was understood as its antithesis, a-religiosity, to develop. Moreover, in some instances this a-religiosity developed into something like a nationally self-understood public anti-religiosity,<sup>5</sup> at times enforced by legal means. This led to the replacement of (most commonly, Reformation) Christianity in almost all public institutions (with private education remaining a sort of exception), as official atheism eventually took hold in almost all such institutions. (Ideologically this is also the case in churches, many of which endorse – to keep here to the traditional terminology, though the realities are more complex than the binary suggests – the separation between church

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flected both in directly religion-related reportage or comment columns (e.g. Claassen and Gaum 2012) and in the inclusion of faith-related comments by people interviewed in the aftermath of a crisis event (as analysed by Froneman and Lombaard 2011:166-184).

- 3 Conversion in the opposite direction on equally (but not similar) unsatisfying arguments is also found; see e.g. Flew 2008.
- 4 As my colleague Eben Scheffler has pointed out, informally, which I here acknowledge with much thanks, the Bible reflects similar and parallel thoughts:
  - Psalm 14:1: אִין אֱלֹהִים נִבֵּל בְּלִבּוֹ אִין אֱלֹהִים, with the ethical conclusion we know well from modern debates too, but with which we have philosophical difficulties of cause and effect: אִין עֲשֵׂה-טוֹב הַשְׁחִיתוּ הַתְּעִיבוּ עֲלֵי-לֵךְ.
  - A more general confession of bewilderment or of ignorance, perhaps implying agnosticism too, is found in Ecclesiastes 7:24: וְיִמְצָא מִי יִמְצָא קֶדֶם מִי יִמְצָא מִן-הַחַיִּים מִן-הַמֵּתִים.
  - In Luke 11:15-16, Jesus' works are ascribed to a source other than God: τινὲς δὲ ἐξ ὑτῶν εἶπον· ἐν Βεελζεβούλ τῷ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων κβάλλει τὰ δαιμόνια. ἕτεροι δὲ πειράζοντες σημεῖον ἐξ οὐρανοῦ ἐξήλθον παρ' αὐτοῦ.
  - The famous matter of blasphemy against the Spirit approaches this issue too. See Matthew 12:31-32: ἡ δὲ τοῦ πνεύματος βλασφημία οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται. καὶ ὅς ἐάν εἴπῃ λόγον κατὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου, ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ· ὅς δ' ἂν εἴπῃ κατὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἁγίου, οὐκ ἀφεθήσεται αὐτῷ.
- 5 This has occurred in the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet Czech Republic (see however Hutt 2022), Estonia, Australia, Angola, and England. The practice is most official in France, with its *laïcité* policies, and it is present, though perhaps most inconsistently, in the USA.

and state; cf. Lombaard 2021:1-19.) Faith yielded to (what was understood as) non-faith.<sup>6</sup>

Second, this action is based on its own religious commitments (to summarise this Christian ethic: love thy neighbour; love thy enemy; and so forth); in doing so, acting against its own inherent impulses. (The reflexes in Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Calvinist theologies in particular are to subsume the world, i.e. to rule over it, expressly for the sake of the benefit of the citizens. The evangelical-charismatic-Pentecostal strands of theology have inherited this reflexive inclination, as seen again in the presidential politics over the past decade in for instance the USA, Brazil and Hungary, as possible examples.) The religio-nationalist Zion theology we know from the Hebrew Bible and the pro-government reading of Romans 13 in favour of hierarchically oriented societies, to name two examples, were no longer used in a self-serving manner to support the state's recognition of an established church ("establishment" meant here in England's sense of the term, where government was understood as *fidei defensor*). Historically speaking, this was a remarkable move of scriptural hermeneutics, theology and politics. Through a complex set of circumstances, which also required revolutions in both of the two founding countries of democracy (France and the USA) (the two usual instances of the first Islandic parliament and of the Magna Carta predate the modern era by too much to be relevant to the argument here), the softer side of Christian theology came to replace entrenched royalist inclinations.

Third, on what is notable on the past two centuries plus of pre-democratic societies turning away from full religious integration in all aspects of life, is the scale of this turn towards unbelief. Though numerically amongst the tally of societies a grand minority, a minority of perhaps only one if this turn is indeed unique in human history, modern Western(ised) civilisation is so vast and so successful in all respects but the ethical (nuanced, naturally), that the distinctiveness of this turn cannot go unnoticed. Indeed, the contrary is not infrequently posited (though it is difficult to argue conclusively) that Western societies' move towards secularism was an enabling and perhaps even necessary sociological and philosophical factor in their matchless accomplishments in virtually all spheres of life. The public hold of religion, specifically Christianity, had – in this line of analysis – to be weakened in order for the other aspects of the human endeavour to thrive.

6 The distinctions between faith and belief, between religious faith and non-religious faith, and between religious belief and non-religious belief do not hold up from the perspective of post-secular phenomenology. Though one could devote a separate publication to debating such distinctions (drawing on e.g. Naudé 2023; Sands 2018; Schrijvers 2016; Bailey 2001), the eventual calls made would simply be mine, as would be the case too with any other author who writes on such distinctions. The distinctions cannot be definitively made or indefinitely upheld. This is an instance where Wittgenstein's (1953) insight that many philosophical problems are in reality language problems would be valid.

It is within these parameters of the ancient and the current that the place afforded atheism within the modern world – characterised by democracy, rationality, naturalism (i.e. a non-metaphysical orientation), atomism, optimism, logical positivism, detached or clinical objectivity and more – may be outlined. The relevance of this situation for Africa is that many of these underlying assumptions remain unacknowledged on this continent too. These impulses of thought thus exert their influence via legal, political and social processes, usually without these effects being critically weighed.

## 2. Aha!theism

The kinds of synonyms we may in our time associate with atheism include irreligiosity, unbelief and secularism, with each of these terms carrying their own problems of etymology and nuance. Being pagan (which is these days claimed with pride in some circles) or infidel (which seems to enjoy no similar esteem) or heathen (held somewhere in between) has similarly knotty associations; the same is true for the terms “unaffiliated,” “without faith,” and “apostate.”<sup>7</sup> Today, in traditionally Christian contexts, religious “nones” is a common designation (see e.g. White 2014).

At a somewhat extended distance, associated convictions, such as on the absence of life after death and, in a contrary direction, on the absence of meaning in life,<sup>8</sup> may be included. Within this mix, the concept of the soul is variously retained as something on a continuum from substantive and eternal, to a metaphorical indication of something humanly perceptible, to a term that refers to an idea without substance, the use of which leads only to confusion (cf. Murphy 2006). Although there may be logical consistency in holding to several related, cogent terms and positions associated with unbelief at the same time, as with all important ideas, the variance one finds can at times be surprising. For instance, although all of us have become accustomed to the common adage that ethics and morality do not require religion, in the same way as people are said not to require God in order to be good and/or to do what is right (e.g. Hare 2019), the case for atheist spirituality

7 Such terms, like a few others too (e.g. idolator), however, may well often relate to still holding to aspects of traditional belief, though not in any orthodox manner, or perhaps even in the inverse (as with Satanism). Closer to the meaning of “doubter” lie terms such as sceptic and agnostic, each with their own nuance. Terms such as *giaour* and *goy* have more specific othering connotations. Yet another category consists of people who are unconcerned about religious matters: they may be quite well informed or not, and they do not see themselves as attracted to any form of religious adherence, expression or rejection (though, of course, nobody escapes the implicit religiosity associated with daily life, language and institutions or with significant rituals; cf. Bailey 1998). The term “theocracy” has become in the current US political scene a (historically inaccurate) liberal denigration of conservative political religiosity, which now hinders other usages of this term.

8 The opening words to Camus’s *Le mythe de Sisyphe* remain a typifying reference to this matter: “Il n’y a qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux: c’est le suicide” (Camus 1942:17).

(McGhee 2021, Harris 2015, De Botton 2013, Antinoff 2009, Comte-Sponville 2006)<sup>9</sup> seems still to contain a contradiction in terms for many people. Because of the idealistic visions, even “purist” in a sense, that are often held around constructs such as “believer” and “non-believer,” a package of ideals that may include belief in God but not in an afterlife, or in an afterlife but not in God, or in a philosophically meaningful life without any transcendental anchoring, and so forth, seems unsound to many. Somehow, we want neatly delineated convictions. A sense of order and coherence seems to be required by observers of religiosity and non-religiosity (“congruence,” in the language of Chaves 2010), in order to attribute authenticity to the people concerned (but perhaps there are other grounding motivations too).

Yet the diversity of human reasoning and conceptualisations, awarenesses and orientations, along with the recognition that none of us are consistent in everything we believe or give expression to, means that these intricacies are the realities of life, banal or grand as they may be. Moreover, in all matters our descriptions often fail us in truly conveying the sensed meaning we want to convey; the more so regarding the basics of our human experience (cf. Lombaard 2008:95), including our sense of, for or towards the religious. Since only in rare instances can people live without a founding metaphysics of some sort, which typically includes the dynamics of revelation in some way (cf. Berkhof 2013, especially the *Prolegomena*), faith finds itself innately at odds with the rationality of logic.

There is such a strong divide within the cultural tradition of logic in which we find ourselves, that the piety for instance intended by a non-academic Afrikaans book title such as *Ek glo nie, ek weet (I don't believe, I know* – implying that faith lies on the same existential and rational level as facticity; De Villiers and De Villiers 2014) therefore does, outside of a small pietist circle of positive reception, the case of faith as a phenomenon *sui generis* more harm than good. Almost diametrically opposed in title, the Dutch *Het algemeen betwijfeld christelijk geloof (The generally doubted Christian faith*; Kuitert 1992) deals much better with the questions that rationality poses to faith. In the sensed reasoning of our current Modernist-influenced contexts, the cognition (and perhaps intuition) of / from / on faith and the rationality of logic stand, in public spheres at least but often too on more intimately personal levels, in a difficult congruence to one another. Within faith, there is substantial confluence (Anselm's famous formulation of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* being already a pre-modern example); viewed from outside, as it were, the divergence of faith and reason may well already seem deep. On Modernist grounds, the two ratiocinations are irreconcilable.

9 The question posed by Taira (2012:388-404), “Atheist spirituality: a follow on from New Atheism?” deserves further exploration.

Given that the era of the modern and the corollaries of Modernism – democracy, rationality, naturalism, atomism, optimism, positivism, objectivity – all work together in some loosely collated manner to constitute secularism (as understood today, i.e. since Holyoake 1896; see however Vanhoutte 2020:1-9), it becomes possible to construct an ideal-typical (in the Weberian sense<sup>10</sup>) view of atheism. To begin with, a-religiosity in a Modernist context understands itself as the opposite – in different senses – of all the negatives that Modernism attributes to faith. To be sure, these characteristics are inherent in the very nature of faith, and what Modernism sees (and objects to) is therefore not a misconstrual; the disagreement (as with many important issues) begins at the point of departure.<sup>11</sup>

These features of faith include, among others (here not separating traits inherent to the phenomenon of faith itself from the social actualities involved), being unverifiable and hence non-empirical; varied and variable; pliable and compliant (i.e. to the chance vagaries of each social and even geographic context); and drawing on unfirm impulses in such dissimilar, even contradictory manners as to remain constantly unfalsifiable (in the Popperian sense) and, hence, intellectually lame. Dealing with deep-seated subjectivities of various sorts – personal, sociological, historical and more – a firm sense of what is indeed theologically valid or dogmatically correct cannot be gained from religion; not to mention the acts elicited and/or prohibited on these bases; how religion may react to a context, or steer it, and how religious people will act or react in various circumstances remains often unpredictable. In fact, precious little can be ascertained: all the key concepts of (for instance) Christian theology remain on apprehensive rather than apprehensible grounds, in contrast to the natural sciences, law, languages, music, and other academic disciplines. From the foundational events to the grounding documents, to the central teachings, to the understanding of all of these (hermeneutics), to the daily practices based on these cores of faith, everything remains tenuous. The holy cannot be proved, though it has in history been enforced; the details of theology and their implications and applications remain ever uncertain and often contrived; the validity of all the foregoing cannot in any manner be ensured, measured or assured (with the methodologies of positivism requiring confirmation, calculated precision and hence certainty).

Therefore, the *topoi* covered in, for instance, the academic genre of introductions to the Bible or comprehensive works of systematic theology may in some ways be interesting, but they are always either literary or speculative, based as

<sup>10</sup> On this methodological endeavour, therefore, the details of the forms of atheism (Gray 2018), secularism (Taylor 2007), etc. are not ignored but are included, albeit at arm's length, from a sufficiently distanced vantage point so as not to repeat the details here assumed as given.

<sup>11</sup> The expression "the point of departure" thus here intends both its possible meanings.

they are on historical contingencies rather than on eternal truths (as they are oft purported to be) or on fixed facts (on which basis more or less all aspects of Modernism operate). Whereas Christians would claim those traits as valuable, involving the mainstays of faith in the forms of revelation, tradition, or discernment (at times formulated as surrender, adherence or obedience), for the natural reflexes of Modernism, such ambiguities simply undermine hope that faith or religion could be married with reason. Hence, we observe the rise of the “four horsemen” of atheism mentioned earlier, as well as many more.

### 3. Elevated atheism

Atheism, therefore, stands beyond such exigencies. In personal views and in the role a-religiosity assumes within society, atheists contend, a position can and therefore should be taken beyond the fray of all of the subjectivities that involve humanity in indeterminate metaphysics. Elevated above the personal and free from societal commitments, yet escaped from the above-human, atheism is placed in an intermediary status: not involved in the ephemeral or in the provisional and fully committed to the unmetaphysical – i.e. reliant on the physical – unbelief finds itself in the almost tranquil rational position. From this default location, all can be observed – objectively, or so it is claimed. In a non-committal, disinterested way and without prejudice, the partisanship of faith can, for the good of all and to the benefit of society as a whole, be removed from public life. Naturally, what the individual, in the atomist conception of the political sphere as final arbiter of everything, decides to do privately, including the *in camera* practice of religion, lies outside the limited parameters of state power, which encompasses government, lawmaking and policing. However, the sphere of public life, the proper terrain of the organs of state, should be emptied of the jeopardies of religion. All official activities, and all activities outside of officialdom but still in the public domain such as business and education, ought properly to be free of religion.

In this conceptual placement of atheism in secular societies, public atheism occupies the seat of an objective, religion-free arbiter; relative to this authoritative position, anything that deviates from the default zero-religion position in society requires clarification and justification. All public religious exercises hence, by definition, must defend themselves in the court of public a-religiosity, if such an expression of faith is to be accepted at all. Public expressions of faith are suspect and require examination. Any unpermitted religious manifestation is to be excommunicated from public life; the disinterested throne of unbelief will decide on what is permissible; public displays of faith are possible, but only as and when they are approved. Because atheism stands beyond faith, outside the margins

of religion, it can claim to function in this way, as a neutral adjudicator of other beliefs. Atheism holds a privileged position, precisely because it is non-religious. That fundamental criterion, in this ideal-typical portrayal, authorizes unbelief to evaluate belief.

#### 4. Relegated atheism

In this last-mentioned respect, religious matters stand alone. No other aspect of the human enterprise requires this kind of outside appraisal in order to achieve legitimacy, certainly not in democracies. (In totalitarian societies, by contrast, the aesthetics of art may be ideologically prescribed.) Food is not evaluated by Non-food, in a manner of speaking metaphorically akin to the formulation above; rather, food is evaluated by specialists in food. Sport is not evaluated by Non-sport. Art is evaluated by specialists in art; dancing, literature, travelling, psychological or familial wellbeing, law, music – all are assessed by experts in the respective fields. Only religion has followed a different curve in democratic societies. Religion has remained, all protestations to the contrary, an exceptional case in society; the special relationship between (using, again, the too simplistic traditional formulation) church and state has not been broken. That bond is as strong as ever; the magnetic polarities have merely been inverted, from the previous attraction to current rejection.

That last expression may be nuanced by reformulating it as follows: from earlier (confessed and hence legislated) attraction to current (confessed and hence legislated) rejection. In either case equally (though differently) so, however, the *nominalism* of the confessed commitment is indicated both by the superficiality of the commitment and by the complexities of reality that belie the simplicities of the confessed convictions. The latter is evidenced in modern democracies in three ways. First, no two countries that hold to the self-understanding of being secular states are exactly the same with regard to how this confession is held; second, no individual state is fully consistent in applying its confessed secularist constitutional orientation throughout society (not even the most extreme such state, the Soviet empire, could rout Polish Catholicism, which went on eventually to produce a pope during this period); and third, no state could truly break its special linkage connecting law and constitution to religion, as indicated above (one can find examples that illustrate this from every single democracy).

The secularist state confession is not only nominal, as stated above; it is also false. There has never been an a-religious government or society. With the statistical trends towards greater religiosity on the global level (though some areas, such as England, are still bucking this wider trend), by now amply attested to in the literature in demography and sociology, it is difficult to foresee a fully a-re-



ligious democracy anywhere in the world in the next century and more. Apart from these political realities, and since much of our human existence remains inescapably coloured by aspects of religion (as demonstrated by Bailey 1998 with his concept of implicit religion, among a few other complementary arguments), there is a main concern for this necessarily limited contribution, as well as for the conceptual (philosophical-phenomenological) matter that follows from section 3 (“Elevated atheism”) above. This is the conceptual concern that failing to understand atheism as itself a religious orientation implodes on itself.

As I stated in a brief essay published by the University of Pretoria (Lombaard 2022), a cluster of (now dated) related suppositions on this matter are each individually erroneous. These assumptions include the following:

- that *secular* implies *a-religious* (which is historically inaccurate; see Vanhoutte 2020:1-9);
- that an *a-religious* position implies a faith-free position (which is false, akin to claims to objectivity, or, more simply, comparable to the claim that one speaks without an accent; in reality, *religionlessness* is as much a position of faith on faith as any other; see Benson 2013:12-29); and
- that a secular or *a-religious* position is a neutral stance taken within democratic societies (which it clearly is not; a secular or *a-religious* standpoint is by definition an actively taken position on religion, at times even enforced by the armed apparatus of the state, e.g. currently in France...).

This cluster of corrections is typical of a set of dearly held positions within one conceptualisation of the world that is being replaced by an alternative of greater cogency (see Kuhn 1962). In this case, the foregoing conceptualisation is secularism, which went hand in hand with Modernism; it is now slowly being replaced (or amended or supplemented; see Hashemi 2017) by a more realistic, emergent conceptualisation of the world called post-secularism (identified most influentially by Habermas 2010; see Staudig and Alvis 2016:589). Within this internationally dawning altered sense of the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical, religion ought not to be publicly privileged, as occurred in extra-Modern (or a-Modern, i.e., before and around the Modernist cultural stream) societies, but neither should it be publicly disadvantaged *a priori*, as has been observed in Modernist societies with their inherent secularist reflexes. Rather, taking a more balanced approach (though perfect balance cannot be expected), faith is regarded as a normal part of life like any other – food, sport, art, dancing and so on. Along with this realisation comes also the insight that the relationship between religion and government must be “normalised” too. Religion is no longer a special case, worthy of more special attention from the state apparatus than other parts of life achieve. In this specific sense, religion is nothing special.

In this kind of socio-political-religio-cultural ambience, the *conceptual placement of atheism*, i.e. within post-secularism, changes too. To be sure, unbelief is not now marginalised or eradicated. Rather, the position afforded atheism in the social imaginary of intangible hierarchies is, in a sense, democratised. Atheism is taken off its throne and no longer holds the status of somehow being elevated above religions and authorised to make evaluative judgments about religions. Rather, atheism “is as much a position of faith on faith as any other” (from the Lombaard 2022 quote above). In the social circle of religious possibilities, atheism is one of a range of other religious possibilities, all relatively equally interlinked. Unbelief is now conceptually located amongst the religious choices, not beyond the religious. It holds no special evaluative status; just like any other faith orientation, atheism holds certain precepts dearly, relates to the world in specific ways, allows and forbids certain actions and views, and promotes a certain language and concepts. Atheism is, in this sense, not unbelief but simply yet another belief (or set of beliefs; cf. Gray 2018) – one with ancient roots and modern concerns, with adherents (such as The Brights n.d.) and leaders and detractors, and which draws public curiosity (such as the three-part documentary series titled *Atheism: A Brief History of Disbelief*; BBC 2004) from time to time.

## 5. Summary execution

The practical implications from the above may be stated as follows. Atheism, also in its public expressions usually formulated under the terminologies of secularism, *laïcité* or separation between church and state, is not non-religious (or a-religious). Such atheism is as religious an orientation as any other faith orientation against which atheism may position itself. In law, public policy, economics and other spheres of life, therefore, the idea of being “religion-free” (in any of its terminologies) is to be regarded as nonsensical – analogous to speaking accent-free and equally as misleading as “sugar-free” sweeteners that then turn out not to be healthier alternatives. The nomenclature of these terminologies parallels the branding of commercial products meant subtly to misrepresent the product’s nature, albeit within the limits permitted by applicable regulations. Such branding does not reflect reality; rather, it craftily deflects attention and re-presents reality.

The conceptual move by modernity, in which it has conceived the possibility of living fully unattached to religion, is phenomenologically as false as the similar assertions about its parallel ideas/ideals on objectivity in journalism or in the pursuit of science. These ideas were articulated and held with honourable motives, but they could not be upheld, either in practice or in logic. The self-understanding of these confessions was mistaken and misguided, even if with noble intent. In law, public policy, economics and other spheres of life, therefore, the now-usual alternative to

a religion or to religions simply cannot be stated other than as a confession of, for instance, affirming atheism in public policy. This public atheism would then become the religious orientation of a society – phenomenologically speaking fully viable and of course as acceptable as any other, but no less confessionally loaded than that of any other religion. The underlying idea of privileging public atheism, such as by means of law, must be altered in terminology and argumentation so as to reflect the acknowledgement that this particular religious orientation is preferred.

Clearly, in just societies, all religious orientations found in that society would be reflected in such terminology and argumentation. How to do this is a practical exploration for a future article. However, the post-secular conceptual placement of atheism would then be expressed as a more realist, and hence more honest, alternative to that claimed by the secular conceptual placement of atheism.

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