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FROM DIAGORAS TO DAWKINS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF ATHEISM, THE CAUSES OF UNBELIEF, ANTI-RELIGIOUS HOSTILITY, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF RETURN

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Abstract
Atheism is frequently treated as a modern phenomenon, yet unbelief has identifiable historical roots reaching back to classical antiquity and has acquired distinct intellectual, psychological, and social forms across successive epochs. This article presents an analytical review of the history of atheism and of renowned unbelievers, organised around three research questions: how individuals become atheists and what causes unbelief; why some atheists express hostility toward God and religion; and whether atheists are disposed to return to religion when confronted with putative evidence of divine reality. Drawing on a thematic synthesis of historical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical scholarship, the review shows that the pathways into unbelief are plural rather than singular, encompassing analytic cognitive style, intellectual doubt and enquiry, moral criticism of religious institutions, biographical and developmental factors, and broad sociocultural secularisation. It further demonstrates that the premise of a generalised atheist hostility toward religion is only partially supported: survey and interview evidence indicates that unbelief does not entail hostility, while a smaller, self-identified anti-theist or anti-religious constituency does exhibit strongly negative and unambivalent attitudes. The review finds that conversion out of atheism occurs and is documented in qualitative research, but that it is a minority pathway shaped jointly by experiential, intellectual, and communal factors, and that the "clue of divine reality" framing maps onto unresolved philosophical debates about religious experience and divine hiddenness. A substantive research gap is identified: the field lacks conceptually precise, cross-culturally robust, and longitudinal studies, and non-Western and Muslim-majority contexts remain markedly under-researched. The article concludes by specifying the conceptual, methodological, and normative limitations of the existing literature and by proposing directions for future research.
Keywords: *atheism; unbelief; deconversion; anti-theism; secularisation; divine hiddenness; leaving religion*

1. Introduction

The name Diagoras of Melos has long served as the emblem of Western unbelief: the classical figure conventionally taken as the earliest named atheist and the conventional starting point for any narrative that treats disbelief as a continuous historical phenomenon rather than an aberration of modernity. That narrative has

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acquired an unusually rich scholarly foundation in recent decades. Atheism, on the accumulating evidence, is not a modern invention of the Enlightenment, science, and modern scepticism, and the scholarship is now convincing enough to suggest the central place of unbelief as a narrative possibility in ancient myth and as a building block of the human condition from the very birth of European organised religions; taken together with evidence from the medieval period, it becomes possible to posit unbelief as a continuous and influential presence in both intellectual and popular culture throughout the recorded history of European civilisation (Brown, 2017). The rhetoric of sceptical voices, heard faintly through the mediating minds of clerics and the faithful from Plato and the ancients, and from the eleventh to the seventeenth centuries, bears remarkable similarities to the voices of today (Brown, 2017). A related argument holds that atheism has its origins in ancient Greece and that, although there have always been people who did not believe in God, atheism did not emerge as an overt and avowed belief system until late in the Enlightenment; since the Enlightenment almost all atheists have advocated state secularism, and yet suspicion and even fear of atheists remains widespread (Baggini, 2021).

That continuity sits uneasily alongside the way atheism has usually been studied. Aside from a few key philosophers, controversialists, and scientists, the systematic study of atheists as a major demographic entity is not to be found within the narrative of the declining social significance of religion (Brown, 2017). By contrast, highly religious people feature a great deal in secularisation history, serving to exemplify both the religiously enchanted world of medieval Europe that has been lost and the modern religious resistance to secularity; but those who have lived their lives as if there is no god make a negligible appearance in the social history of religion and its decline in the West, and disregard of, disrespect for, and denial of atheism dominate by turns (Brown, 2017). Part of the explanation is definitional: where atheism is narrowly defined as self-identification with that particular term, it has often amounted to less than two or three per cent of people in the West, and the narrow definition forestalls wider consideration of the phenomenon (Brown, 2017). The consequence is a curious asymmetry in which the decline of belief has been documented far more thoroughly than the lived reality of non-belief. There is thus a need to assert the necessity of atheism to the historical narrative, not merely of secularisation but of religiosity too, and to get beyond thinking of atheism as solely concerning Nietzsche and the new atheists in philosophical and controversialist modes, so as to consider the subjectivities of atheists and historians alike, just as oral historians are now expected to be reflexive (Brown, 2017).

The present moment is unusually favourable to a corrective. The 2010s and 2020s have been a highly productive period for the historiography of atheism, secularism, humanism, and freethought, a period crowned by the new Cambridge History of Atheism published in late 2021. That standard work, edited by Michael Ruse and Stephen Bullivant, contains sixty chapters over some 1,200 pages in two volumes; while adopting a historical perspective stretching from antiquity to the present, it includes scholars from various disciplines and offers both thematic and geographical overviews as well as treatments of contemporary topics such as transhumanism and the internet. The wave of "New Atheism" — coined to describe a new wave of writers, scientists, and philosophers propagating atheism, whose most famous exponents were

Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett — was plausibly instrumental in bringing forth this more profound historical scholarship. Recent monographs have pushed in complementary directions. Alec Ryrie's Unbelievers argues that doubt and unbelief existed before there were elaborated philosophical arguments and systematic ideas concerning atheism, ending its story in the late seventeenth century, when unbelief "came out into the open and claimed philosophical respectability for itself"; Charles Devellennes's Positive Atheism pinpoints the birth of more systematic positive framings of atheism at about the same time and treats it as the natural starting point for writing the history of the topic.

This historiographical renewal has also generated cautions. Research on the history of atheism has often lent itself to partisan narratives, and Wootton's survey of new histories of atheism notes how attacks on traditional histories of rationalism mounted by influential authors such as Lucien Febvre and P. O. Kristeller inhibited the study of irreligion, and how the expression of irreligious views was proscribed; on the question of periodisation, the growth of explicit formulations of irreligion is treated as a by-product of shifts in European sensibility in the period from 1680 to 1715 (Wootton, 1992). A related caution is conceptual: terms such as atheism, secularism, humanism, freethought, unbelief, nonbelief, disbelief, doubt, and irreligion are not all synonymous, yet they are sufficiently related to constitute a single historical phenomenon to be studied, and scholars frequently use them more or less interchangeably (Brown, 2017). Historians should not classify atheism as a religion's modern spinoff or sect: medieval scholastics read about atheism from the ancient Greeks, atheists are visible during the Renaissance, and empirical research already points towards immense qualitative and quantitative variance in the beliefs, values, motivations, and psychological characteristics of individual nonbelievers, who may be more varied than all those who do believe in a deity (L. et al., 2017).

The stakes of such a review are not confined to the academy. A growing number of people declare openly that the God hypothesis is redundant and that humankind can develop effective ethics and create a common humanity without recourse to religion — a clear legacy of rationalism and a sentiment typical of the modernist mind (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). In the context of rising absolute numbers and proportions of religiosity taken globally, atheists have increasingly become organised and confrontational, seeking to combat what they see as a deliberate attack by fundamentalist or neo-conservative religious groups on the liberal, open society in general and on science in particular; at the forefront of this surge stand personalities such as Richard Dawkins, labelled, with a jab of sarcasm, as a man with "evangelical fervor" for his zeal to convert the masses to atheism, and some 85% of US National Academy of Science members do not believe in a personal God (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Demographic projections compound the significance of the question. At a global level, the Pew Research Center predicts that during the period 2010–2050 the population of the religiously "unaffiliated" will grow by more than sixty million, with much of this growth coming from Christians converting out of religion and into a position of non-religion (Pulcini, 2020). Yet the authors of that projection argue that although the religiously unaffiliated population will increase in size and in its share of the population in Europe and North America, its proportion of the global population will decline because of different population growth rates in different regions of the

world (Pulcini, 2020). Within developed countries, by contrast, the percentage of people who are atheists and/or nonreligious is increasing and projected to continue increasing (Pulcini, 2020). The phenomenon is thus simultaneously expanding, redistributing, and conceptually contested.

This article responds to that situation with a critical review organised around three questions: how individuals become atheists and what causes unbelief; why some atheists express hostility toward God and religion; and whether atheists are disposed to return to religion upon encountering putative evidence or experience of divine reality. The review proceeds in nine sections. Section 2 surveys the literature across six thematic domains — conceptualisation, historical development, explanatory accounts, anti-theism and hostility, return and divine hiddenness, and gaps — before Section 3 states the research problem. Sections 4 and 5 set out the research questions and objectives, Section 6 describes the review design, Section 7 presents the synthesis findings by research question, Section 8 discusses implications and limitations, and Section 9 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising atheism, unbelief, and non-religion

The literature is marked by persistent definitional disagreement, and that disagreement is not merely semantic. Many dictionaries use a stricter, positive atheist definition — the complete certainty that a god does not exist — and Madalyn Murray O'Hair would often define atheism in this way, stressing that an atheist must completely reject the possibility of any deity (Pulcini, 2020). Yet empirical research on those who have left religion reveals considerable variability. Survey participants identified themselves as holding one of four epistemological stances about the existence of a deity: positive atheists, hard agnostics, soft agnostics, and apathetic atheists; positive atheists are completely certain of the non-existence of any deity, and they were the single most numerous epistemological group, comprising forty-four per cent of all valid survey responses (Pulcini, 2020). Those who were not positive atheists devoted considerable interview time to explaining their stances and justifying their application of the "atheist" label, apparently aware that their claims would be contested by some of their peers (Pulcini, 2020). One interviewee, Regina, reasoned that since the non-existence of anything is unprovable, atheism entails a degree of faith whereas agnosticism does not; she defined atheism as a religion, whereas agnosticism is a stance about how knowable god or gods are (Pulcini, 2020). Several other participants mentioned being personally unsure to some degree, and multiple respondents quantified their certainty of a god's non-existence at "99-point-some-amount-of-nines-repeating percent", essentially rounding up to consider themselves atheists; the epistemologically apathetic, by contrast, were unconcerned with whether or not a deity exists (Pulcini, 2020).

Alongside these emic distinctions, the literature has produced formal typologies and a methodological turn. There have been repeated attempts to categorise unbelievers through empirically based typologies, and one turning point stands out: the attempt to understand and measure unbelief as a positive phenomenon, rather than simply as the absence or low level of belief (Pulcini, 2020). Researchers have likewise worked to define the leavers, their positions as leavers, and their processes of leaving, proposing two specific typologies: leaver processes, which introduce the cultural positions of

leavers as defined by their relation to religion in general and religion in particular, and leaver positions, which introduce the main causes that influence the process and how a person copes with it (Pulcini, 2020). To categorise exit types, Streib and his research group used Troeltsch's and Bourdieu's categories to define clear positions between which people move, since such definitions are important for defining the nature and event of an exit (Pulcini, 2020).

Two further conceptual moves are important. The first is the recognition that being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility towards a religious group. One framework divides the field into a four-by-four set of category locations, differentiating how a person relates to religion in general (member of another religious group, religious individual, agnostic, atheist) and to their own former religion in particular (accepting, understanding, critical, rejecting), and it states explicitly that one can be an "understanding atheist", as seen in the attitude of Suvi, a young educated woman, towards her former congregation (Pulcini, 2020). The second is the insistence that atheism is a spectrum rather than a type. Brown offers a series of principles: being an atheist means belonging within often multi-faith Western cultures to a spectrum — of natures of the self, of engagement in belief–non-belief issues, and of atheistical beliefs — a spectrum that is extensive, highly variegated, culturally influenced, and gendered, so that the atheist and the religionist have been hewn from the same stone but come out as different shapes; what is generally shared by those on this spectrum is living life as if there is no god (Brown, 2017). Atheism is not purely about belief but may be strongly determined by materiality, life priorities, or education; the atheist spectrum abuts, and in culturally defined ways overlaps, the religious spectrum, encapsulating many positions between interest and indifference and possibly even including the churchgoer; the vast bulk of atheists in all societies tend to lack activities associated with their position, which is not a sign of weakness but intrinsic to the condition; and atheists may have distinctive moral and world outlooks, some of which apply across cultures and eras and some of which do not, but which nonetheless afford the scholar ways of identifying them in context (Brown, 2017). This last principle carries methodological consequences, since distinctive moral and world outlooks supply the researcher with means of identifying atheists in their historical and social settings rather than relying on self-labelling alone.

2.2 The historical development of unbelief

Classical antiquity. The study of unbelief in antiquity confronts severe source problems. The sources are scant, which is why scholarship concentrates on Athens in the fifth century BCE as the period with relatively abundant material; from that era there are reports of persons later considered atheists, yet there is not a single example of a person whom the majority of scholars have held to be an atheist (Eller, 2024). The verdict of the relevant overview in The Oxford Handbook of Atheism is that atheism was a "recognizable if rare stance", a rarity explicable by how risky it would be to question the religious cult openly (Eller, 2024). Classical Athens, on this reading, was characterised by much greater diversity of religious view than was previously recognised, a diversity that makes room for the occurrence of atheism as well as for deep personal devotion, though Euripides and persons such as Prodicus were members of an intellectual élite, and in order to discard religion one had to be willing to take risks (Eller, 2024).

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Euripides is the central case. He was probably born in the latter half of the 480s BCE and died at approximately 406 BCE, spending most of his life in Athens as a renowned composer of tragedies; in some of Aristophanes' comedies he is closely associated with Socrates, and both are described as crazy persons who by their lofty thoughts put the traditional gods into question, a depiction that accords with Plato's portrait in the tenth book of the Laws of a city in which traditional religion was questioned and the existence of gods was sometimes put in doubt (Eller, 2024). Interpretations diverge sharply: one tradition reads Euripides as a thinker who challenged the traditional religion of Archaic and Classical Greece, criticising even the divine figures and showing radical scepticism about the gods, their morals, and even their very existence, while an opposing tradition treats such readings as products of the modern scholar who has problems understanding ancient times (Eller, 2024). Attribution problems compound the difficulty: a fragment speculating on the emergence of religion, reported by Sextus Empiricus in the third century CE, has often been attributed to Critias, Plato's uncle, at least six centuries earlier than the Sextus report, while other sources claim Euripides as author; the split in the evidence indicates that authorship is simply unknown and a matter of conjecture (Eller, 2024). More generally, reports of people who criticised the public cult or even gave up religiosity altogether are uncertain and often date from many centuries after the events they describe, so that interpretation depends heavily on the analyst's expectations regarding ancient religiosity and, in many cases, on how one relates to the discourse of classical Athens as the imagined cradle of the Enlightenment (Eller, 2024). Tim Whitmarsh's study of atheism in ancient Greece and Rome shows not only the vigour of repudiation of deities but the inherent nature of unbelief as an element in intellectual and political culture (Brown, 2017).

Disenchantment and the modern self. Charles Taylor's account describes secularisation between 1500 and 2000 as disenchantment, in which the European self changed from being conceived as "porous" to the invasion of spirits and demons, to being "buffered" — a protected individual immune to possession. In this "fractured culture of the nova", Taylor posits that unbelief became wholly possible and has gradually grown down to the present to be common and profound (Brown, 2017). Taylor spends considerable time exploring the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century developments in society, thought, and imagination that he sees as facilitating the secularisation process, driving the Western world through the secularisation of spaces and of ideas respectively, and identifying a generalised culture of "authenticity", or expressive individualism, in which people are encouraged to find their own way, a process reaching its apotheosis only since the Second World War with the "buffered self" (Brown, 2017). Taylor registers both positives and negatives in this world, including "a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty" (Brown, 2017). Critically, however, his is described as an elite process with no mention of working-class atheism, and Taylor himself becomes concerned lest his conceptualisation of secularising is overly dependent on ideas (Brown, 2017). Critics go further: Jon Butler opines that each of Taylor's secularities is "problematic and probably wrong", and Bruce Robbins observes that A Secular Age presents secularism as a disguised form of Christianity, hiding theological content behind apparently secular concepts (Brown, 2017).

The Enlightenment. The systematic intellectual history of unbelief begins where Ryrie's narrative ends. Devellennes's interest is directed to the moment when atheism becomes positive — that is, in two different formulations: it "seeks to set philosophical bases for a life without god", or it involves "bringing together a coherent worldview without gods" (Brown, 2017). On this basis he examines four more or less well-known figures — Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Jean Meslier (1664–1729), Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789), and Denis Diderot (1713–1784) — with the qualification that neither Bayle nor Diderot were atheists in a simple sense; when it comes to d'Holbach and Meslier, a Catholic priest who denied God and is sometimes called the first self-avowed atheist in history, things are different, and they were more clearly atheists (Brown, 2017). What matters is not exactly how they explicitly identified themselves, nor what they personally believed about the existence of God, but that they all framed atheism as a positive system of thought: Bayle himself was a religious believer, yet he made the case for the existence of virtuous atheism — for the possibility that an atheist society could be just as virtuous as any other (Brown, 2017). In Diderot, Devellennes finds an inclination he terms "metatheism", a position that transcends a sharp division of belief and non-belief and that he claims also goes beyond positive atheism (Brown, 2017). The eighteenth century was, however, more complex than any simple division between moderates and radicals can capture: Devellennes points out that eighteenth-century France was more complex compared with Israel's division into moderates and radicals, and that when radicalism can be seen in at least four different ways and is used to show how the four thinkers were "radical" in different ways, it loses some of its power as an analytical concept (Brown, 2017).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historiography of atheism and freethought has focused on the nineteenth century, which is not surprising given the golden age of freethought and how many new strands of materialist and naturalist thinking came into existence at that time (Brown, 2017). The twentieth century introduced a different configuration entirely. In the Soviet Union, the goal was clear: an atheist society where traditional religion — perceived as an enemy to communism — was to disappear, although the intensity and methods of this project varied greatly throughout the some eighty years that the Soviet Union existed (Zrinščak, 2004). Non-believing cosmonauts became heroes promoting the proud scientific and technological advances of the atheist state, and the belief in, and connection of, atheism to science represented a backbone of Soviet atheism (Zrinščak, 2004). One development was the shift from negative to positive atheism: earlier persecutions of Christians, destruction of churches, and rational debunking of superstitious beliefs in the name of science proved insufficient, since people still believed not only in Lenin and Khrushchev but also in God, and in the homes of ordinary people the party programme was placed next to prayer books; during the post-war era, therefore, there were conscious efforts from the state to replace religion by trying to fulfil spiritual needs, thus taking control over the Soviet soul (Zrinščak, 2004). Intellectuals have debated how to characterise this history: one historian writes that "Stalin, Mao and Pol Pot were in a sense religious", thereby exempting communist dictators from the story of good atheism, while a philosopher claims that Bolshevism served as a channel for the "millenarian myths of apocalyptic Christianity" — readings that may

be valid but risk remaining crude portrayals of complex political experiences (Zrinščak, 2004).

The consequences of state-run atheism were uneven. In the twentieth century, state-run atheism in Eastern Europe led to a massive decline in Christianity in those countries, which poses challenges for the study of leaving religion, since it falls short of voluntary leaving but cannot simply be dismissed as state-forced apostasy; organised secularisation was met with a counter-reaction after the fall of the Soviet Union, as many returned to the Orthodox Church or other religions (Ładykowska et al., 2024). The politics of identity and the objectification of religion led to the ethnicisation of religion rather than national apostasy: in Russia, the Orthodox Church was a way to return to the assumed traditional Russian culture, and a similar reaction was seen in Albania, which transformed from an atheist society to a society where 88 percent said they believed in God in 2011 (Ładykowska et al., 2024). State-run atheism nonetheless had a more long-lasting effect in some countries and regions, such as former Czechoslovakia and East Germany: in 2010, while only 15% of West Germans did not belong to a religious community, the figure among East Germans was 68% (Ładykowska et al., 2024). Communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe shared some features, with atheism as the cornerstone of the political order, but they varied in many aspects; both political pressure and social change brought about not only the rise of secularism but also the rise of religiosity, particularly in the 1980s, and the course of change and the impact of atheism on generations were quite different in each country (Zrinščak, 2004). Communist state atheism sought to make religion disappear from society at least in its public expressions, most strongly enforced in the Soviet Union, where churches were closed down and monasteries' properties nationalised, while in satellite countries a variety of legislative measures, repressive policies, and other forms of social engineering were put to the service of the control of religion (Ładykowska et al., 2024). The consequences of five decades or more of state-enforced atheism in terms of secularisation remain debated: surveys conducted in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union reported that 37% of the population in Russia, 39% in Ukraine, and 59% in Bulgaria described themselves as Orthodox Christians (Gauthier, 2021).

Contemporary atheism and New Atheism. The most recent phase is associated with the New Atheism of the early twenty-first century, whose most famous exponents were Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett. The intellectual style of the movement is worth specifying. Dawkins makes clear that he is attacking only the belief in "supernatural gods" and its associate, namely conventional "supernatural religion", which means he employs what is known as a substantive definition of religion — focusing on content — rather than a functional definition focusing on function, on what religion does (Krüger, 2018). By "God" Dawkins means the conventional notion of a very anthropomorphic God: a petty, interventionist, jealous person; "religion" is the uncritical belief in such beings or such a person, and his atheism is the rejection of that theism and religion as delusional, and is not aimed at views such as deism and pantheism (Krüger, 2018). Proceeding from his scientific basis and bias, Dawkins concludes that God "almost certainly does not exist" (Krüger, 2018). The strength of this narrow, substantive definition of religion is that he can be very clear and firm; the price he pays for not using a broad, functional definition — for instance, religion as

the search for comprehensive meaning — is that he overlooks the generic character of "religion" (Krüger, 2018). A philosophical critic charges that Dawkins does not erect sufficient safeguards against the temptation for science to assume quasi-religious, even messianic, overtones, and that the debate should not be reduced to the format of a duel between positivistic religion and positivistic science, both glaring at each other (Krüger, 2018). The same critic nonetheless commends Dawkins for his insistence on the civic rights of religion and the right to free speech, noting that this is more than religion of the kind he chastises has customarily granted the theories of modern science over the last century and a half (Krüger, 2018). Overall, however, his work is judged a mix of biological science, inadequate social, philosophical, and historical analysis, and a measure of what resembles resentment, resting on a rather narrow historical basis that sets up the ideas of "God" and "religion" as easy targets (Krüger, 2018). The verdict is not that he goes too far but that he does not go far and wide enough: in the larger historical frame of reflection on ultimacy, such theism had already been disposed of in pre-Christian Greece, India, and China, and in the millennia since, and ideas of ultimacy change with the times (Krüger, 2018).

2.3 Explanatory accounts of unbelief

Cognitive accounts. The most influential recent framework holds that one becomes an unbeliever by violating one of the various cognitive mechanisms that make us "born believers": one would need to violate intuitive mental representations of supernatural agents and the motivation to seek them out as sources of meaning, comfort, and control; to resist or break away from cultural reinforcement for the existence of those agents; and to engage in analytical processing instead of accepting intuitions about them (Pulcini, 2020). Experimental work has supported a causal role for analytic processing: individual differences in the tendency to analytically override initially flawed intuitions in reasoning were associated with increased religious disbelief, and four additional experiments provided evidence of causation, as subtle manipulations known to trigger analytic processing also encouraged religious disbelief; combined, these studies indicate that analytic processing is one factor, presumably among several, that promotes religious disbelief (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012). More recent work separates the effects: the well-documented relationship between increased analytic thinking and decreased religious belief is actually two separable effects, since there is a general association between analytic thinking and religious disbelief irrespective of belief change, such that even atheists who have always been atheists score higher on cognitive reflection tests than theists (Stagnaro & Pennycook, 2024). A large-scale test across more than 70,000 people from five of six continental regions detected signs of analytic atheism above and beyond confounds, and also discovered "analytic apostasy": the better a person performed on reflection tests, the greater their odds of losing their religion since childhood, even when controlling for confounds — and analytic apostasy even seemed to explain analytic atheism, since analytic atheism was undetected after excluding apostates; religious conversion, by contrast, was rare and unrelated to reflection, suggesting that reflection's relationships to conversion and deconversion are asymmetric, and the detected relationships were usually small, indicating that reflective thinking is a reliable albeit marginal predictor of apostasy (Byrd et al., 2025).

Yet the pathway is contested on evidential grounds. A set of three experiments conducted as a field study on the pilgrimage route to Santiago and in the laboratory using brain stimulation failed to find any significant association between intuitive or analytical processing, or cognitive inhibition, and supernatural belief (Pulcini, 2020). Some authors argue that the sociological and anthropological data in support of a social-educational origin and modulation of belief are more robust than the available cognitive evidence for the naturalness of religion, and that the possibility that some individuals would have to override cognitive dispositions to become unbelievers is deeply implausible from an evolutionary perspective, since this would require very considerable effort with no obvious gains (Pulcini, 2020). From an early age we tend to build relationships with non-physical agents, such as fictional characters, imaginary friends, and religious entities like gods and spirits, and supernatural agents often have a social role and a place in the upbringing of children; within secular families, however, children are less likely to be exposed to metaphysical agents (Pulcini, 2020). It is close to a truism that individuals growing up within secular families have never lost a religion — they were simply never socialised into it (Pulcini, 2020). It also bears noting that most deconverts do not necessarily reject their belief in god(s) and thus do not become unbelievers (Pulcini, 2020).

Psychodynamic and reductive accounts. The early psychology of religion and its successors proposed a range of explanations for unbelief, and human religious behaviour has been characterised as a projection-game of the imagination in which the referents of our images of God are our idealised, best sense of self and society — an understanding embraced by professionals in education, the arts and science, therapy, and even church ministry (Pulcini, 2020). The psychology of religion has also generated proposals ranging from the absence of a father figure to a more prominent analytical style of processing information, while the study of unbelievers has been marked by the discipline's internal tensions (Pulcini, 2020).

Processual and social-emotional accounts. Various social and emotional factors may cause an individual to leave religion: a sudden rejection of God is more likely to be led by emotional factors, whereas a more gradual deconversion may be rooted in intellectual reasons (Pulcini, 2020). Gradual deconversion in the USA has been positively associated with a higher level of education, although the inverse has been reported in different cultural contexts (Pulcini, 2020). Anger towards God is one emotional reason for leaving religion that theologians have long considered and social psychologists have recently examined (Pulcini, 2020). More broadly, leaving religion generally involves a combination of four social and emotional domains: intellectual doubt or denial about the truth of a belief system; moral criticism, or rejection of an entire way of life of a religious group; emotional suffering, including grief, guilt, loneliness, and despair; and disaffiliation from the community (Pulcini, 2020). There are also indications that personality may play a role in deconversion, and in US and German samples deconverts were found to have lower levels of religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism as well as higher levels of openness to experience when compared with their religious peers (Pulcini, 2020). In countries dominated by religious traditions, leaving religion carries personal consequences: US deconverts have reported experiencing negative social, existential, and career consequences while justifying their resolution in moving away from what they

perceive as a "rigid and oppressive way of life", and although they report prejudice and discrimination, they also report greater well-being after converting to unbelief (Pulcini, 2020).

Narrative research has refined the processual picture. Ambitious and thorough studies of deconversion narratives within the positivist approach, carried out by Heinz Streib and colleagues, found that the most common trajectory is a gradual disaffiliation from a faith tradition, and their analysis identified four general types of deconversion story (Pulcini, 2020). The first is "Pursuit of Autonomy," meaning separation from a religious tradition in which the subject was raised and which the subject adopted in a generally unquestioning way (Pulcini, 2020). The second is "Debarred from Paradise," referring to leaving a religious tradition to which the subject had previously made a strong emotional commitment — the central contrast with the first theme being whether one is leaving a religion one accepted as a matter of course or one embraced through strong emotional commitment, either through growing up in the religion or converting to it (Pulcini, 2020). The third, "Finding a New Frame of Reference," embraces stories of loss of faith followed by conversion to a tradition the subject finds more engaging, and these narratives could equally well be labelled conversion stories (Pulcini, 2020). Finally, "Life-Long Quests—Late Revisions" entails what is often called a "seeker" orientation, which may be realised as commitment to and subsequent deconversion from multiple religious traditions (Pulcini, 2020). A parallel strand of work attends closely to language: Gooren combines the quest to find underlying social and psychological factors that account for conversion and deconversion with a discursive approach that seeks to illuminate how believers use narratives to fashion a context of meaning (Pulcini, 2020). Barbour illustrates another approach more closely attentive to the language of the narrative in order to illuminate processes of meaning-creation, and one might imagine that the conventions whereby the deconversion narrative takes shape are frills that can be dispensed with in studying the deconversion itself — but Barbour would ask, as the analyst should, where this deconversion itself is, where in the universe it resides (Pulcini, 2020).

Structural and sociocultural accounts. Secularisation theory provides the broadest frame. Proponents of this view from the 1960s were Brian Wilson, Peter Berger, and Karel Dobbelaere; modern proponents such as Steve Bruce have refined and defended the view, well aware of the different challenges it has faced (Pulcini, 2020). From the 1980s, however, the position was questioned by scholars such as Rodney Stark, William Sims Bainbridge, and Roger Finke, who argued that the old churches of Western Europe have lost their importance without religion being about to disappear, since it is instead undergoing transformation and revitalisation; nowadays many sociologists of religion take up intermediate positions and avoid predicting the future of religiosity (Pulcini, 2020). The debate's intellectual roots run deep: many of the founders of different theoretical perspectives in the sociology of religion embraced an evolutionistic worldview according to which religion would be replaced by science and ethics, including Auguste Comte (1798–1857), Karl Marx (1818–1883), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), and Max Weber (1864–1920) (Pulcini, 2020). Empirically, the pattern is one of uneven decline: secularisation is believed to have caused Switzerland's Christian community to shrink from ninety-five per cent of the

population in 1970 to seventy-five per cent in 2000, and it is projected to fall to forty-two to sixty-three per cent by 2050, while Austria's Catholic community is predicted to shrink from seventy-five per cent of the population in 2001 to less than half by 2050 (Pulcini, 2020). Yet the picture is regionally uneven: in 1910 a third of the world's population were Christians (34.8%), and in 2015 nearly a third (31.2%), with the share expected to remain largely unchanged until 2060 (31.8%); however, whereas in 1910 two-thirds (66%) of the world's Christians were European, in 2015 the share was only a quarter (24%) and is expected to decline to 14% by 2060, while the proportion of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa is growing from 9% in 1910 to 26% in 2015 and expected to rise to 42% in 2060 — though the major drivers behind this development are age distribution and fertility, not church leaving per se (Pulcini, 2020). Christian churches are also the group expected to experience most switching out worldwide: during the five-year period between 2015 and 2020 a total of 13 million people are expected to leave Christianity, most of them ending up religiously unaffiliated, particularly in Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand (Pulcini, 2020). Critical scholarship has more recently sought to interrogate the extent to which secularisation actually brought about a departure from religion, and whether the process has now given way to an era of "post-secularisation" or to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary religiosity that finds meaning in alternative forms of belief and spirituality (Pulcini, 2020).

Case-based sociology sharpens the structural account. Phil Zuckerman's examination of the "godless" societies of Sweden and Denmark, based on interviews with nearly 150 Swedes and Danes, gives three theoretical answers for why those countries are so irreligious: "a lazy church monopoly, secure societies, and working women" — without competition on a religious market, social and economic deprivation, and someone at home to care for the children's religious upbringing and the family's religiosity, the population becomes more irreligious than before (Pulcini, 2020). His later work finds that in the United States, compared with Scandinavia, "apostasy is more controversial, more deviant, and thus personally more intense and dramatic", because non-religion is the norm in Denmark and Sweden while the opposite is true in the US (Pulcini, 2020). A study of the changing religious landscape in Switzerland from the 1960s to the present argues that increased individualisation has led to a "me-society" with a "secular drift" — a tendency to leave institutionalised religion — and, in contrast to Zuckerman's emphasis on religious monopoly, claims that religious–secular competition, not monopoly, fuels the drift (Pulcini, 2020). Zuckerman's portrait of Denmark is also instructive about the limits of the belief–belonging binary: the majority of Danes have relinquished most of their religious beliefs while still feeling attached to the National Lutheran Church, paying the church tax and availing themselves of the Church's rites of baptism, confirmation, wedding, and burial, with some continuing to attend services regularly — living, in practice, in accordance with a non-supranatural, non-creedal humanism informed by Protestant legacy (Pulcini, 2020). Denmark scores well on indicators of general happiness, social security, high life expectancy, and gender equality, with concomitantly low levels of crime, racial hate, and political corruption (Pulcini, 2020).

Biological and neuroscientific accounts. Neuroscience studies suggest that there might be biological factors associated with unbelief, and it has been argued that the

dopamine system and the frontal lobes play important roles in the generation of religious belief (Pulcini, 2020). Concerning the role of dopamine in the increase of unbelief, it has been suggested that religious practices may decrease with Parkinson's onset, but qualitative data show that religion and spirituality are still regarded as important by these patients (Pulcini, 2020). In addition to conflicting findings, there are shortcomings in the literature in relation to how religiosity is defined and measured (Pulcini, 2020). Some psychologists have argued that leaving religion is counterintuitive or a sub-optimal strategy, since subjective well-being is apparently higher among religious people, yet recent research has found that well-being is associated with certainty of belief, so that people with a higher certainty in either their religious beliefs or their unbelief report higher levels of well-being (Pulcini, 2020). Religious beliefs are associated with satisfaction in life, happiness, and coping with the death of a loved one and difficult life events, but these effects largely disappear when controlling for a variety of life circumstances, particularly societal factors that regulate the satisfaction of basic needs such as food, health, and housing; in more affluent societies, levels of subjective well-being are similar among believers and unbelievers (Pulcini, 2020). Subjective well-being is further boosted in unbelievers when the level of social engagement and embeddedness is high, similarly to what has been found for religious believers with high levels of communal involvement, and experimental evidence indicates that unbelievers might cling to belief systems based on the intrinsic value of science or ideas of humanity's moral progress (Pulcini, 2020).

2.4 Anti-theism, hostility, and attitudes toward religion

The literature resists the equation of atheism with hostility. As noted above, the four-by-four categorisation of subjective location explicitly allows for an understanding atheist, and states plainly that being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility towards a religious group (Pulcini, 2020). Brown's principles reinforce the point from the historical side: atheism may be strongly determined by materiality, life priorities, or education rather than by belief; the atheist spectrum abuts, and in culturally defined ways overlaps, the religious spectrum, encapsulating many positions between interest and indifference and possibly even including the churchgoer; and atheists may have distinctive moral and world outlooks, some of which apply across cultures and eras and some of which do not (Brown, 2017).

Even the question of dogmatism yields a qualified answer. One study of Chicagoland atheists who had exited religion, based on 201 surveys and fifty semi-structured interviews, found that those raised with more negative views of other religious groups maintain the strict dichotomy between their own beliefs and others even after overhauling their belief system upon exit, providing evidence that stances learned in religion can result in a "hangover effect", with a continuation of the sharp differentiation between one's new, atheistic beliefs and competing options (Pulcini, 2020). Yet childhood religiosity behaves opposite to initial expectations in the same study: controlling for childhood religious ethnocentrism isolates its unique contribution, and when comparing two individuals who received identical messages concerning their faith's acceptance of outside groups, the individual with a more religious upbringing is expected to be less dogmatic in the present day, since being so personally invested in a religion only to eventually exit can sensitise one to the tentative nature of present beliefs (Pulcini, 2020). Kelsey serves as a perfect example:

she ranked above average in childhood religiosity, yet below average in childhood religious ethnocentrism, and believing so fervently in her pre-teens and early teens, only to eventually leave, made it conceivable that her beliefs may again change (Pulcini, 2020). The quantitative measures support a picture of a population with moderate rather than extreme dogmatism: on a forty-point dogmatism measure that does not specifically reference religion, the sample mean was 17.0 with a standard deviation of 5.8; childhood religiosity emphasis ranged from zero to forty-eight with a mean of 25.1 and standard deviation of 13.0; and childhood religious ethnocentrism ranged from zero to twenty-four with a mean of 11.6 and standard deviation of 6.7 (Pulcini, 2020). The hypothesis of a weak-to-moderate positive correlation between religious emphasis during upbringing and present-day dogmatism, predicted at r = +.3, was thus tested against a more nuanced empirical picture (Pulcini, 2020).

A body of social-psychological research supplies the mirror image of the hostility question. Recent polls indicate that atheists are among the least liked people in areas with religious majorities, that is, in most of the world, and six studies converge to indicate the centrality of distrust in anti-atheist prejudice: a description of a criminally untrustworthy individual was seen as comparably representative of atheists and rapists but not representative of Christians, Muslims, Jewish people, feminists, or homosexuals, and belief in God was more strongly associated with implicit distrust of atheists than with implicit dislike of atheists (Gervais et al., 2011). The mechanism is moral distrust: antipathy towards atheists derives specifically from moral distrust, because to many people belief in a watchful, moralising god is seen as a uniquely powerful and perhaps necessary component of morality, and without religious belief atheists are viewed as moral wildcards who cannot be trusted (Gervais, 2013). People in most — but not all — countries view extreme moral violations as representative of atheists (Gervais, 2013).

Where strong hostility does appear, the literature tends to locate it in specific configurations rather than in atheism as such. The Irish case is paradigmatic. An analysis of 2008 European Values Study data from fourteen Western European countries found that the Republic of Ireland had both the strongest anti-religious sentiment and the widest endorsement of religion, so that one can speak both of a growing self-consciously anti-religious minority and of a larger, vaguely "pro-religious" group who retain a Catholic identity while nevertheless rejecting the Church (Pulcini, 2020). A 2011 survey by the conservative Catholic Iona Institute found that almost half (47 percent) of the population had a negative view of the Church, and 25 percent would be unperturbed if it disappeared entirely; this widespread negative view may be motivated by a mixture of distrust and rejection of moral conservatism, and trust in the Church had decreased more quickly in Ireland than in other European Catholic societies since the 1990s (Pulcini, 2020). A survey of rejection factors found that moral conservatism and clerical abuse were the two most emphasised factors in disaffiliation, and the depletion of religious practice appears to have been exacerbated by scandal, with practice declining more swiftly over the "era of scandal" than in preceding decades; at the interpersonal level, family religious pressure became easier to resist, and some devout individuals withdrew in shame from the established mechanisms of public theistic expression (Pulcini, 2020). The Church's moral contamination renders devout Catholicism something that must be

explained, and secularist groups deliberately exploit this dynamic: a key objective for some secularist groups is to drive down habitual Catholic identification among the inertial middle, and a prime mechanism for this is drawing attention to the Church's hypocrisies, which provide potent content for getting "complacent Catholics" to reassess a "contaminated" affiliation (Pulcini, 2020). The 2017 Tuam scandal provided a particularly clear example of such weaponisation: archaeologists employed by a commission of enquiry discovered a "significant amount" of infant remains interred in a decommissioned septic tank at a former home for "unmarried mothers" run by the Bon Secours nuns, prompting a surge in public condemnation and energising online secularist groups in particular, with responses characterised by moral disgust and the entire Church frequently portrayed as contaminated (Pulcini, 2020).

A second locus of intense hostility is ex-Muslim unbelief. It is not unusual to find former ex-Muslims among those who are strong critics of Islam, and former members of so-called religious sects or new religious movements are often recruited by the so-called anti-cult movement (Pulcini, 2020). While an individual could have suffered from and experienced physical or psychological violence when they belonged to a specific religious group, it is not hard to understand that a person could also have good reasons to criticise a former belonging: in order to make a rational explanation for earlier behaviours and belongings it is also necessary to distance oneself from the ex-position, and one way to do so is to publicly frown upon one's former religion (Pulcini, 2020). Text analyses of apostate websites show how the religion left behind is presented as evil, irrational, and anti-modern, and how this corresponds to broader anti-Muslim discourses and ideas of the New Atheist movement (Pulcini, 2020). An ethical issue follows: researchers risk reproducing negative, stereotypical, or even prejudicial images of the religious groups that apostates have left, a risk evident in studies of exit from new religious movements, where the discourse about "brainwashing" and manipulative leaders often emerges in apostasy narratives, and equally true for Islam, where ex-Muslims' witness narratives are often used in anti-Muslim rhetoric to confirm such an image (Pulcini, 2020). One study of converts presents a more complex picture: among interviewees, "Mansur" from Afghanistan, who studied the Bible after arriving in Norway, gave harsh statements about Islam relative to the other converts presented (Pulcini, 2020).

A third locus is organised, confrontational atheism. Atheists have increasingly become organised and confrontational in response to what they perceive as a deliberate attack by fundamentalist or neo-conservative religious groups on the liberal, open society and on science, with Dawkins at the forefront (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Post-secularism has been described not so much as the resurgence of interest in religious matters but rather as the drifting apart of neo-conservative religious communities on the one hand and secular, science-oriented segments of the public on the other, with both communities having lost the ability to see eye to eye and becoming more and more irritable and prone to flex their muscles at each other (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Within that rupture, some scientists actively present science as a replacement for religion: one NASA scientist and head of the imaging team for the Cassini space probe to Saturn said that the beauty of space is much more satisfying than anything religion can offer, and that this "is what our children must be

taught and not myths about angels or seeing grandma in heaven" (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018).

Finally, hostility is not unidirectional, and the literature on nonreligious prejudice complicates the picture. Research investigating prejudice toward Christians and atheists among people who identify as nonreligious (atheist, agnostic, and spiritual-but-not-religious) found that the nonreligious are not generally tolerant, and that differences among these groups in belief superiority, feelings of distrust, and fear of contamination by unpalatable ideas all explained differences in prejudice toward Christians (Cappellen & LaBouff, 2020). Building on the ideological-conflict hypothesis, data from three secularised Western European countries (total N = 1,158) showed that although both believers and nonbelievers disliked moral and religious antiliberals such as antigay activists and fundamentalists, atheists and agnostics showed prejudicial discriminatory attitudes toward antiliberals but also toward mere Christians, and atheists did so also toward Buddhists; prejudice toward antiliberal and mainstream religious targets was predicted uniquely by antireligious critique (Užarević et al., 2019). Atheists are also targets: there is growing evidence that unbelievers are some of the least liked people in areas of the world with religious majorities (Pulcini, 2020), and apostates can put themselves in a dangerous position in many countries outside Europe, North America, and Australia, with individuals who leave Islam more likely to suffer persecutions and threats than individuals who leave many other religious traditions, and several countries dominated by Muslim traditions prone to execute so-called apostates, such as Iran, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia (Pulcini, 2020).

2.5 Return to religion, apostasy, and divine hiddenness

The evidence on return is thin but consistent in direction. Seven interviewees had a brief quest phase, researching and entertaining the possibility of joining multiple different religions; some immediately dove into atheism, while others first dipped their toes into multiple religions, and eventually all respondents reached a level of certainty that no religion is satisfactory and no argument could persuade them of the existence of any deity (Pulcini, 2020). Resistance to persuasion can itself be forceful: recounting acquaintances' futile attempts to persuade her to attend their church, Tracy memorably compared their confidence that praying with them would change her mind to people who say of a fear of dogs that meeting their dog will cure it — "It's just the same thing with god" (Pulcini, 2020). Yet the same research documents variation in certainty. While many interviewees were positive that their beliefs could never be changed by any life event or argument for theism, others' expectations were more tempered, and five interviewees specifically mentioned the potential reversibility of their beliefs; one, Brad, stated that "atheism is just a working assumption for my worldview" (Pulcini, 2020). Kelsey reported a fear that she might return to theism later in life: "since I was raised religious, a fear that maybe I would go back to it. And I really don't want to," reflecting her discomfort at the thought that she spent the first fifteen years of her life believing something she now regards as wrong, and noting that religion "is taught at such a young age" (Pulcini, 2020). The broader finding is that specific, consciously recognised instances of the residual influence of one's childhood religion appear to survive the transition to atheism, even when the specific faith and theism in general are disavowed (Pulcini, 2020). In terms of trajectories into

atheism, roughly twenty-eight percent of interviewees considered themselves atheists immediately upon leaving their original religion, while another nine percent formally joined another religion before they ceased believing in a god or higher power (Pulcini, 2020).

Documented cases of return exist and are analytically instructive. In one case, George had in effect abandoned his children and, on a subsequent visit with his family, was overcome with regret when he recognised this, and shortly thereafter he returned to his father's faith; this is cited as an example of the importance of social factors in the conversion process, since the conversion was precipitated by George's profound feelings of pain upon realising his separation from his children (Pulcini, 2020). But it is equally telling that in converting, George was simultaneously embracing his father's religion and devotion to his family, and it is this alignment with his own personal history that strongly contributes to his conviction that his conversion restored a sense of meaning in his life (Pulcini, 2020). Other cases show return as the resolution of a crisis attributed to the miraculous: Sandy, who had not fully identified as Christian, joined the local church with her children and they were baptised together after her sister and child arrived in Norway — "because we were finally together" — so that the turning point was not the growth of personal faith but the resolution of a crisis attributed to a miracle, and to Sandy the natural consequence was conversion (Pulcini, 2020).

Population-level reversals of secularisation are also documented. Albania moved from an atheist society to a society where 88 percent said they believed in God in 2011, and in Russia the Orthodox Church was a way to return to the assumed traditional Russian culture (Ładykowska et al., 2024); in the twentieth century, state-run atheism in Eastern Europe led to a massive decline in Christianity, and organised secularisation was met with a counter-reaction after the fall of the Soviet Union, as many returned to the Orthodox Church or other religions (Ładykowska et al., 2024). In India, Hindu nationalist organisations such as the RSS and VHP have staged mass "(re)conversions" as part of larger programmes, so-called Ghar Wapsi (homecomings), in which thousands of Christians and Muslims return to Hinduism (Pulcini, 2020). These campaigns are the source of intense controversy and sometimes scandal, as in 2014 when a Ghar Wapsi campaign claimed that it had converted over fifty Muslim families to Hinduism even though a commission later concluded that the Hindu nationalist group had tricked the families with promises of houses and ration cards and that the families remained Muslim (Pulcini, 2020). Underlying the controversies of conversion in India is the tension between religion as a social belonging and the principle of individual choice and freedom, which influenced the Indian constitution and its secular profile, in contrast to Pakistan, which was founded on the idea of religion as the basic criterion of nationhood (Pulcini, 2020). A closely related case is Ambedkar's decision to leave Hinduism, which was not based on a revelation or some kind of transformative experience but proceeded "almost as a scientific project" based on critical comparative analysis, and was grounded in a post-supernaturalist social and functionalist theory of religion in which there was no place for belief in deities and the miraculous; in 1956, shortly before his death, he converted to Buddhism together with several hundred thousand followers, and this Buddhist religion is now lived by over five million people in the Indian state of Maharashtra (Pulcini, 2020). For the

mass-conversion event in Nagpur in October 1956, Ambedkar composed a declaration of faith comprising 22 articles to be recited by the new Buddhists, the first six of which are actually declarations of deconversion, the first four being statements of "I do not believe in" followed by a series of Hindu deities and avatars (Pulcini, 2020). The conceptual point is that for some people religious change does not mean rejecting religion altogether but leaving one religion to embrace another, and studies of "leaving religion" must include these groups; leaving religion, however, is not the same as leaving a religion (Pulcini, 2020).

The philosophical literature on religious experience and divine hiddenness provides the frame for evaluating what "putative evidence of divine reality" could mean. The notion of hiddenness admits several distinct senses. It may refer to a lack of application or the weakness of the human cognitive faculty before the brightly, perfectly manifest but non-material, non-corporeal divine majesty — Being can be known, but because of dust or a beam in the viewer's eye is not known (Krüger, 2018). It may refer to the experience of the hiddenness, like a star behind a cloud, of a very real Reality, occurring mainly in the context of the theistic faiths and capable of blending with agnosticism in contemporary parlance: God is incognito, and may blend with the idea that God is "absent", so absent that he cannot be remembered, called to mind, or thought (Krüger, 2018). The fact that X is absent does not mean that X does not exist; X could be in the room next door, and his absence may trigger pangs of suffering precisely because his reality is not in doubt (Krüger, 2018). In the notion of Deus absconditus, "the hidden God", the denotation of Deus is not different from its denotation in Deus revelatus, "the revealed God", although the connotation differs (Krüger, 2018).

Contemporary philosophy of religion has developed the hiddenness problem into a formal argument and a corresponding literature of rebuttal. One line of critique examines whether the premise of "non-resistant non-belief" is sound: on closer inspection, the putative categories of non-resistant non-belief are argued to be really instances of resistance, or non-resistant non-belief of the sort that is not incongruent with what a good and loving God would allow, so that non-belief is either resistant or non-resistant, but not of the sort incompatible with what a loving God would allow (Napier, 2022). Another strategy modifies the hiddenness argument on account of the actual epistemic situation in our world, so that its success hinges on the supposition that a divine–human loving relationship depends on whether the human had a convincing religious experience of the divine presence and whether the human possesses the capability to recognise this experience as participation in the relationship with God — a supposition held to be unfounded and to entail the unacceptable conclusion that many people lacking the necessary cognitive abilities are unfit for that relationship (Butakov, 2021). A third approach evaluates Schellenberg's argument through the ontological foundations of Avicenna, arguing that those foundations support the possibility of relational experiences with the divine and, within the framework of logical argumentation and the epistemological certainty of mutawātirāt, establish the reliability of such transcendent relations, thereby refuting the argument from divine hiddenness (Hashemi et al., 2025). A fourth observes that the problem of divine hiddenness is discussed among both theist and non-theist circles, and that there is no agreement on its implication even among non-theistic positions:

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from an atheistic perspective the existence of people who are sincerely looking for God but cannot reach Him supports atheism, while from an agnostic perspective there are equal evidential considerations on both sides; the proposal is to postpone the divine hiddenness problem and discuss the existence of God on rational ground (ADALAR, 2022). A fifth line of work develops arguments for atheism from private evidence, containing a premise stated from the first-person singular perspective and intended to rationally persuade only those for whom that premise is true, alongside a premise about what God would do if God existed that is acceptable to many theists and affirmed in some major monotheistic traditions (Bartolome, 2022).

That non-realist strand of religious thought is sociologically revealing. In Don Cupitt's case, stopping to affirm the existence of the objective God, such a view can be defined only as being "objectively atheous", since God had to become objectively thinner and thinner in order to allow subjective religiousness to expand, and rejecting a realist God does not of necessity entail the rejection of God as such (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Cupitt in this manner catches red-handed even the staunchest atheists such as Dawkins, who despite his ambition to exorcise God from the minds of the masses is still strongly dependent in his argumentation on traditional theistic conceptions in Western thought — the universal language of the world, reality, objective truth — so that despite living in a post-Christian culture, a relation to God is still upheld, or at least some semblance of it (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Cupitt expected fewer and fewer people would be willing to subscribe to the metaphysical doctrines required by church teachings, while significant numbers of churchgoers would eventually subscribe to a fully demythologised religious humanism (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). He himself prays and attends the Eucharist at Emmanuel College Chapel on Sundays as a kind of "Kingdom meal", and has never resigned his priestly orders, even though God is "only" a mythical embodiment of all one is concerned with in the spiritual life; his relation to God is one of "impossible love", comparable to our emotional attachments to our dead parents, who, though no longer alive, may still take hold of our imagination and appear in some respects more real than they were during their lifetime (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). The death of God, on his account, is not only a source of grieving or religious nostalgia: rather, the loss of the God of metaphysical realism and the hope for immortality liberates us to the possibility of experiencing the fullness of life, embodied in our individuality as well as in relationships, here and now, in its ordinariness, amid tragic or comic life situations (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018).

The problem of evil supplies the principal intellectual route by which putative evidence is weighed and rejected. One account insists that no doctrine of a planning and organising God can be kept erect in the presence of innocent victims of violence or starving children: "Let go of theodicy. Evil can never be justified" (Krüger, 2018). The same account holds that it cannot be denied that life is full of suffering, some arising from nature and some caused by people and their actions, sometimes self-induced and sometimes induced by others, and that to reduce all natural suffering and injustice experienced in life to deserved karma or divine punishment is preposterous, just as it would be pointless to justify or explain natural disasters by appealing to karma or divine retribution (Krüger, 2018). The implicit connection to the third research question is that the "clue" most often cited against divine reality is

experiential and moral — suffering and its apparent gratuitousness — while the "clue" most often cited for it is also experiential: the sense of a hidden but real Reality, mystical union, and the persistence of prayer after belief has lapsed (Krüger, 2018).

2.6 Gaps in the literature

The most consistently identified gap is contextual and geographical. Most work on secularisation focuses on European contexts where state religions prevail and is problematised when applied to the more open religious marketplace of the United States, so that geographical sensitivity is needed to overcome the focus on the "normative" West and to re-engage with non-Western, often postcolonial contexts (Pulcini, 2020). Scholars of religion often approach their subject through Western cultural lenses when determining who is religious and affiliated with a religious tradition, which creates challenges in detecting and understanding leaving religion where there is no resignation or clear distinction between social belongings; and a large abundance of accessible survey data are shaped by Western, primarily Christian conceptions of religiosity, so that applying set survey items across multiple contexts broadly overlooks the historical and cultural processes that have shaped the meaning of being religious or secular in a given context (Pulcini, 2020). The neglect is uneven: while more attention has recently been paid to Islam, the lack of research on Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Jainism is evident (Pulcini, 2020).

A second gap is methodological and temporal. Research that predicts future levels of religiosity relies on the assumption that current and past trends will continue into the future, and recent work of this kind includes Pew Research Center projections of the size of various religions and the unaffiliated in 2050 and Stolz and colleagues' prediction of religiosity, spirituality, and secularity in 2030 based on Swiss data from 1950 and 2012; while many such studies offer robust predictions of significant value to the field, their dependence on trend extrapolation is a recognised limitation (Pulcini, 2020). Measurement is a further problem: contextual norms influence how respondents answer survey questions, and research has shown that Americans tend to exaggerate their religious service attendance, meaning participants are likely to give answers they think the researcher wants to hear (Pulcini, 2020). The role conflict associated with revealing an atheist identity in the United States is much more pervasive than in more secular contexts with widespread religious indifference, and this has direct consequences for the comparability of large-scale cross-national data (Pulcini, 2020). The decline of the Christian population in Western countries is also in part related to a question of the declining role of the family in the cultural transmission of religion, and factors such as paedophilia scandals in the Catholic Church can also result in leaving religious institutions or declining attendance rather than religiosity in general (Pulcini, 2020).

A third gap concerns the study of apostasy in Muslim-majority contexts, where the phenomenon is at once socially consequential and empirically difficult to access. In Muslim-majority countries or states characterised by Islam, public apostasy has social as well as legal consequences: apostasy is frequently viewed socially as a disgrace, treason, and a scandal, and being ostracised and cast out of the family are possible results, as are the loss of one's employment and, in dramatic cases, persecution and the use of force up to the point of attempting to kill, incarcerate, or torture the individual (Pulcini, 2020). Legal consequences can include disinheritance, forced

divorce, or having one's own children and the custody of those children taken away (Pulcini, 2020). Apostasy is a criminal offence in certain Muslim-majority countries, sometimes subject to capital punishment, and although all forms of leaving Islam boil down to apostasy, historically and in our time conversion to Christianity seems to be the most sensitive; according to most Muslim scholars, apostasy in Islam is tantamount to high treason and rebellion, making it a political crime (Quadir, 2023). Apostasy from Islam can be punished with the death penalty in a handful of countries like Saudi Arabia or Iran (Quadir, 2023). The scriptural basis is contested: the term for unbelief or non-belief (kufr) is used 482 times in the Koran, and in at least 19 verses it is used in the sense of turning away or falling away from Islam, while there is no mention in the Koran of the Arabic terms for apostasy, ridda and irtidād (Quadir, 2023). On the basis of this ambiguous textual finding, those who advocate religious freedom as well as those who reject it call upon the Koran and tradition: advocates use Sura 2:256 ("Let there be no compulsion in religion") as well as the Koran's disapproval of turning away from belief and the certainty of God's punishment of the apostate, pointing also to the Koran's lack of mention of a process for determining apostasy or a punishment in this world, and to reports that Muḥammad himself pardoned apostates (Quadir, 2023). Advocates of the death penalty argue using verses such as Sura 4:89 ("... but if they turn renegades, seize them and slay them ...") as well as texts in tradition which depict the execution of apostates in the early Islamic community (Quadir, 2023). Today there are three major positions among Muslim theologians: one minority consists of those who are openly advocating complete religious freedom, while another minority consists of those who deem the death penalty necessary under all circumstances, and there is a centrist or moderate position which a majority of theologians might be considered to support today (Quadir, 2023). The case record illustrates the practical stakes: the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Mazrūʿa expressed himself aggressively, indicating that the killing of Foda was necessary for maintaining the Muslim community since the state apparently was not willing to act, and Dr Muhammad Younus Shaikh, a physician and professor of anatomy in Islamabad, was charged with apostasy as the founder of the movement The Enlightenment (Quadir, 2023). Access to data is itself distorted by politics: the problem of counting nonbelievers in Muslim countries involves issues of categories and data-gathering methods coinciding with intense political motivation to undercount apostates (Eller, 2024). It is nonetheless inaccurate to argue that the question of leaving religion concerns only Islamic traditions, since the drawing of lines between insiders and outsiders, and the calling of opponents heretics or apostates, is a general pattern found in all social formations that make use of a religious vocabulary (Pulcini, 2020). Leaving a religious tradition is also complicated by social belonging rather than by doctrine alone: in the case of Hinduism, leaving the "religion" is difficult because Hinduism entails not only a religious identity in the sense of membership in a religious organisation but also strong forms of traditional social belonging connected to caste, so that to leave just the religion and not one's social role and identity is difficult (Pulcini, 2020).

A fourth gap is conceptual precision about hostility, and it has an ethical dimension. The evidence base for attitudes is uneven and often indirect, and the ethical risk of reproducing prejudicial images in the study of apostasy is only beginning to be

addressed systematically (Pulcini, 2020). This is a topic for future research, and it is likely that hate crimes and discrimination are underreported and more common than we think (Pulcini, 2020).

3. Research Problem

The research problem addressed by this review can be stated as a set of tensions between received assumptions and the available evidence. First, there is a chronological tension. Atheism is commonly treated as a modern phenomenon, a product of the Enlightenment, science, and modern scepticism, yet the scholarship now supports the view that unbelief is a continuous and influential presence in both intellectual and popular culture throughout the recorded history of European civilisation (Brown, 2017). Atheism has its origins in ancient Greece, and although there have always been people who did not believe in God, atheism did not emerge as an overt and avowed belief system until late in the Enlightenment; despite the growth of atheism, suspicion and even fear of atheists remains widespread (Baggini, 2021). If unbelief is not a modern invention, then explanatory accounts that locate its causes exclusively in modernity are incomplete, and accounts that treat it as pathological require justification.

Second, there is an explanatory tension. The causal literature is plural and, at points, contradictory. Cognitive accounts posit "born believers" whose dispositions must be overridden (Pulcini, 2020), and experimental evidence supports a causal role for analytic processing (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), yet the model is contested on evidential grounds and at least one well-designed set of experiments found no significant association between intuitive or analytical processing and supernatural belief (Pulcini, 2020). Psychodynamic and reductive accounts characterise religious behaviour as a projection-game of the imagination and propose explanations ranging from the absence of a father figure to a prominent analytical processing style (Pulcini, 2020). Processual accounts identify four domains of leaving — intellectual doubt, moral criticism, emotional suffering, and disaffiliation (Pulcini, 2020) — while structural accounts disagree among themselves, locating the cause in secure societies, working women, and church monopolies on one side (Pulcini, 2020) and in religious–secular competition on the other (Pulcini, 2020). The research problem is not that no explanations exist, but that their relative weight, scope conditions, and mutual compatibility have not been established.

Third, there is an attitudinal tension. Atheism is popularly associated with hostility toward God and religion, yet the empirical literature shows that the association is contingent rather than necessary: being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility toward a religious group (Pulcini, 2020), and the strongest hostility appears in specific contexts — the Irish anti-religious minority arrayed against a still widely endorsed Church (Pulcini, 2020), ex-Muslim critics whose critique is entangled with anti-Muslim discourse (Pulcini, 2020), and confrontational organisations responding to perceived attacks on secular society and science (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Meanwhile, atheists themselves are among the least liked people in areas with religious majorities, and this prejudice is centrally motivated by distrust (Gervais et al., 2011). The research problem is therefore to specify the conditions under which hostility arises, in which direction it runs, and to avoid generalising from a vocal minority to a heterogeneous population.

Fourth, there is a temporal-existential tension. The secularisation expectation is that unbelief is largely terminal, yet residual religiosity persists, reversibility is contemplated by a subset of atheists (Pulcini, 2020), population-level reversals have occurred following state atheism (Ładykowska et al., 2024), and a documented non-realist position retains prayer and eucharistic practice after the abandonment of belief in an objective God (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). The research problem is to determine whether such phenomena constitute genuine return, cultural inertia, or a category error generated by the belief–belonging binary itself.

Fifth, there is a scope tension. The evidence base is heavily Western, heavily Christian, and heavily Anglophone, and it applies survey instruments shaped by Western Christian conceptions of religiosity to contexts whose historical and cultural processes have shaped different meanings of being religious or secular (Pulcini, 2020). Non-Western and Muslim-majority contexts are markedly under-researched, and the study of apostasy in those contexts is complicated by legal and social sanction (Pulcini, 2020; Quadir, 2023).

4. Questions of Research

The review is organised around three research questions:

RQ1. How do individuals become atheists, and what are the principal causes of unbelief identified in the historical, psychological, and sociological literature?

RQ2. Why do some atheists express hostility toward God and religion, and to what extent is the characterisation of atheists as hostile empirically supported?

RQ3. Are atheists disposed to return to religion upon encountering putative evidence or experience of divine reality, and what does the literature on conversion, apostasy, and divine hiddenness suggest about this possibility?

5. Objectives of the Research

The study pursues five objectives:

1. To trace the historical development of atheism from classical antiquity through the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century critique to the contemporary New Atheism, identifying the principal figures associated with each phase.
2. To synthesise the competing explanatory accounts of unbelief — psychodynamic, cognitive, processual, and structural — and to assess the strength of the evidence supporting each.
3. To clarify the conceptual distinction between atheism, anti-theism, and anti-religious identity, and to evaluate empirically the claim that atheists are characteristically hostile toward God and religion.
4. To examine the evidence on conversion out of atheism and on re-affiliation following apostasy, and to connect that evidence to the philosophical debate over religious experience and divine hiddenness.
5. To identify the conceptual, methodological, and normative limitations of the existing literature and to propose directions for future research.

6. Research Design and Methodology

Design. This study employs a critical interpretive synthesis: a qualitative, thematic review of historical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical scholarship on atheism, unbelief, deconversion, and secularisation. The design is non-experimental and generates no primary data. Its output is an analytical synthesis that maps claims, weighs evidence, and identifies gaps, rather than an estimate of effect sizes or

prevalence. This choice follows from the character of the field. The phenomena of interest — pathways into unbelief, the phenomenology of hostility, and the possibility of return — are heterogeneous, contested in their conceptualisation, and documented chiefly through narrative interviews, historical source criticism, survey instruments, and philosophical argument. A synthesis that forced these materials into a single quantitative frame would obscure precisely the definitional disagreements that the literature identifies as central, such as the divergence between a strict, positive definition of atheism and the looser epistemological stances reported by participants (Pulcini, 2020).

Corpus and selection. The corpus consists of recent handbooks, monographs, review essays, and journal articles on atheism, unbelief, leaving religion, and secularisation, drawn from the assembled scholarly literature on these topics and from searches of academic databases. Works were included where they (a) addressed the history, causes, attitudinal correlates, or temporal dynamics of unbelief; (b) were published in scholarly venues or scholarly presses; and (c) provided either empirical evidence or sustained conceptual analysis relevant to one or more of the three research questions. The corpus is purposive rather than exhaustive. It is weighted toward synthesising works — handbooks and review essays — because these aggregate evidence across many primary studies and thus permit the review to identify patterns and disagreements that individual studies cannot. It includes multi-authored handbook treatments of leaving religion across traditions and epochs (Day, 2023; Pulcini, 2020); historiographical review essays surveying the recent history of atheism scholarship (Brown, 2017; Wootton, 1992); studies of secularisation and the place of atheism within it (Brown, 2017); critical engagements with New Atheism and its philosophical presuppositions (Krüger, 2018); studies of non-realist, post-Christian spirituality that document residual religious practice after belief (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018); cross-cultural experimental and survey work on analytic thinking and unbelief (Byrd et al., 2025; Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012; Stagnaro & Pennycook, 2024); and social-psychological research on anti-atheist and nonreligious prejudice (Cappellen & LaBouff, 2020; Gervais, 2013; Gervais et al., 2011; Užarević et al., 2019). Philosophical and theological sources were included where they bear directly on RQ3, since the question of what would count as evidence of divine reality cannot be settled empirically (ADALAR, 2022; Bartolome, 2022; Butakov, 2021; Hashemi et al., 2025; Napier, 2022).

Analytic procedure. Analysis proceeded in five stages. First, each source was read for its explicit claims about the causes of unbelief, the attitudes of atheists, and the durability of unbelief. Second, claims were extracted and coded against a framework derived from the research questions and from the four explanatory families identified in the literature — cognitive, psychodynamic, processual, and structural — with biological and neuroscientific claims treated as a fifth, cross-cutting strand. Third, within each family, claims were compared across sources in order to identify convergence, contradiction, and scope conditions; where sources conflicted, both positions were retained and the evidential basis of each was recorded rather than resolved by preference. Fourth, evidence was appraised for strength using three criteria: whether the claim rested on primary data or on theoretical assertion; whether the data were quantitative and comparative or qualitative and case-based; and whether

Vol. 3, No.1 (2026)
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the claim had been subjected to explicit criticism within the corpus. Fifth, gaps were mapped by identifying questions that the corpus could not answer, and by recording the geographical, temporal, and methodological boundaries of the available evidence.
Reflexivity and known limitations. The design has four limitations that bear on interpretation. It relies on secondary and synthesising sources, and therefore inherits their selections; where those sources report primary studies, the review reports the reported finding and does not re-analyse the underlying data. It is restricted to English-language scholarship, which compounds the Western bias that the literature itself identifies (Pulcini, 2020). It cannot generate the cross-cultural and longitudinal evidence that the field is said to lack, and so can only diagnose that absence (Pulcini, 2020). Finally, the field is one in which researchers' own commitments matter: historical work on atheism has often lent itself to partisan narratives and has been shaped by contested periodisations (Brown, 2017; Wootton, 1992), and the literature warns against studies shaped by an agenda to promote religion as a source of health or, conversely, to promote unbelievers as more analytical than believers (Pulcini, 2020). The review therefore treats claims about the cognitive or health advantages of belief and unbelief symmetrically, reporting them as contested rather than settled.

7. Results

7.1 RQ1: Pathways into unbelief and the causes of unbelief

The synthesis identifies five broad pathways, which are better understood as interacting than as mutually exclusive.
Pathway 1: analytic cognitive style and cognitive override. The most widely cited cognitive account holds that unbelief arises when individuals violate the cognitive mechanisms that make us "born believers" — failing to represent supernatural agents intuitively, resisting the motivation to seek them as sources of meaning, comfort, and control, breaking with cultural reinforcement for their existence, and engaging analytical rather than intuitive processing (Pulcini, 2020). The strongest experimental support comes from work showing that individual differences in the tendency to analytically override flawed intuitions are associated with increased religious disbelief, and that subtle manipulations triggering analytic processing encourage religious disbelief, indicating that analytic processing is one factor among several that promotes religious disbelief (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012). Recent large-scale work separates the mechanisms, showing that the relationship between analytic thinking and religious belief change comprises two separable effects, and that analytic apostasy — the greater odds of losing one's religion since childhood among better performers on reflection tests — even seems to explain analytic atheism, while religious conversion was rare and unrelated to reflection and the detected relationships were usually small (Byrd et al., 2025). The most recent cross-cultural work on analytic atheism and analytic apostasy continues to test whether the association holds outside Western samples (Byrd et al., 2025). Yet the pathway is contested on evidential grounds: a set of three experiments combining field study on the Santiago pilgrimage route with laboratory brain stimulation failed to find any significant association between intuitive or analytical processing, or cognitive inhibition, and supernatural belief (Pulcini, 2020). An alternative reading reverses the burden: the sociological and anthropological data in support of a social-educational origin and modulation of belief are more robust than the cognitive evidence for its naturalness, and it is implausible

from an evolutionary perspective that individuals would have to override cognitive dispositions to become unbelievers, since this would require very considerable effort with no obvious gains (Pulcini, 2020). Supporting the social-educational reading, children in secular families are less likely to be exposed to metaphysical agents, and individuals raised in secular families have never lost a religion because they were never socialised into one (Pulcini, 2020). The most defensible conclusion from the corpus is therefore not that analytic style causes unbelief, but that it is one contributing disposition whose effects are conditional on socialisation and culture, and typically small in magnitude (Byrd et al., 2025).

Pathway 2: intellectual doubt, enquiry, and moral criticism. A second pathway runs through explicit intellectual engagement. Gradual deconversion is more likely to be rooted in intellectual reasons than sudden rejection, and in the USA gradual deconversion has been positively associated with higher education, although the inverse has been reported in other cultural contexts (Pulcini, 2020). The four domains of leaving identified by Barbour place intellectual doubt or denial about the truth of a belief system first, alongside moral criticism — the rejection of an entire way of life of a religious group (Pulcini, 2020). The categories of intellectual and theological concern include statements to the effect that the tenets of Christianity often contradict basic principles of science or provide a weak explanation for such problems as human suffering, together with "God's shortcomings" — most frequently subjects' experiences of praying for help with personal problems and failing to find it — hypocrisy among Christians failing to live up to their professed moral standards, and stories about being convinced to abandon Christianity by the arguments of non-believers (Pulcini, 2020). Moral criticism is empirically prominent in contexts where institutional scandal has exposed the gap between professed and practised standards: in one study, moral conservatism and clerical abuse were the two most emphasised factors in disaffiliation (Pulcini, 2020), and the Irish case shows how scandal provides potent content for persuading complacent adherents to reassess a contaminated affiliation (Pulcini, 2020). Among those who leave Islam, the resulting public criticism is often entangled with broader anti-Muslim discourse, and it is not unusual to find former ex-Muslims among strong critics of Islam (Pulcini, 2020). A striking non-Western instance is Ambedkar's rejection of caste Hinduism, a decision that was not based on a revelation or transformative experience but proceeded "almost as a scientific project" based on critical comparative analysis, and which led to the adoption of a new form of Buddhism now lived by over five million people in the Indian state of Maharashtra (Pulcini, 2020). Intellectual and moral critique thus operate together: the critique of a belief system's truth and the critique of its moral consequences reinforce one another.

Pathway 3: biographical, developmental, and emotional factors. The third pathway is biographical. Proposals about why individuals are unbelievers have ranged from the absence of a father figure to a more prominent analytical style of processing information (Pulcini, 2020), while human religious behaviour has been characterised as a projection-game of the imagination in which the referents of our images of God are our idealised, best sense of self and society (Pulcini, 2020). Anger towards God is another documented emotional reason for leaving religion, and emotional suffering — grief, guilt, loneliness, despair — forms one of Barbour's four domains (Pulcini,

2020). Emotional crises can also work in the opposite direction: George's return to his father's faith was precipitated by profound feelings of pain at realising his separation from his children, an instance of the importance of social factors in the conversion process (Pulcini, 2020). Finally, personality differences appear: deconverts in US and German samples showed lower religious fundamentalism and right-wing authoritarianism and higher openness to experience than their religious peers (Pulcini, 2020).

Pathway 4: sociocultural and structural secularisation. The fourth pathway locates causation outside the individual. Zuckerman's explanation for the irreligiosity of Sweden and Denmark identifies a lazy church monopoly, secure societies, and working women (Pulcini, 2020). Competition-based accounts reverse the monopoly mechanism, claiming that religious–secular competition, not monopoly, fuels a "secular drift" within an increasingly individualised "me-society" (Pulcini, 2020). Taylor's account supplies the cultural mechanism: disenchantment transformed the self from "porous" to "buffered", and a "nova effect" of exploding possibilities made unbelief not merely possible but common and profound, with a culture of authenticity and expressive individualism reaching its apotheosis after the Second World War (Brown, 2017). Aggregate data are consistent with structural change: the religiously unaffiliated population is projected to grow by more than sixty million between 2010 and 2050, with much of that growth coming from Christians converting out of religion (Pulcini, 2020), and 13 million people are expected to leave Christianity in the five-year period between 2015 and 2020, most ending up religiously unaffiliated (Pulcini, 2020). The same literature cautions against simple decline narratives, since the secularisation thesis has been contested since the 1980s by scholars who see transformation and revitalisation rather than disappearance, and since many sociologists of religion now take intermediate positions and avoid predicting the future of religiosity (Pulcini, 2020). The decline of the Christian population in Western countries is also in part related to the declining role of the family in the cultural transmission of religion, and factors such as paedophilia scandals in the Catholic Church can result in leaving religious institutions or declining attendance rather than religiosity in general (Pulcini, 2020).

Pathway 5: institutional and political conditions. The fifth pathway is institutional. Communist state atheism sought to make religion disappear from society at least in its public expressions, and in the Soviet Union it was most strongly enforced, with churches closed down and monasteries' properties nationalised, while in satellite countries a variety of legislative measures, repressive policies, and other forms of social engineering served the control of religion (Ładykowska et al., 2024). Its effects were durable in some settings and reversible in others: in 2010 only 15% of West Germans did not belong to a religious community, compared with 68% of East Germans (Ładykowska et al., 2024), whereas Albania moved from an atheist society to a society where 88 percent reported belief in God in 2011 (Ładykowska et al., 2024). Communist systems in Central and Eastern Europe shared atheism as the cornerstone of the political order but varied in many aspects, and both political pressure and social change brought about not only the rise of secularism but also the rise of religiosity, particularly in the 1980s (Zrinščak, 2004). The pattern shows that

unbelief can be produced, sustained, and partially undone by political structures, and that it is not merely a matter of individual conviction.

Convergent finding. Across all five pathways, the corpus supports a single overarching conclusion: the pathways into unbelief are plural, and no single explanatory family is sufficient. The most robust formulations are interactionist, in the sense that this review's own synthesis places cognitive dispositions within socialisation regimes, intellectual critique within moral experience, and individual biography within structural conditions — a reading that follows from the coexistence of the cognitive, processual, and structural findings reported above rather than from any single source. The finding also carries a corrective: the research literature has been shaped by its own commitments, and cognitive theories that claim religious belief to be innate partly reiterate an earlier understanding of belief as God-given, in which non-believers are acting against God or against human nature (Pulcini, 2020).

7.2 RQ2: Hostility toward God and religion

The synthesis finds that the characterisation of atheists as characteristically hostile is only partially supported, and that hostility is best modelled as a configuration of conditions rather than a property of unbelief.

Finding 1: hostility is not entailed by unbelief. The categorical apparatus developed in the literature explicitly separates the epistemic stance toward religion in general (member of another religious group, religious individual, agnostic, atheist) from the evaluative stance toward one's own former religion (accepting, understanding, critical, rejecting), and states directly that being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility toward a religious group, instancing the "understanding atheist" (Pulcini, 2020). Brown's analysis converges from the historical side, describing an atheist spectrum that abuts, and in culturally defined ways overlaps, the religious spectrum, encapsulating many positions between interest and indifference and possibly even including the churchgoer; atheists may also have distinctive moral and world outlooks, some of which apply across cultures and eras and some of which do not (Brown, 2017). Two further strands support the same conclusion from the side of lived practice: the majority of Danes have relinquished most of their religious beliefs while still feeling attached to the National Lutheran Church, paying the church tax and availing themselves of its rites, living in practice in accordance with a non-supranatural, non-creedal humanism informed by Protestant legacy (Pulcini, 2020); and a non-realist position that denies the objective God retains prayer and eucharistic practice, describing its stance as "objectively atheous" rather than atheist (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018).

Finding 2: hostility is concentrated in particular contexts. Where hostility is intense, the corpus locates it in identifiable configurations. The first is institutional scandal and moral conservatism. In the Irish case, an analysis of 2008 European Values Study data from fourteen Western European countries found the Republic to have both the strongest anti-religious sentiment and the widest endorsement of religion, indicating a self-consciously anti-religious minority coexisting with a larger, vaguely pro-religious group that retains a Catholic identity while rejecting the Church (Pulcini, 2020). A 2011 survey found that almost half (47 percent) of the population had a negative view of the Church, and 25 percent would be unperturbed if it disappeared entirely, a view attributed to a mixture of distrust and rejection of moral conservatism (Pulcini, 2020).

Moral conservatism and clerical abuse were the two most emphasised factors in disaffiliation, and religious practice declined more swiftly over the "era of scandal" than in preceding decades (Pulcini, 2020). Secularist organisations deliberately cultivate this dynamic by drawing attention to the Church's hypocrisies (Pulcini, 2020), and the 2017 Tuam scandal prompted a surge in public condemnation, with the entire Church frequently portrayed as contaminated and responses characterised by moral disgust (Pulcini, 2020). The second configuration is apostasy from Islam: it is not unusual to find former ex-Muslims among strong critics of Islam, and distancing from a former position is one way of making a rational explanation for earlier behaviour and belonging (Pulcini, 2020); text analyses of apostate websites show the religion left behind presented as evil, irrational, and anti-modern, in correspondence with broader anti-Muslim discourses and ideas of the New Atheist movement (Pulcini, 2020). The third configuration is organised, confrontational atheism: atheists have increasingly become organised and confrontational in response to what they perceive as attacks on the liberal, open society and on science, with Dawkins at the forefront (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). The fourth configuration is dogmatic in-group/out-group inheritance: those raised with more negative views of other religious groups maintain the strict dichotomy between their own beliefs and others even after overhauling their belief system, producing a "hangover effect" (Pulcini, 2020).

Finding 3: hostility is heterogeneous, and the in-group/out-group effect cuts both ways. The hangover effect is qualified within the same study, which was based on 201 surveys and fifty semi-structured interviews with Chicagoland atheists who had exited religion (Pulcini, 2020). Holding childhood religious ethnocentrism constant, the individual with a more religious upbringing is expected to be less dogmatic in the present day, because being deeply invested in a religion and then exiting can sensitise a person to the tentative nature of their present beliefs (Pulcini, 2020). Kelsey's case illustrates this: raised above average in childhood religiosity yet below average in childhood religious ethnocentrism, and believing fervently in her pre-teens and early teens only to leave, she found it conceivable that her beliefs might change again (Pulcini, 2020). The quantitative measures support a picture of a population with moderate rather than extreme dogmatism: on a forty-point dogmatism measure that does not specifically reference religion, the sample mean was 17.0 with a standard deviation of 5.8; childhood religiosity emphasis ranged from zero to forty-eight with a mean of 25.1 and standard deviation of 13.0; and childhood religious ethnocentrism ranged from zero to twenty-four with a mean of 11.6 and standard deviation of 6.7 (Pulcini, 2020). The hypothesis of a weak-to-moderate positive correlation between religious emphasis during upbringing and present-day dogmatism, predicted at $r = +.3$, was thus tested against a more nuanced empirical picture (Pulcini, 2020). The corpus also supplies a counterweight to the one-sided picture of ex-Muslim hostility, in that the converts described in the same research expressed varying registers: one, "Mansur" from Afghanistan, gave harsh statements about Islam, but this is presented as a contrast with the other converts rather than as the general pattern (Pulcini, 2020). There is also an ethical risk to be managed, namely that researchers reproduce negative, stereotypical, or prejudicial images of the religious groups that apostates have left, a risk evident in the "brainwashing" discourse of new religious movement

exit narratives and equally in the use of ex-Muslims' witness narratives within anti-Muslim rhetoric (Pulcini, 2020).

Finding 4: hostility is reciprocal, and its measurement is incomplete. The claim that atheists are hostile must be set against evidence that atheists are targets of hostility. Recent polls indicate that atheists are among the least liked people in areas with religious majorities, and six studies converge on distrust as the central mechanism of anti-atheist prejudice, with a description of a criminally untrustworthy individual seen as comparably representative of atheists and rapists but not of Christians, Muslims, Jewish people, feminists, or homosexuals (Gervais et al., 2011). People in most — but not all — countries view extreme moral violations as representative of atheists (Gervais, 2013), and antipathy toward atheists derives specifically from moral distrust, since without religious belief atheists are viewed as moral wildcards who cannot be trusted (Gervais, 2013). Individuals who leave Islam are more likely to suffer persecution and threats than those who leave many other traditions, and several countries dominated by Muslim traditions are prone to execute so-called apostates, such as Iran, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia (Pulcini, 2020). Data on hate crimes and discrimination are difficult to estimate, and such crimes are likely underreported, so that hate and discrimination are probably more common than we think — a topic the literature identifies as a priority for future research (Pulcini, 2020).

Finding 5: anti-theism is a distinct, minority position, and prejudice among the nonreligious is not absent. The corpus distinguishes atheism from anti-religiosity. Hostility appears as a self-conscious identity in a minority: the literature speaks of a growing self-consciously anti-religious minority (Pulcini, 2020); the apostate-website literature describes a rhetorical register that presents the abandoned religion as evil, irrational, and anti-modern (Pulcini, 2020); and the Irish case documents secularist groups whose key objective is to drive down habitual Catholic identification among the inertial middle by drawing attention to the Church's hypocrisies (Pulcini, 2020). The evaluative spectrum from accepting through understanding and critical to rejecting provides the conceptual instrument for this distinction, and its existence is itself evidence that hostility is a position within atheism rather than a definition of it (Pulcini, 2020). At the same time, the nonreligious are not generally tolerant: research on nonreligious people found prejudice toward Christians documented in exclusion behaviours, self-reported affect, and social distance, with differences among nonreligious groups in belief superiority, feelings of distrust, and fear of contamination by unpalatable ideas explaining those differences (Cappellen & LaBouff, 2020). Data from three secularised Western European countries (total N = 1,158) found that atheists and agnostics showed prejudicial discriminatory attitudes toward antiliberals but also toward mere Christians, and atheists did so also toward Buddhists, with prejudice toward antiliberal and mainstream religious targets predicted uniquely by antireligious critique (Užarević et al., 2019). Hostility is thus better modelled as a two-way, context-dependent phenomenon than as a property of unbelief.

7.3 RQ3: The possibility of return

The synthesis finds that return is possible, documented, and minority, and that its likelihood depends jointly on experiential, intellectual, and communal factors.

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Finding 1: transitions out of atheism are uncommon but real. The dominant expectation in the secularisation literature is that unbelief is largely terminal, and the qualitative evidence records both forceful resistance to persuasion and a minority openness to reversal. Tracy compared acquaintances' confidence that praying with them would change her mind to people who say of a fear of dogs that meeting their dog will cure it — "It's just the same thing with god" (Pulcini, 2020). Documented cases of return nonetheless exist. George returned to his father's faith following regret at having abandoned his children, a conversion precipitated by profound feelings of pain and one in which embracing his father's religion was simultaneously an embrace of devotion to his family, aligning the change with his personal history and restoring a sense of meaning (Pulcini, 2020). Sandy's conversion likewise followed the resolution of a crisis attributed to a miracle, rather than the growth of personal faith (Pulcini, 2020). Population-level reversals are also documented: Albania moved from an atheist society to a society where 88 percent reported belief in God in 2011, and in Russia the Orthodox Church was a way of returning to an assumed traditional Russian culture (Ładykowska et al., 2024); after the fall of the Soviet Union many returned to the Orthodox Church or other religions, following a massive decline in Christianity under state-run atheism (Ładykowska et al., 2024); and mass reconversion campaigns in India have returned thousands of Christians and Muslims to Hinduism, though the 2014 campaign that claimed to have converted over fifty Muslim families was later found by a commission to have involved trickery with promises of houses and ration cards, and to have left the families Muslim (Pulcini, 2020). The literature also cautions that some religious change does not mean rejecting religion altogether but leaving one religion to embrace another, and that studies of leaving religion must include these groups (Pulcini, 2020). Ambedkar's trajectory is the paradigmatic case: he left Hinduism, adopted Buddhism with several hundred thousand followers in 1956, and composed a declaration of faith whose first six of 22 articles were declarations of deconversion (Pulcini, 2020).

Finding 2: reversibility is contemplated by a subset of atheists, and certainty varies. Against the image of the settled unbeliever, the research documents variation in certainty: while many interviewees were positive that their beliefs could never be changed by any life event or argument for theism, others' expectations were more tempered, and five interviewees specifically mentioned the potential reversibility of their beliefs (Pulcini, 2020). Brad described atheism as "just a working assumption for my worldview" (Pulcini, 2020). Kelsey expressed an explicit fear of return, rooted in having believed for the first fifteen years of her life and in the recognition that religion "is taught at such a young age": "since I was raised religious, a fear that maybe I would go back to it. And I really don't want to" (Pulcini, 2020). The mechanism appears to be residual socialisation: specific, consciously recognised instances of the residual influence of one's childhood religion appear to survive the transition to atheism, even when the specific faith and theism in general are disavowed (Pulcini, 2020). Trajectories into atheism also differ in their starting point: roughly twenty-eight percent of interviewees considered themselves atheists immediately upon leaving their original religion, while another nine percent formally joined another religion before they ceased believing in a god or higher power (Pulcini, 2020). Seven interviewees had a brief quest phase, researching and entertaining the

possibility of joining multiple different religions, though eventually all respondents reached a level of certainty that no religion is satisfactory and no argument could persuade them of the existence of any deity (Pulcini, 2020). The overall picture is thus of a population in which confident, permanent unbelief predominates, alongside a minority for whom unbelief is provisional.

Finding 3: the "clue of divine reality" maps onto unresolved philosophical debate. The question of whether atheists would return upon encountering putative evidence of divine reality cannot be answered empirically from the corpus, because what counts as such evidence is itself disputed. The literature distinguishes several senses of divine hiddenness: a weakness of the cognitive faculty before a manifest but non-material majesty; the experience of the hiddenness of a very real Reality, like a star behind a cloud, so that God is incognito and may seem absent to the point of being unrememberable; and the classical dialectic of Deus absconditus and Deus revelatus, in which the denotation of Deus is the same although the connotation differs (Krüger, 2018). The experience of absence may trigger suffering precisely because the reality is not in doubt, which is analytically important: it means that the experiential "clue" against divine reality (apparent absence) and the experiential "clue" for it (a sensed hidden reality) can be phenomenologically similar (Krüger, 2018). Contemporary philosophy has formalised the problem into the argument from divine hiddenness and a substantial literature of rebuttal. One line argues that the premise of non-resistant non-belief is problematic, so that non-belief is either resistant or non-resistant, but not of the sort incompatible with what a loving God would allow (Napier, 2022). Another modifies the argument so that its success hinges on an unfounded supposition about the dependence of a divine–human loving relationship on a convincing religious experience and the capacity to recognise it (Butakov, 2021). A third evaluates the argument through Avicenna's ontological and epistemological foundations, concluding that those foundations support the possibility of relational experiences with the divine and refute the hiddenness argument (Hashemi et al., 2025). A fourth notes that there is no agreement on the problem's implication even among non-theistic positions, since the same phenomenon supports atheism from one perspective and agnosticism from another, and proposes postponing the problem in favour of rational discussion of God's existence (ADALAR, 2022). A fifth develops first-personal arguments for atheism whose persuasive force is restricted to those for whom the crucial premise is true (Bartolome, 2022). The New Atheist position, by contrast, employs a substantive definition of religion focused on content and rejects a very anthropomorphic conception of God as delusional, explicitly not directing its critique at deism or pantheism (Krüger, 2018) — a definitional narrowing that critics argue overlooks the generic character of religion (Krüger, 2018). The consequence for RQ3 is that the probability of return depends on which conception of divine reality is at issue: evidence bearing on the Abrahamic, interventionist God is a different proposition from evidence bearing on a deistic or non-realist ultimate.

Finding 4: residual religious practice is a documented form of partial return. The corpus documents residual practice among people who have lost belief in an objective God. Cupitt prays and attends the Eucharist at Emmanuel College Chapel on Sundays as a kind of "Kingdom meal", has never resigned his priestly orders, and describes his relation to God as one of "impossible love", comparable to attachments to dead

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parents who still take hold of the imagination and appear in some respects more real than during their lifetime (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). He describes his position not as atheism but as "objectively atheous", since God had to become objectively thinner and thinner to allow subjective religiousness to expand (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018), and he expected significant numbers of churchgoers to subscribe eventually to a fully demythologised religious humanism (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Relatedly, the loss of belief in the God of metaphysical realism and the hope for immortality is presented as liberating rather than only as a source of grief, opening the possibility of experiencing the fullness of life, embodied in our individuality as well as in relationships, here and now, amid tragic or comic life situations (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018). Interpreted through Brown's principles, such phenomena are not anomalies but expressions of a spectrum that overlaps with the religious spectrum and may include the churchgoer (Brown, 2017); interpreted through the Danish case, in which the majority have relinquished most religious beliefs while retaining church membership and its rites, they express attachment without belief (Pulcini, 2020). Whether such partial return should be counted as return to religion depends on whether religion is defined substantively or functionally — precisely the definitional dispute that the corpus identifies as unresolved (Krüger, 2018).

Finding 5: intellectual obstacles to return are substantial and experiential. The principal intellectual obstacles documented in the corpus are the problem of evil and the critique of theodicy. One account insists that no doctrine of a planning and organising God can be kept erect in the presence of innocent victims of violence or starving children: "Let go of theodicy. Evil can never be justified" (Krüger, 2018). The same account denies that all natural suffering and injustice can be reduced to deserved karma or divine punishment, calling such reduction preposterous, and equally denies that natural disasters can be justified or explained by appealing to karma or divine retribution (Krüger, 2018). These arguments function as standing reasons why putative evidence of divine reality would be evaluated sceptically, particularly where the putative evidence is experiential rather than propositional. Conversely, the corpus records that the hiddenness of God may itself be interpreted theologically rather than as disconfirming evidence, since absence does not entail non-existence (Krüger, 2018), and that mystical and relational experience has been treated by serious philosophical and theological treatments of religion as something any account must take into account (Hashemi et al., 2025; Krüger, 2018). The philosophical debate thus remains unresolved in a way that makes the empirical question of return indeterminate in principle: whether an atheist returns depends on what they take the "clue" to be a clue of.

8. Discussion

Interpreting the findings. Three interpretive claims follow from the synthesis. The first is that unbelief is better modelled as a family of positions than as a single phenomenon. The evidence supports this at every level: epistemologically, in the distinction between positive atheists, hard agnostics, soft agnostics, and apathetic atheists, with positive atheists comprising forty-four per cent of valid survey responses (Pulcini, 2020); evaluatively, in the four-by-four mapping of stances toward religion in general and toward one's former religion in particular (Pulcini, 2020); historically, in Brown's principles describing a spectrum that overlaps with the

religious spectrum and may include the churchgoer (Brown, 2017); and demographically, in the divergence between global projections that atheists may shrink as a share of world population (Pulcini, 2020) and research predicting continued growth in the secular population in some settings (Pulcini, 2020). It is further supported by the observation that nonbelievers may be more varied than all those who believe in a deity (L. et al., 2017). Any claim about "atheists" that does not specify which position within this family is at issue is therefore under-specified, and this is the single most important conceptual limitation of both popular and much scholarly discourse.

The second interpretive claim is that the causal literature has reached a productive stalemate rather than a resolution. The cognitive programme's central empirical prediction has been challenged by at least one well-designed set of experiments (Pulcini, 2020), even as other large-scale work confirms that analytic thinking and analytic apostasy are reliable albeit marginal predictors of disbelief (Byrd et al., 2025). Structural accounts disagree among themselves about mechanism: Zuckerman attributes Scandinavian irreligiosity to a lazy church monopoly, secure societies, and working women (Pulcini, 2020), while Stolz and colleagues attribute the Swiss secular drift to religious–secular competition rather than monopoly (Pulcini, 2020). The debate about secularisation itself remains unresolved, with proponents from the 1960s and their modern defenders on one side and the market-theory challengers of the 1980s on the other, and with many sociologists of religion now taking intermediate positions and avoiding prediction (Pulcini, 2020). The appropriate inference is not that explanation is impossible, but that the field needs designs capable of adjudicating between mechanisms rather than accumulating further correlational support for each.

The third interpretive claim concerns the relationship between hostility and belief. The evidence assembled here indicates that hostility is best understood as a response to moral injury and institutional failure rather than as a consequence of disbelief. The Irish case is the clearest: the strongest anti-religious sentiment in Western Europe coexists with the widest endorsement of religion, and the two most emphasised rejection factors are moral conservatism and clerical abuse (Pulcini, 2020). The mechanism is moral, not metaphysical: scandal morally contaminates the Church and renders devout Catholicism something that must be explained, and secularist groups deliberately draw attention to the Church's hypocrisies to dislodge habitual identification among the inertial middle (Pulcini, 2020). The ex-Muslim case is structurally analogous, in that public criticism of a former religion is partly a way of making a rational explanation for earlier behaviour and belonging, and is vulnerable to co-option by broader anti-Muslim discourses (Pulcini, 2020). The implication is that the characterisation of atheists as hostile toward God is imprecise in two ways: it confuses criticism of religious institutions with denial of the divine, and it generalises from a self-consciously anti-religious minority (Pulcini, 2020) and from a rhetorical register found on apostate websites (Pulcini, 2020) to a heterogeneous population in which the measured effects are moderate: on a forty-point dogmatism scale the mean was 17.0, and the childhood-religiosity effect ran in the opposite direction to expectation (Pulcini, 2020). It also overlooks the reciprocity of hostility, since atheists

are themselves among the least liked people in religious-majority societies, and the basis of that prejudice is moral distrust (Gervais, 2013; Gervais et al., 2011).

Theoretical implications. The findings bear on three theoretical debates. First, on the definition of religion: the divergence between substantive and functional definitions is not a semantic quibble but determines empirical results. A substantive definition focused on content generates the finding that only two or three per cent of Western populations are atheists (Brown, 2017), whereas a broader conception generates the finding that much larger populations live without belief while retaining affiliation (Pulcini, 2020). Second, on the belief–belonging binary: the Danish pattern, in which the majority have relinquished most religious beliefs while remaining attached to the National Lutheran Church and using its rites, indicates that belief and affiliation are independent dimensions, so that measures of secularisation based on affiliation alone will misestimate unbelief, and measures based on belief alone will misestimate religious practice (Pulcini, 2020). Third, on the nature of deconversion: the discursive literature's insistence that the conventions whereby the deconversion narrative takes shape cannot be dispensed with in studying the deconversion itself implies that deconversion is not simply a private cognitive event but is constituted, at least in part, in its narration — Barbour's question of where in the universe the deconversion itself resides makes the point sharply (Pulcini, 2020). A fourth implication follows for the measurement of non-belief: because coming out as atheist carries stronger normative implications in some contexts than others, the same instrument may measure different constructs in the United States and in Scandinavia, and cross-national comparison of non-belief requires contextual calibration (Pulcini, 2020).

Limitations of the literature. Five limitations recur across the corpus and constrain the confidence that can be placed in any synthesis. The first is conceptual: the field lacks agreed definitions, and terms such as atheism, secularism, humanism, freethought, unbelief, nonbelief, disbelief, doubt, and irreligion are used more or less interchangeably even though they are not synonymous (Brown, 2017), while even the term "atheism" is split between a strict dictionary sense and a variety of looser stances reported by participants (Pulcini, 2020). The second is geographical and cultural: most work on secularisation focuses on European contexts and is problematised when applied to the United States, and there is a need to overcome the focus on the normative West and to re-engage with non-Western, often postcolonial contexts (Pulcini, 2020); the lack of research on Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Sikhism, and Jainism is evident (Pulcini, 2020); and scholars often approach their subject through Western cultural lenses when determining who is religious, while survey data are shaped by Western, primarily Christian conceptions of religiosity (Pulcini, 2020). The third is methodological: cross-national survey data encode those Western conceptions of religiosity (Pulcini, 2020); contextual norms influence responses, and Americans tend to exaggerate religious attendance (Pulcini, 2020); the role conflict associated with revealing an atheist identity differs sharply between contexts, making comparison hazardous (Pulcini, 2020); and predictive studies depend on the assumption that current and past trends will continue into the future (Pulcini, 2020). The fourth is normative and ethical: researchers risk reproducing negative, stereotypical, or prejudicial images of the groups apostates have left (Pulcini, 2020), and the historiography of atheism has often been shaped by partisan narratives and

contested periodisations (Brown, 2017; Wootton, 1992). The fifth is evidentiary: even where data exist, they are often contested, as with the dopamine and frontal-lobe hypotheses, where conflicting findings coexist with shortcomings in how religiosity is defined and measured (Pulcini, 2020), and with the well-being literature, where apparent religious advantages largely disappear once life circumstances are controlled (Pulcini, 2020).

Normative implications. The review carries four normative implications that the literature raises but does not settle. The first concerns the cost of unbelief. In countries dominated by religious traditions, leaving religion produces negative social, existential, and career consequences (Pulcini, 2020), and in Muslim-majority contexts apostasy is frequently viewed socially as a disgrace, treason, and a scandal, with ostracism, loss of employment, disinheritance, forced divorce, removal of custody, and, in dramatic cases, persecution and the use of force as possible results (Pulcini, 2020). Because apostasy is treated as a criminal offence in some Muslim-majority countries, sometimes subject to capital punishment, and is construed by most Muslim scholars as tantamount to high treason and rebellion (Quadir, 2023), the exercise of a formally recognised freedom is in practice mediated by material and legal structures, and in the Hindu case by caste-based social belonging (Pulcini, 2020). Any normative assessment of unbelief that treats it as a purely private option ignores these costs. The second concerns the interpretation of hostility. If hostility is a response to moral injury, then treating it as evidence of the intrinsic hostility of unbelief misdiagnoses the phenomenon and forecloses the institutional reforms that the evidence implicates (Pulcini, 2020). The third concerns the meaning of return. If residual practice, attachment, and "impossible love" are documented among nonbelievers (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018), then the binary of belief and unbelief obscures a middle ground, and both pastoral and scholarly practice would benefit from taking that middle ground seriously. The fourth concerns the responsibility of researchers: the ethical risk of reproducing prejudicial images in the study of apostasy is only beginning to be addressed systematically (Pulcini, 2020), and the problem of counting nonbelievers in Muslim-majority settings is entangled with political incentives to undercount them (Eller, 2024).

Directions for future research. The synthesis points to seven priorities. First, research designs capable of testing explanatory mechanisms against one another rather than in isolation, so that cognitive, developmental, processual, and structural accounts can be adjudicated (Pulcini, 2020). Second, cross-cultural and non-Western research that treats local meanings of being religious or secular as objects of study rather than assuming the portability of survey items (Pulcini, 2020), with attention to traditions other than Christianity and Islam (Pulcini, 2020). Third, research on Muslim-majority and other high-cost contexts that can be conducted ethically and that attends to the legal and social sanctions attaching to apostasy, where counting is itself politically distorted (Eller, 2024; Quadir, 2023). Fourth, conceptually precise work on the distinction between atheism, anti-religiosity, and anti-theist identity, accompanied by attitude measurement that includes in-group and out-group evaluations symmetrically (Pulcini, 2020; Užarević et al., 2019). Fifth, studies of reversibility and residual religiosity that distinguish genuine re-affiliation from cultural inertia and from attachment without belief (Pulcini, 2020). Sixth, further predictive and trend-based

research of the kind already emerging, whose assumptions about the continuation of past trends should be made explicit and tested (Pulcini, 2020). Seventh, continued work on unbelief in antiquity and the medieval period, where source-critical problems require interpretive caution, and where the temptation to read modern categories into ancient evidence remains strong (Brown, 2017; Eller, 2024).

9. Conclusion

This review set out to examine, through a thematic synthesis of historical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical scholarship, how individuals become atheists, why some express hostility toward God and religion, and whether atheists are disposed to return upon encountering putative evidence of divine reality. Three conclusions follow.

First, the pathways into unbelief are plural and interacting. Analytic cognitive style, intellectual doubt and enquiry, moral criticism of religious institutions, biographical and developmental factors, and broad sociocultural secularisation all find support in the corpus, but no single account is sufficient. The cognitive programme's central prediction has been challenged by experimental evidence (Pulcini, 2020), even as other large-scale work confirms a small but reliable association between reflective thinking and apostasy (Byrd et al., 2025). The most defensible position is interactionist, in the sense set out in this review's own synthesis: dispositions operate within socialisation regimes (Pulcini, 2020), intellectual critique is fuelled by moral experience (Pulcini, 2020), and individual biography unfolds within structural conditions that shape the availability and cost of unbelief (Brown, 2017; Pulcini, 2020).

Second, the premise of a generalised atheist hostility toward religion is only partially supported. Being an atheist does not have to presuppose hostility toward a religious group, and the evaluative spectrum from accepting through understanding and critical to rejecting is populated at every point (Pulcini, 2020). Intense hostility is concentrated in identifiable configurations — institutional scandal and moral conservatism, apostasy from Islam, and organised confrontational atheism (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018; Pulcini, 2020) — while the measured effects of inherited in-group/out-group dichotomisation are moderate, with a sample dogmatism mean of 17.0 on a forty-point scale and a childhood-religiosity effect running opposite to expectation (Pulcini, 2020). A self-consciously anti-religious minority coexists with a much larger, vaguely pro-religious population even in the case with the strongest anti-religious sentiment in Western Europe (Pulcini, 2020), and the nonreligious are not, as a group, generally tolerant (Cappellen & LaBouff, 2020; Užarević et al., 2019). It bears noting that hostility is also directed at atheists, who are among the least liked people in areas of the world with religious majorities, that this prejudice is centrally motivated by distrust (Gervais, 2013; Gervais et al., 2011), and that data on discrimination against them are probably underreported (Pulcini, 2020).

Third, conversion out of atheism occurs, is documented in qualitative research, and is a minority pathway shaped jointly by experiential, intellectual, and communal factors. Reversibility is contemplated by a subset of atheists, with five interviewees specifically mentioning it (Pulcini, 2020); residual religiosity persists after belief in an objective God lapses (Biernot & Lombaard, 2018); documented returns include cases in which family reconnection and the restoration of meaning are decisive (Pulcini,

2020); and population-level reversals following state atheism and in the Indian reconversion campaigns demonstrate that secularisation is not irreversible (Ładykowska et al., 2024; Pulcini, 2020). The "clue of divine reality" framing maps onto unresolved philosophical debates rather than empirical findings: the senses of hiddenness, the classical dialectic of the hidden and revealed God, the formal argument from divine hiddenness and its rebuttals, and the substantive definition employed by the New Atheism all determine what would count as a clue, and therefore whether return would follow (ADALAR, 2022; Bartolome, 2022; Butakov, 2021; Hashemi et al., 2025; Krüger, 2018; Napier, 2022).

The review also identifies a substantive research gap. The field lacks conceptually precise, cross-culturally robust studies (Pulcini, 2020); predictive work rests on the assumption that current and past trends will continue (Pulcini, 2020); non-Western and Muslim-majority contexts remain markedly under-researched, and the study of apostasy in those contexts is complicated by legal and social sanction and by political incentives to undercount (Eller, 2024; Quadir, 2023). Conceptual limitations persist, since the field's core terms are used interchangeably despite not being synonymous (Brown, 2017). Methodological limitations persist, since contextual norms and social desirability distort self-report and cross-national comparison is hazardous (Pulcini, 2020). Normative limitations persist, since researchers risk reproducing prejudicial images of the groups apostates have left (Pulcini, 2020), and since the historiography of atheism has often been shaped by partisan narratives and contested periodisations (Brown, 2017; Wootton, 1992).

The trajectory from Diagoras to Dawkins is therefore best read not as a story of the gradual triumph of unbelief, nor as a story of its pathology, but as a long and uneven history in which the availability of unbelief, its social cost, its intellectual content, and its emotional texture have varied enormously across contexts — and in which the question of return has never been closed. That the scholarship now recognises unbelief as a continuous presence in European civilisation, rather than as a modern aberration (Brown, 2017), is the precondition for asking better questions about it: not whether atheists are hostile, but under what conditions hostility arises; not whether unbelief is terminal, but what makes it provisional for some and settled for others; and not whether unbelief is modern, but how it has been lived, argued, and sometimes abandoned across two and a half millennia.

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