

The *Ins* and *Outs* of Rural Teachers: Who Are Atheists, Agnostics, and Freethinkers

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Perhaps the most maligned group of people in the United States, atheists and other nonbelievers (e.g., agnostics and freethinkers) reside everywhere and are employed in every field. Disclosure of nonbelief generally imposes costs, such as alienation from family and associates or even loss of employment. As a result, nonbelievers often disguise their views about the existence of a god. This article reports findings from a qualitative study based on interviews with 24 nonbelieving teachers in rural schools across the United States, illuminating the ways these teachers position themselves professionally and intellectually in communities with relative homogeneity of cultural beliefs and practices. Using a person-oriented mode of analysis, the study identified four types of rural non-believing teachers: community insiders or outsiders who disclosed or did not disclose their nonbelief. Their decisions about self-disclosure intersected with community attachment, pedagogical judgments, and regionality, but common across the types was teachers' determination to cultivate their students' thinking. Most teachers believed that intellectual skepticism did not require religious skepticism. This perspective, however, sometimes conflicted with local expectations that public schools inculcate Christian beliefs.

Researchers who seek to understand the complex dynamics of rural schools and communities have investigated the circumstances and experiences of rural residents whose characteristics differ from the norm and whose life choices differ from conventional wisdom about how best to live one's life. This study follows our own path within that tradition (see, e.g., Barton, 2012; Burnell, 2003; Jacob, 1997; Sherman, 2009), focusing on the "life choice" among some teachers to be nonreligious in rural places where religious observance is expected—as it is elsewhere across the United States.

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To learn about the experiences of nonreligious rural K-12 teachers, we interviewed 24 individuals (working in all regions of the United States) who explicitly disclosed their nonbelief in a supernatural deity. Based on our reading of the related literature, we could find no evidence that anyone had previously studied nonbelieving K-12 teachers—wherever located. This report is part of a larger effort, in fact, that included 85 teachers from rural, urban, and suburban locales nationwide.

As our background prominently includes rural education research, the study was attentive to locale, and we asked all interviewees what their communities were like. If locale were not evident in teachers' discourse, we asked about it. Probes often asked about social class structure and dynamics, race, and economic circumstances. As we explain later, our sample was neither random nor stratified, but because we were tracking locale, we were able to determine that 28% of our respondents worked in rural schools. Indeed, we were able to identify which schools they worked in and then retrieve additional contextual data from public sources.

One might frame the principal issue of the study as "marginalization," with the implication being that life choices, including the choice to hold a particular viewpoint

that differs sharply from conventional wisdom, are abnormal, perhaps even *deviant*.¹ Atheism, for instance, would be read as abnormal on such a basis, especially considering that rural community members adhering to strong local norms with respect to religion (e.g., Elder & Conger, 2000) would be likely to make such a judgment. We predictably do not make that judgment, because we understand as legitimate the decision making (about life's meanings and purposes) that arises from many sources including various sorts of thought processes, commitments, and ideologies.

We mention this view at the outset because it underwrites our efforts to keep systematic bias from influencing our data and our interpretation. Neither Barton (2012) nor Burnell (2003) presumed that the characteristics, practices, and beliefs of their subjects (respectively, homosexuality and refusal to pursue college studies) were abnormal, inadequate, or reprehensible. Those scholars' efforts to bracket their personal perspectives, whatever those perspectives might have been, enabled them to derive insights that would otherwise have been unlikely.²

Therefore, we undertook this research with the assumption that atheism *is* normal because it *can* be a reasonable position that *might* even harbor interesting and useful insights for decision making about life's meaning and purposes. Furthermore, we made the assumption that what nonbelieving teachers think about the relevant issues and circumstances (e.g., what it means to hold a view counter to conventional wisdom, what personal skepticism contributes to one's views about teaching) might prove interesting to education scholars and curious practitioners.

At the same time, some evidence suggested to us that rural places might not be uniformly narrow and judgmental in their treatment of difference. Some studies of international immigrants to rural places in the United States, for example,

¹The present study was not conceptualized to address issues of social psychology, though such a conceptualization is clearly possible. For a study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) teacher-education candidates that uses the identity-management framework (van Knippenberg, 1989), see Shelly (2012). According to van Knippenberg, identity management is a strategy for coping with negative attributions of status. Only a few teachers in this sample, however, were dealing with situations where disclosure of their atheism had produced serious negative consequences. This fact in itself, though only a footnote, is a kind of finding (i.e., one well outside the conceptual framework).

²This approach to studying "marginalized" groups does not imply that the idea of "abnormality" is itself no longer a concern of social scientists (e.g., Goode, 2006), but it does suggest that a researcher's decision to classify beliefs or practices as somehow inadequate ought to be made with extreme care in consideration of a broad view of what might be construed as "normal." In a *prima facie* sense, the 2% of citizens who identify as "atheists" would seem no more abnormal than the 2% who identify as Jewish (Pew Forum, 2007). Uncommonness or even rarity hardly justifies such a judgment.

showed that they may find such places hospitable in part because they develop bonds within their own locally-established cultural groups before establishing bonds with others, especially those with long-standing family ties to the local mainstream community (e.g., Raffaelli, Tran, Wiley, Galarza-Heras, & Lazarevic, 2012; see Berkel et al., 2009, for a similar finding regarding rural African Americans). A recent empirical study (conducted in Canada) even found that rural communities, in contrast to urban communities, tended to be somewhat more welcoming to international immigrants (Lund & Hira-Friesen, 2013). In other words, some evidence pointed to the dubiousness of the *a priori* position that rural communities would necessarily be more hostile to cultural differences or unusual individual life choices than urban ones. We saw particular salience to those who study and teach in rural places, where norms governing religious practice are so often reputed to be both narrow and strong (e.g., Barton, 2012; Biggers, 2006).

In particular, then, we decided to focus our first effort at data analysis on the rural teachers who composed 28% of our sample. Our research question reflects this interest, and the question reflects our long preparation to pose it. So what? Rural places are too often dismissed as deficient; simply demonstrating the existence of an unusual—and very active—subgroup in rural America is pushback against the misperceptions that prevail nationally about *all* rural places. But the study goes further. It describes what it is like to be a nonbelieving rural teacher. Our chosen method (person-oriented research) enables this sort of description, even though it is a method unusual in education research.

Finally, we accepted the possibility that differences of creed with respect to religion might be especially problematic in *some* rural communities. And we certainly did not want to overlook the research offering evidence of intolerant beliefs and discriminatory practices in some rural communities in the United States (e.g., Barton, 2012; Cortese & Dowling, 2003). Intolerance, of course, is not restricted to rural places—especially when atheism is the object of intolerance (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Norenzayan, 2013).

Religious Belief and Nonbelief

Many rural people whose religious beliefs—especially their nonbelief—diverge from what is considered acceptable in their communities (e.g., Charles, Rowland, Long, & Yarrison, 2012) also *choose* to remain silent about their religious creeds, wherever these communities and whatever their creed. Nonbelief may be acceptable in some U.S. communities (Charles et al., 2012; cf. Ritchey, 2009), but in more overtly Christian communities it *often* is not (Karpov, 2002). Considering the intensity of religious fundamentalism in some rural places in the United States

(Barton, 2012; Chalfant & Heller, 1991; Whitt & Nelsen, 1975), one might expect greater risks and challenges for people, notably teachers, who disclose their atheism there than in other rural places (Ritchey, 2009).

One might anticipate, moreover, that because teachers in many communities are positioned as moral arbiters (Sockett, 1990), nonbelieving teachers, whatever the U.S. locale, could easily face the risk of being discredited or even ostracized were their positions on religion made public. After all, most Americans believe that religion grounds their morality (Aikin & Talisse, 2011). To be good, in this view, requires belief in a god (see Elder & Conger, 2000, for a complex rural example). Furthermore, Americans, perhaps rural Americans especially (e.g., Berry & Gravelle, 2013), expect teachers to serve as “role models” for their students (e.g., Vidourek, King, Bernard, Murnan, & Nabors, 2011), and such modeling prominently includes “being good” (see, e.g., Hoy, 2001; Tyack & Hansot, 1982; Tye, 2000). Considering these two perspectives, willfully chosen nonbelief would seem to many Americans synonymous with sin (error or even evil)—with not being *at all* good. In support of this view of nonbelief, those who study attitudes toward atheists have suggested that atheists may be the most maligned and distrusted of all social groups in the United States (e.g., Edgell et al., 2006). Many of the atheists we interviewed for this study were well aware of this research claim.

At the same time, nonbelievers are often rationalists and critical thinkers (i.e., “freethinkers”)—characteristics widely valued as educative (e.g., Lent, 2006). Arguably, then, nonbelieving teachers might provide excellent models of the intellectual habits of mind that many schools and communities purport to value (e.g., Blau, 2003). Conflicting perspectives about what teachers ought to model—that is, moral actions grounded in deism or speculative approaches to thinking (including moral reasoning) grounded in rationalism—potentially place nonbelieving teachers in an unusual, possibly uncomfortable, and even vulnerable, position. As a result, how they *position themselves* and how they interpret the need for such positioning could provide significant insights into the complexity of the teacher’s role in various types of communities, and perhaps especially, for all the reasons mentioned, in rural ones.

Research Question, Rationale, and Researchers’ Outlook

Statement of the research question and explanation of the study rationale follow. We also account for our own situation with respect to the study in this section.

Research question. We draw on data from the rural teachers who provided interviews in a larger qualitative investigation of nonbelieving teachers across the United States. Our research question for this first analysis was:

“What is it like to be a teacher in rural America who is an atheist, agnostic, or freethinker?” The study considered how teachers (1) situate themselves in relationship to communities that might treat nonbelief with suspicion,³ (2) bring their moral reasoning and ethics to bear in their school cultures, and (3) conceptualize their professional roles.

Rationale. In addition to surfacing insights based on the experiences of nonbelieving teachers, a study of this sort of religious difference is important in the United States, where secular, public schooling for democratic engagement still figures in public discourse at least as a contested aim (e.g., Apple, 2000). True, separation of church and state might provide a weak moral basis for the common good or for fostering diversity of opinion. But sectarian domination of the public space in the United States offers very little hope for either aim in the view of some observers (Noddings, 2008; Widdows, 2004). Increased sectarianism and intensifying religious fervor worldwide influence the way education constitutes democracies and states, and these trends have serious import for the future of political institutions according to Noddings (2008).

Exploring these issues in rural places in the United States offers a particularly pointed illustration of the dilemmas that nonbelieving teachers face. Rural schools and their teachers are often close to their communities; many rural communities expect members to attend Christian churches and ground behavior in religious morality (Barton, 2012). In addition, a study of nonbelievers in rural communities offers an opportunity to explore how these communities cope with significant diversity, or how they navigate the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion referenced earlier.

Researchers. This research project interested us, in part, because we have lived and worked in rural communities and schools for most of our careers, long ago arriving as transplants from New York City. In fact, as arrivals from cities and suburbs, the experience of being welcomed by our new rural Appalachian neighbors—“poor” and “ignorant” to so many other Americans (Biggers, 2006)—initially surprised us a little and pleased us thoroughly. That welcome was offered despite our obviously divergent backgrounds and beliefs. It made us question our own possible preconceptions about rural clannishness and narrow-mindedness, including the fabled rural narrow-mindedness associated with religious fundamentalism (see, e.g., Barton, 2012). Subsequently, our many years in rural places allowed us to observe first-hand how some rural schools and communities, and not only in Appalachia, deal with religion. Early on we learned that the principle of “separation of church and state” was an ideal more honored

³Most, but not all those we interviewed (including the rural teachers) were comfortable with the term “atheist,” for example, but some preferred to use other words and ideas to describe themselves (especially “agnostic” and “freethinker”).

in the breach than in reality. It bothered the senior authors most when their own children were proselytized in school.

Otherwise, all the authors are simply tolerant of diverse religious outlooks, and the issue did not and does not intrude much, and has rarely seemed threatening. Recently, though, we have come to understand that most Americans (even some of those we interviewed) ground their morality in some form of Christian religion, and that many, perhaps most, Americans regard atheists as inherently immoral (Aikin & Talisse, 2011; Barton, 2012; Hitchens, 2007; Edgell et al., 2006; Goodman & Mueller, 2009). Indeed, Norenzayan (2013) observes that such prejudice amounts to a well-established “worldwide intolerance of atheists” (p. 63). Such insights surprised us, possibly because we assumed tolerance was common, if not universal. Nonetheless, the existence of ample research corroborating the insight suggested to us, as researchers, the usefulness of exploring the issue *among teachers* (that is, within the profession to which we are devoted).

Our first engagement with the research, then, was to determine what studies had been conducted relevant to nonbelieving teachers. We found almost nothing, a discovery that convinced us that we ought to study the issue.

What of our own religious beliefs? All three of us hold the position that such views are private matters—much like the secret-ballot principle that shrouds voting in an election. A minority of our teachers held a similar position on nondisclosure, but more expressed frustration. These teachers felt they could not be themselves without disclosure, but the price of public disclosure could be too high. In our case, we have felt no compunction to disclose publicly and in a general way, and no guilt at nondisclosure of our varied and even changeable views.

That position applies to this research narrative as well. Keeping our religious outlooks private in the context of an empirical study is consistent with our position. In the present narrative, we are providing descriptions as accurately and fairly as we can. True, we think American society ought, on principle, to be much more tolerant of nonbelieving fellow citizens.

Related Literature

In past decades the predicaments of marginalized groups have attracted much attention in social science research (e.g., D’Andrea & Sprenger, 2007), but until recently people who do not believe in a supernatural deity have not been flagged as such a group. Nonbelievers have, however, received some attention as a marginalized group in recent publications—both scholarly (e.g., Aikin & Talisse, 2011; Norenzayan, 2013) and mass-market (e.g., Gutting & Kitcher, 2014; McGowan, 2013). Recent writings about nonbelief and nonbelievers may represent an effort to make sense of the ideas presented by vocal public atheists (e.g., Dawkins, 2006; Hitchens, 2007).

Perhaps because many people in the United States believe rural residents to be more religious than urban and suburban residents (e.g., Wallace, Forman, Caldwell, & Willis, 2003), few works as yet examine the experiences of nonbelievers in rural communities. Moreover, as noted above, we have found no studies to date that explored the experiences of nonbelieving teachers anywhere, let alone in rural places. With no close body of research to draw on, we look to a wider scholarly literature to contextualize the study.

Research on Atheism in General and with Respect to Rurality

Rather recently—within the past decade for the most part—a substantial body of research about atheism in general (in contrast to the broader concept, nonbelief) has begun to accumulate (e.g., Andrews, 2011; Caldwell-Harris, Wilson, LoTiempo, & Beit-Hallahmi, 2011; Edgell et al., 2006; Fitzgerald, 2003; Herzbrun, 1999; Keysar, Mayer, & Kosmin, 2003; Pew Forum, 2007; J. M. Smith, 2011; Straughn & Feld, 2010). Part of the incentive for growing interest may be public controversy. In recent years, under the leadership of figures such as evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2006), atheists have begun to publicize their point of view and even to organize (Cimino & Smith, 2007; J. M. Smith, 2013; Smith & Cimino, 2012). Believers, who far outnumber nonbelievers in the United States, may find such efforts disturbing because believers expect other people to be religious, even if their religions differ. In league with George H. W. Bush, some may even doubt the wisdom of tolerating atheists: “I don’t know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.”⁴

Another possible contributing influence to the recent increase in research literature about nonbelievers is the growth in numbers of people willing to report nonbelief (e.g., Wallace et al., 2003). Despite evidence from recent studies (e.g., Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Pew

⁴This quote has provoked understandable controversy, but such discourse illustrates the level of acceptable prejudice on this issue. In the name of transparency, the exact details surrounding this quote follow. At a 1987 Chicago press conference, then Vice President Bush made the quoted statement to reporter Rob Sherman from the *American Atheist Press*. At that venue, the reporter’s questions were very notably off-point: The conventional stories were Bush’s appearance in Chicago, local disaster relief, and plans for the just-announced Bush bid for the presidency. Doubts were subsequently voiced that the reported Q&A ever took place. The White House nuanced Bush’s views but did not repudiate the cited remark. Indeed, in official correspondence after the election, the White House did allow that “the President strongly believes that religious values ... are a vital part of the ethical fabric of this nation” (letter of June 1, 1989, from White House counsel Robert Lund to Charles Cheves; see <http://www.robsherman.com/advocacy/bush/thirdfax.pdf>).

Forum, 2007; Sherkat, 2008; Wallace et al., 2013), the real prevalence of definitive nonbelief, as well as the prevalence of doubt (nuanced in any number of ways), remains imprecise. Whatever the exact prevalence, however, the number of people who do not believe in a god constitutes a small proportion of the U.S. population (Pew Forum, 2007).

Sociological research on nonbelievers tends to address four issues: (1) the prevalence of nonbelievers (e.g., Pew Forum, 2007); (2) varying perspectives among nonbelievers (e.g., Lu & Chancey, 2008); (3) formation of a nonbeliever identity (e.g., J. M. Smith, 2013); and (4) associations between nonbelief and other personal and demographic characteristics (e.g., Sherkat, 2008; Wallace et al., 2003).

Somewhere between 2% and 14% of U.S. adults report nonbelief, with the low figure referring to admissions of atheism per se (Pew Forum, 2007). The prevalence numbers demonstrate the range of nuance entailed in nonbelief: from theism (belief in a remote, unknowable “higher power”); to a form of “spirituality” not anchored to a supernatural being; to agnosticism (claiming lack of knowledge about the existence of supernatural beings); to an atheism that credits the *nonexistence* of supernatural beings as extremely likely. Nonbelief, in short, is a continuum. Within the nonbeliever community, moreover, only a small minority are at least second-generation nonbelievers—about 2% (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). Hence, researchers have been interested in defining the conditions and sequence involved in relinquishing belief. Variety prevails in the passage from belief to nonbelief, but the central tendency is the development of a broadened cultural awareness that contributes to greater levels of skepticism (e.g., J. M. Smith, 2011). The demographic correlates of nonbelief are suggested by Wallace and colleagues (2003; for their large 12th-grade student cohort), in order of strength of influence: (1) region, (2) parental presence, (3) male sex, (4) ethnicity, (5) urbanicity, (6) and maternal employment.

In contrast to the literature from sociology, a search of the education literature identified only a handful of works—most of which might be classified as normative essays arguing for tolerance of atheists (e.g., Goodman & Mueller, 2009; Noddings, 2008), and just two empirical works that investigated nonbelief—both focusing on K-12 students rather than K-12 teachers (Mayhew, 2004; Wallace et al., 2003). Wallace and associates (2003) conducted a prevalence study primarily, and their findings for 12th-grade students resemble those for the adult population in the nation as a whole—14% view religion as unimportant, and 16% report no church affiliation. Mayhew (2004) interviewed eight students from different religious backgrounds (including one agnostic and one atheist) about spirituality: Students understood the term to reference the human compulsion to make meaning (a very inclusive outlook).

Before turning to literature relevant to our rural concern, we need to underscore the rural findings from the

generic literature on nonbelievers. Residence outside large cities has long been empirically identified as a unique and durable, but weak, influence on religiosity (Blanchard, 2007; Chalfant & Heller, 1991; Miller & Luloff, 1981; Wallace et al., 2003; Whitt & Nelsen, 1975). Again, geographic, compass-point “region,” as per Wallace and colleagues (2003) and Chalfant and Heller (1991), is far more influential, and all such “regions”—even the South—not only harbor both rural places and large cities but all sorts of places that nonbelievers call home. Considerable variability in the possible association between locale and nonbelief prevails, and considerable variation prevails in how nonbelievers negotiate relationships in the particular rural places where they live.

Nonbelief in Rural Community Context

Familiarity with the research literature on rural community, in addition to the experience of living in rural places for many decades, suggests to us the relevance to our study of being a *community insider vs. being a community outsider* (an in-migrant, for instance). Predictably, we found very little literature precisely relevant to nonbelievers raised locally or migrating to rural places. Nonetheless, sociological research on community attachment—which addresses the status of community insiders and outsiders, and in which religion sometimes figures (e.g., Beggs, Hurlbert, & Haines, 1996; Brehm, Eisenhauer, & Krannich, 2004; Elder & Conger, 2000; Mitchell, 2007)—is relevant to our study. Although we cannot provide a thorough summary of this large literature, we indicate within the literature review findings that warrant our subsequent analytic use of the distinction between community insiders and outsiders.⁵

The literature on insiders and outsiders focuses on the construct of rural community attachment, and of particular concern to us are the predictors of attachment. Two predictors stand out: (1) length of residence and (2) religious affiliation (see, e.g., Brehm et al., 2004).

Among our participants are some whose length of residence (including but not limited to lifelong residence) clearly marks them as insiders. What happens to them as they lose their faith is an emergent concern in our study. Have they been shunned? Does fear of being shunned silence them? Or does their long-term affiliation with the community give them permission to be different?

⁵Attachment, of course, is not congruent with being an insider. Outsiders may develop greater attachment to place than some insiders; some insiders may be more attached than others; and, indeed, some rural people may experience attachment that feels to them more like imprisonment (cf. Carr & Kefalas, 2009; De Blij, 2009; Hektner, 1995; Jacob, 1997). Being an insider just means being born in one of these communities. Thus, with our teachers, being married to an insider does not make one an insider oneself.

Religious affiliation also provides a route to attachment so long as a person shares the ideology of an established community church. But not all churches accept newcomers easily. Using nationally representative census data, Blanchard (2007) found that the prevalence of conservative Christian ideology strongly predicted higher community segregation *across* locales.⁶ Many influences in rural places, however, served to reduce segregation (arguably fostering wider attachment), the strongest of which was greater income equality (see also Duncan, 1996, for this rural influence).

Rural Nonbelief Coming out of the Closet

In the rural sociological literature, the only empirical study we could find about tolerance for atheists was Whitt and Nelsen's 1975 work, nearly two generations old at this point, and predating the rise of the religious right in the United States. At the time, their study found that rurality alone did not contribute to intolerance but that lower education levels and higher religious fundamentalism in some rural locales did. More recently, Karpov (2002), a sociologist of religion, studied religious intolerance in the United States and Poland (rurality was not a variable), affirming the predictable association between intolerance of atheists and religious fundamentalism.

Even with so few studies as a basis of support, one suspects that rural nonbelievers, community insiders and outsiders alike, would—on average—find “coming out of the closet” more difficult than urban nonbelievers (Ritchey, 2009). As Jesse M. Smith (2013) suggested, publicly disclosing nonbelief demonstrates agreement with a broad cultural perspective: one that may not resonate locally. Others in rural places, in fact, may confuse such a broad perspective with a desire to leave the community (Corbett, 2007).

Rural places constitute a range of lifeworlds,⁷ some of which may not be particularly tolerant of nonbelievers in general, and not at all tolerant in some specifics—however mild, moral, and respected those nonbelievers might be when still closeted. On the basis both of this generalization about rural lifeworlds and evidence presented in the empirical literature on the correlates of religiosity and attachment (e.g., Brehm et al., 2004; Wallace et al., 2003;

⁶Although the study did not focus on attachment per se, we infer that communities with greater segregation restrict attachment based on a narrow set of membership criteria or characteristics. That is, in our study, too, some communities are predictably more tolerant than others.

⁷Alfred Schutz is credited with inventing this epistemological construct (see, e.g., Schutz, 1932/1967; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). We have had frequent recourse to the construct in our previous qualitative work to indicate the realm of meaningfulness in everyday rural life.

Whitt & Nelsen, 1975), one could predict heavy costs for disclosure in communities where conservative political views, Biblical literalism, and income inequality combine to sustain the tendency to demonize nonbelievers (for some confirmation see Karpov, 2002; Whitt & Nelsen, 1975). But, as we again note, cultural circumstances vary widely in rural places and everywhere else. Norenzayan (2013) reports that half of those who believe in God are Biblical literalists. Such evidence puts the rural circumstance in a much broader cultural context.

Just as one should be careful about concluding that, with respect to tolerance of nonbelievers, *rural* is “the problem,” one should also be cautious in treating the *rural South* as “the problem.” Like other rural places, the rural South incorporates a variety of cultural experiences. For instance, consider Christianity among African Americans in the rural South. In a sense the Black church, which was instrumental in the Civil Rights movement, became a liberation church (e.g., J. P. Smith, 1991); at the same time Black churches frequently embraced fundamentalism, rendering them socially conservative in some ways (Gay & Lynxwiler, 2010). In demographic terms, African Americans, moreover, are the least likely social grouping to relinquish faith in a god (Sherkat, 2008). As this example suggests, even the influence of geographic region on intolerance for nonbelievers—an influence that has surfaced repeatedly in correlational studies—is subject to considerable nuance (J. P. Smith, 1991).

Implications from Existing Empirical and Theoretical Literature

We infer five lessons from the extant literature, the first three based on empirical research and the last two, more impressionistically, from our reading of both empirical and theoretical works: (1) American culture is significantly Christian, and most teachers are probably Christians (Norenzayan, 2013; Sherkat, 2008; Straughn & Feld, 2010); (2) evidence suggests that conservative religiosity makes it difficult for nonbelievers to disclose or discuss positions on religion (Beggs et al., 1996; Blanchard, 2007; Norenzayan, 2013); (3) regional differences are more salient to willingness to negotiate diversity of religious views than rurality, but rurality is weakly associated with lack of tolerance for atheists (Chalfant & Heller, 1991; Wallace et al., 2003); (4) lack of empirical data on the experiences of nonbelieving K-12 educators has stymied research on the experiences of nonbelievers in general, their engagement with professional work, their practical and moral reasoning, and their interactions with others in their communities (including rural communities); (5) to understand the experiences of rural nonbelieving teachers, it is important to talk with them.

In view of the range of literature, we wanted to know how these teachers came to their current views, how they negotiated interactions related to religion and religiosity, what their communities were like, and how they accounted for their own ethical outlooks. Moreover, because so little was known about nonbelief among teachers, we thought it was important to ask questions that allowed teachers the widest latitude to tell their own stories.

Given the rich empirical literatures on rural political economy, rural education, rural sociology (including religiosity), and the nuanced meanings of rural ways of living overall, the failure to examine the experience of rural teachers in the United States who are not Christians because they deny the existence of supernatural beings is remarkable. This sort of silence about a momentous issue is nearly always an indicator of those taken-for-granted meanings that merit scholarly attention for what they disclose about a culture (e.g., Schutz, 1932/1967).

In the case of nonbelieving K-12 teachers, the scholarly silence itself is widespread: The culture involved here is not just rural, and not just the culture of education, but pertains to American culture in general. Founded *definitively* (in its Constitution) as an early secular state, the United States has nonetheless evolved as a largely Christian culture—one that is, in fact, more religious than most other developed Western nations (Norenzayan, 2013). This evolution arguably imposes a variety of constraints on the nature of “public” (secular) schooling itself. But no one in education research is writing about it. So we undertook this rural analysis and the broader study with three ideas in mind: (1) Most Americans understand morality to come from a god, nearly always the Christian tri-partite godhead, (2) most Americans expect teachers to model morality grounded in Christian religion, and (3) not all teachers ground their morality in the authority of a god or the teachings of religion.

These ideas do not constitute a conceptual framework in their own right, but they do fit well with efforts of some critical theorists to examine religion complexly as a set of social practices with the potential to contribute to repression, on the one hand, and to ideas that help frame social justice (i.e., “the good” and “the good life”), on the other (Brittain, 2005). Observing religious belief (and nonbelief) as social practices that interact in complicated ways with other social practices—in our study, practices relating to schooling and rural community attachment (i.e., among both community insiders and outsiders)—adds to a broad and emergent understanding of how ideology works both to sustain and to undermine freedom (e.g., Horkheimer, 1995).

Methods

The question framing this analysis asked, “What is it like to be a teacher in rural America who is an atheist,

agnostic, or freethinker?” We approached this question from a qualitative perspective for several reasons. First, we wanted to understand the experience of nonbelieving teachers—for this study, those in rural places. Such understanding emerges most richly from stories that people tell about their own experiences (e.g., Creswell, 2008; Weiss, 1995). Those experiences, especially in this case, depend in part on the context in which people live and work.

Second, according to our search of the relevant research literature, nothing systematic is known about K-12 teachers in the United States who are nonbelievers, and therefore little guidance exists for a large-scale quantitative survey. We hope this qualitative report about rural nonbelieving teachers will inform such efforts in the future.

Third, as we read the range of literature on nonbelief, we began to appreciate more fully that the issue of belief and nonbelief is centered on thinking (e.g., Herzbrun, 1999; Karpov, 2002; Mayhew, 2004; J. M. Smith, 2011; Wallace et al., 2003). Grappling with religion causes people to ask what others think, why, and how—and what it means for how they live. Those who become nonbelievers as a result of their own thinking about the issue tend to privilege reason as a way to know the world, a perspective that seems educative and therefore potentially connected to the experiences of teachers, and to the sorts of things at least some teachers hope students learn.

Instrumentation

As suggested by the research question and our antecedent curiosity, the aim of the study was to capture the experiences and thinking of rural nonbelieving teachers, hoping to evoke stories about where their nonbelief came from, what it meant to them, and what influence it might (or might not) have on their teaching and other work in their schools and communities (rural ones, in this report).

To encourage participants to tell their stories, we conducted semi-structured interviews. We drafted initial questions, discussed them in several meetings, and finalized a set of seven questions to guide the interviews (see Appendix A).⁸ The key lessons from the literature informed the development of our interview questions, interpreted in view of the school and community context in which K-12 teachers operate. Although the *separation of church and state* is a defining principle of public schooling, rural education research (e.g., DeYoung, 1995; Elder & Conger, 2000; Peshkin, 1978) suggests that the principle is negotiated variously in reality. The nature of that

⁸In particular, we found Herzbrun’s (1999) study methodologically informative. That study belongs to the wider literature on “identity development” in which the treatment of context has thus far been conceptually subordinate (e.g., J. M. Smith, 2013; Visser-Vogel, Westerink, de Kock, Barnard, & Bakker, 2012).

negotiation became a major focus of our questions, but the questions were not narrowly focused on discovering if the principle were honored. For instance, we asked, “Do you have dialog with other teachers about religion or morality?” And we followed up with prompts to learn more about that dialog. The literature on atheists also suggested that nonbelievers often offer accounts of their transition from belief to nonbelief, but we framed the related question less directly: “Where do your moral convictions come from?” In short, we tried to frame the questions carefully to elicit stories about teachers’ experiences. Over the course of the interview experience we developed a repertoire of useful probes⁹ to engage the particularities of participants’ stories.

Participants

Nonbelievers are a minority in the population; they do not exhibit physical characteristics that might identify them; and their status as a highly suspicious subgroup (e.g., Edgell et al., 2006) logically implies that they tend to obscure their beliefs. Rural teachers, however, are an especially visible group overall (e.g., DeYoung, 1995). Given what is known about Americans’ tolerance for nonbelief and the relationship between religiosity and schooling, then, rural nonbelieving teachers would appear to be especially difficult to identify. Random, and even purposive, sampling was not practicable.

We initially approached the challenge of identification by posting a short message in a national magazine for K-12 teachers and invited participants to contact us. The magazine advertisement eventually yielded 17 completed interviews. Partly to help guide the ongoing selection effort, we created a coded and encrypted spreadsheet describing interviewees. Teachers’ locale was *not* an important concern in selection for the overall study; we acquired interviews from all teachers who agreed to participate.

But we did determine locale for each teacher’s school in two ways, first by asking the teacher and subsequently by retrieving the locale of the teacher’s school assigned by the National Center for Education Statistics (2013). In other words, as data collection proceeded, and somewhat to our surprise, it emerged that we were indeed collecting data from a substantial group of rural nonbelieving teachers. We realized (because of our interest and background in rural schooling and rural education research) that a rural analysis had become possible.

Once we had completed that first round of interviews, we contacted a national association with a mission relevant to the study. In this way we discovered a social media site where we posted a second invitation. This message produced 80 responses, yielding a subsequent interview-completion rate of about 60%. At this juncture we examined

⁹The researchers tracked these probes; they are available on inquiry from the senior authors.

our spreadsheet, which helped confirm our impression that we had interviewed comparatively few African American (the most religious demographic group in the United States), Jewish (the least religious), Hispanic, and conservative Republican nonbelieving teachers. For this reason, we decided to post a third invitation—again on the social media site—specifically inviting such teachers to contact us. We also attended a national conference for atheists in an effort to recruit additional participants.¹⁰

These activities did help us recruit additional participants, and when we ceased recruitment efforts, we had 85 interviews with nonbelieving teachers across the nation, in rural, suburban, and urban locales. Of these interviews, 24 (28%) were with teachers in rural or small-town schools. This report is based on these 24 interviews.

Data Gathering and Data Management

We conducted all interviews by telephone. Interviews typically lasted an hour, but a few were as short as 40 minutes, and several required 90 minutes or more to complete. With the assistance of a transcriptionist, we produced verbatim transcripts of all interviews. The typical transcript comprised 20 pages of single-spaced text.

Additional data. Interviewing was a comparatively intense experience for our teachers and for us, and the stories we heard were often related to photographs, videos, websites, or news reports. Rather to our surprise we collected about 20 such artifacts in the course of the study.

Obviously, information about the locale of schools in which teachers worked was crucial to the present analysis. The password-protected spreadsheet of information about interviews included data about interviewees’ ethnicity, grade level, subject specialization—plus other information useful to study management (e.g., school locale and community affluence, interviewer, date of interview). We also recorded field notes to help us remember details about particularly interesting or difficult interviews.

All data were stored on encrypted drives in password-protected files on password-protected machines; personal identifiers were stripped from the final transcripts. Due to the sensitivity of the research topic, we were extremely cautious about protecting the identities of our participants, and about reporting their stories and insights. Protection included the just enumerated electronic security measures, the use of pseudonyms in transcribed interview texts, and (as explained next) composite profiles.

Data Analysis

For this analysis, we decided to use a person-oriented approach (Bergman & Lundh, 2015; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Weiss, 1995). We wanted to convey a sense

¹⁰We are suppressing the identity of these organizations in the name of data security and participant anonymity.

of the experience of persons—in this case, teachers—in rural circumstances. Typically, this approach involves categorizing subjects (persons) rather than identifying themes (ideas, issues, patterns of behavior). Person-oriented qualitative research is particularly useful for inducing generalizations (i.e., the types in a typology) from individuals' developmental experiences and synoptic sense-making, and the approach is used in many domains of inquiry and human-service fields (Bergman, & El-Khoury, 2001; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), though it seems infrequently used in education research. It is not, however, uncommon in sociology (Bergman & Lundh, 2015; Weiss, 1995). According to Bergman and Lundh (2015):

Person-oriented research sees individuals as organized wholes with interacting components operating together in a process to achieve a functioning system. It provides a general framework for problem formulation, research strategy and methodology, and for interpreting findings. Fundamental to the approach is a focus on the individual with the information about him/her regarded as a Gestalt, an indivisible whole, and with a system view, stressing process characteristics. (p. 3)

Such process characteristics can support categorization into types in a manner similar to the way some researchers use belief patterns (e.g., Thomson & McIntyre, 2013) or narrative elements to induce types (e.g., Manning 2015).

One of our favorite rural qualitative studies using the person-oriented approach is Jacob's *New Pioneers* (1997). His analysis amusingly classifies most of his back-to-the-land interviewees as weekenders, pensioners, country romantics, and country entrepreneurs (Jacob, 1997, p. 53). Such typologies—like the one we settled on for this analysis—often use a “Latin square” to categorize persons along two continuous dimensions. Another of our favorite person-oriented analyses, though not rural, categorized Stanford undergraduates using the two dimensions of careerism and intellectualism (Katchadourian & Boli, 1985). Such dimensions are always continua (they are *dimensions*) and so the separation into quadrants (e.g., low or high in one dimension, low or high in the other) is always a matter of judgment.

First phase of data analysis and identification of a tentative analytic framework. Our initial work with the data involved reading the transcripts and using open and axial coding to organize significant ideas into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). When we moved to the next step—seeking explanatory patterns (what Strauss and Corbin refer to as selective coding)—we tried to induce an analytic scheme that fit the data closely and contributed to a

deep understanding of the experiences of the teachers (and the different categories of teachers) we interviewed. The literature on person-oriented research methodology, and our experience reading studies based on it, also suggested the importance of developing a tentative framework to guide our further analyses (Weiss, 1995).¹¹

As is often the case with qualitative studies, our selective coding pointed to analytic categories that already fit to some extent with findings from previous theoretical and empirical literature. In particular, our analytic engagement with the data pointed to the salience of two continua—and the four-cell typology resulting from their use. One continuum related to insider or outsider status with respect to community origin, and the other related to disclosure or nondisclosure (“out-ness” and “in-ness”) with respect to nonbelief.

Second phase of data analysis. Keeping our preliminary analytic framework in view and at the same time working to avoid *imposing* the framework onto the data, we reread the transcripts. At this phase our aim was to develop profiles for *each teacher* based on a set of interacting dimensions. Deep engagement with the data surfaced six salient categories for describing each teacher's experiences: (1) “leads with”—a researcher-created gloss to characterize how the participants put themselves forward; (2) “most salient quote”—the quote, or in some cases quotes, that all researcher members agreed represented the participant well; (3) “pedagogical focus”—usually with a gloss to capture connections of nonbelief to the interviewee's outlook on teaching and learning (i.e., as evidenced by the transcript); (4) “central dilemma”—a gloss describing the interviewee's most prominent struggle; (5) “community and cultural surround”—a summary of the interviewee's characterization of the local school and community; and (6) “pathway to nonbelief”—a description of the sequence in the individual's construction of a nonbeliever identity.

Focusing on these categories, we produced a database with cells arranged to classify each interviewee with respect to each category along with at least one illustrative quote per category. At the start of the process, we were open to modifying the categories based on ideas that surfaced in our discussions of the salient data for each participant, but by the time we got to the fourth or fifth profile our understanding of the categories had stabilized.

Once we had all the profiles, we were able to see obvious contrasts across individuals. In particular, the tentative analytic framework—whether the person was a community insider or a community outsider, and whether the person had chosen to self-disclose or to remain closeted—seemed

¹¹Although some of the literature focuses on quantitative clustering techniques, key theorists (e.g., Weiss, 1995, in sociology) articulate its applicability to qualitative research that deploys semi-structured interviews.

to hold up to the evidence. Again, “insider” meant born where teaching, or born nearby. Attachment was a concern of teachers whether or not they were “insiders.”

Using these two theoretical dimensions, conceptualized as continua, we then created four types that helped us induce the general character of the teachers’ experience: the experience of (1) an insider who was in the closet, (2) an insider who self-disclosed nonbelief, (3) an outsider who was in the closet, and (4) an outsider who self-disclosed nonbelief. In Table 1, we show the number and percentages of participants who fit into each of the four types.

Table 1

Categorization of Interviewees by Community Membership and Disclosure

Community Native	“In the Closet”	“Out of the Closet”
Yes (insider)	4 (17%)	3 (13%)
No (outsider)	11 (46%)	6 (25%)

Note. N=24. Percentages are rounded and do not sum to 100.

Even at this stage, however, we remained open to the possibility that the framework would not suffice to typify teachers usefully. Had cells been empty, we would have examined alternative classification schemes. Alternatives might, for instance, have included regions and remoteness. But community insider status and disclosure figured as very strong lines of discourse in all of the interviews; regionality and ruralness, by contrast, were discussed far less often. Across the board in the language of the teachers, community attachment and the choice about disclosure were very important concerns—to the point that many teachers explicitly worried about the implications of disclosure for community attachment and, in a subset of participants, for their ability to remain employable in (and thereby retain any attachment to) the communities where they worked.

Composite profiles. Having decided upon a person-oriented approach, appreciating the need for absolute confidentiality (the disclosure issue), and affirming our analytic framework, we determined to summarize the data with composite profiles, as described next. Composite profiles are particularly important (within the context of a person-oriented, rather than theme-oriented approach) to protect sensitive information about subjects. Creswell (2012) is very clear about the need for composite profiles: “Qualitative researchers need to be mindful of protecting

the participants’ privacy through masking names or creating composite profiles” (p. 60). For this issue and these participants, masking names was completely inadequate—although for our intermediate analysis, in finalizing transcripts and in creating individual teacher profiles, we did indeed assign pseudonyms purely as a security measure.

We created a spreadsheet (a “data display” in the nomenclature of Miles and Huberman, 1995) in which we included salient information about participants by type. We used this spreadsheet to produce four composite profiles by type. Developing the composite profiles was an intensive process, building on the existing base of our experience of (1) having created individual profiles and (2) holding a series of discussions surrounding classifying teachers according to the four-part scheme we had adopted. We had held separate meetings to classify teachers (the quadrants with more teachers had required multiple meetings), and then in an additional series of meetings discussed the features that described the separate quadrants. On that basis, we then decided, as a team, who would create the rough draft of the composite narrative.

Throughout the study, our collaboration was both intensive and extensive. We held dozens of meetings (most of them virtual; two of us live in Ohio and the other in Texas) and we met for two face-to-face, three- or four-day retreats. For published examples of research teams that used an intensive collaborative process to create composite profiles with a view to disguising individual identities in person-oriented qualitative research, see Lordly, MacLellan, Gingras, and Brady (2012) and O’Neill, Hopkins, and Bilimoria (2013).

As noted by Bergman and Lundh (2015), profiles, including composite ones, are gestalt representations (see also Creswell, 2012) of the people in each of the types. As just explained, we created our draft profiles based on the careful, collaborative review and discussion of the type spreadsheet *and* the individual profiles.

Use of composite profiles aligns well with person-oriented methods (Creswell, 2012; Jacob, 1997; Weiss, 1995), and composite profiles allowed us to use quotes from actual transcripts while disguising the identities of the participants who provided the remarks. This protection is very important in studies where risks from possible exposure as research subjects are high (e.g., Creswell, 2012; Markham, 2012; Mealer & Jones, 2014). As Markham (2012) pointedly notes, high risks justify the “fabrication” involved in circumstances such as prevails in the reality of these teachers’ lives, but this sort of fabrication is no more speculative than any other approach to the interpretation of qualitative data. The surface detail is fabricated here, but the analysis strictly honors the underlying reality—that is what the care of systematic study (i.e., extensive, rigorous, and collaborative data analysis) provides.

Findings

Following the creation of the revised composite profiles (produced after another series of meetings), which we present below, we also induced cross-type generalizations with particular relevance to the dilemmas that all our participants faced (and are represented in the composite profiles). These generalizations are (1) transparency of creed, (2) community attachment, (3) managing the pedagogy, and (4) regionality. Each of these themes connects explicitly to a wide range of rural issues, a range so wide, in fact, that this discussion cannot touch on all such connections. We include this more thematic rendition of findings, however, to make explicit certain important features that are implicit in the composite profiles.

The “lived experience” of participants, we think, is captured by the profiles, but such representations, even in composites, remain necessarily fragmented: They are stories of rural teachers. Note, though, that the “storied” fragmentation actually embeds (or reflects) generalizations induced from interview data. The profiles may resemble fabrications, *but the stories are not fiction*. Thus the consideration of key features across profiles adds a clearer thematic presentation of what is already represented between the lines in the four stories.¹² We conclude the section with a bulleted list of synoptic findings. These thematic characterizations of the experiences of our participants (characterizations that follow the presentation of the composite profiles) provide a context for the issues considered in the discussion section.

Composite Profiles

The four teacher profiles characterize the intersection of the two salient dimensions: insider vs. outsider and in-the-closet vs. out-of-the-closet. Each profile traces the teacher’s developing nonbelief, relationship to community, and approach to pedagogy as it relates to nonbelief.¹³

Samuel Wilson (community insider, in-the-closet).

Samuel Wilson teaches English in a small high school in a Western town, where he grew up in a family whose church attendance was taken for granted. He now comfortably calls himself an “atheist,” but was once upset (and therefore less comfortable self-identifying as an atheist) by the contempt

¹²For an example of a similarly more synoptic approach, see Peshkin’s theoretical treatment of community at the end of his ethnographic *Imperfect Union* (1982).

¹³The connections between pedagogy and nonbelief were described *often* by participants, but not by every participant. In particular, we found that math teachers tended to separate issues of faith from the domain of mathematical logic. Science teachers, by contrast, *usually* made the connection between freethinking and scientific skepticism and respect for evidence.

family and community directed at atheism. His uncle was the minister at his family’s church, and the church had given his family assistance during a difficult time. Since community members were aware of his family’s religious engagement and his religious upbringing, Sam has “passed” with ease as a Christian.

But Sam says that despite his local attachment to the church, little that went on there made sense to him, even when he was a child. An avid reader, the young Sam began a bit later to question Christian beliefs: They could not be verified and did not seem to make sense. His vocal musings troubled family and friends, and their reactions made him aware early that disclosure could hurt the people and community he cared about. So he remains cautious and vigilant:

While I am technically a tenured teacher and pretty safe employment-wise, I fear that if word got out that I was “godless,” that might really sour some families and some of my co-workers to me. (Case transcript, p. 4)

He said he would disclose his position if directly confronted, but he works hard to redirect conversations to avoid that possibility.

To help students become more open-minded, Sam emphasizes critical thinking about issues that surface in literature. Sam related his teaching to insights from his own struggle to think more clearly:

It’s important to think critically, but it’s also important to educate yourself. One of the biggest problems that I have with religion in general, is that, a lot of times, the people who profess belief don’t even know what they believe. (Case transcript, p. 10)

So Sam aims to help students become more systematic in their search for and use of evidence. Sam also indicated that in most years he teaches units about “urban legends”—what they are, how they develop, and why they might be misrepresentations. Again, he drew a connection between learning and teaching to what he prefers to call *freethinking*:

I’ve always been interested in finding and knowing and discovering. Even with English content, there’s always stuff to do with that.... So, I guess that ... what led me to freethinking also, in a different path, [led me] to teaching. (Case transcript, p. 9)

Sam sees protection of the “underdogs” as part of his teaching mission. He empathizes with them and takes pains to help such students participate in class discussions,

guarding them from being overrun by peers, and making sure his classroom is a safe haven for everyone.

He recognizes that Christian beliefs are central to students' lives, but he finds that conversations about such beliefs would likely elicit unproductive evasions from him. For this reason, he won't entertain religious discussions in class.

Sam was curious about the beliefs of a recently hired teacher. Some things the teacher said and used in class suggested a strongly skeptical stance about most matters. But he was not yet ready to talk with his new colleague about religion. Since Sam had determined that he could not talk to family, school, or community members about his nonbelief, he valued his participation in an online community of atheists. It helped him feel less isolated.

Annette Baker (community insider, out-of-the-closet). For just under a decade, Annette Baker, who lives in the South, has taught chemistry at the high school from which she graduated. She married a community outsider and then returned to the area to raise her family.

Annette grew up in a family long established in the local community. Her father was a metal worker in a nearby factory and her mother a pharmacy assistant at the hospital. She was raised a regular churchgoer; her family members were conservative Christians, adhering to strict standards of behavior and belief. Non-compliance was not an option.

But it somehow did remain an option for Annette. Early in her adolescence, the intolerance she saw among church members provoked doubt about church dogma. She saw many Christians behaving uncharitably toward others, usually those of lower social status. The tragic death of a friend caused her finally to question the existence of any god. In college she met people with varied perspectives and began to take seriously her study of science. Finally, a critical reading of the Bible gave Annette two insights leading to nonbelief: (1) Religions have many internal contradictions, and (2) A gulf separates espoused virtues and the unjust practices of so many Christians. In college Annette met and later married someone who shared her perspectives. Her husband found work in the rural community where she had grown up, and the couple is now raising children there. Though he does not describe himself as an "atheist," Annette's husband agrees about the hypocrisy of organized religion.

Annette believes that one must be true to oneself, and so she has disclosed her atheism to those who have asked. And, in a small community, word gets around. When she first started teaching, she answered questions about which church she attended by saying she was not a churchgoer. Now she says she is a "nonbeliever." Though "being out" as an atheist is what she chose, she is still self-conscious:

It was awkward because, as a teacher, you want the kids to be on your side; I didn't want them to immediately decide they didn't like me because I didn't go to church, but I didn't want to lead them on and make them think I went to church. (Case transcript, p. 3)

She understands that gossip about her is inevitable.

Perhaps to cope with feeling judged a deviant and rejected by community members, Annette distances herself from the community, especially its fundamentalists. She criticized this segment for holding narrow views, and resented that some families used religious dogma to bully educators.

When she reported allegiance with community members, she referred to educated, creative, and mostly affluent people. Many had come to the community from elsewhere, but some were friends from college.

Annette values inquiry and problem solving but is wary about her teaching. She worries particularly about being assigned to teach biology, which would entail difficult conversations with school administrators and teachers about her unwillingness to present "intelligent design" as an alternative "theory" of evolution. Even as a teacher of chemistry, she worries that any given pedagogical decision might cause influential community members to turn on her. She feels a measure of security in knowing that school administrators value her contribution and are alert to the power plays of parents who are vocal about the need for the school to accommodate Christian beliefs.

Given her conflicted view of the community, Annette might be a good candidate for moving elsewhere. She noted that some circumstances would make relocation a sensible option. For now, though, she senses the people to avoid and those to cultivate in the community, so that staying makes sense. Staying, despite some discomfort, lets her enjoy raising children in the country, close to family.

George (community outsider, in-the-closet). George Hood grew up in the rural Midwest and now teaches geology and literature in the rural Midwestern town where his wife was raised and her parents still live. The Hoods live in a nearby town, in a separate district: Their children go to school there, not where George teaches. Overall, says George, their town is a good place to raise children. People are kindly. It is safe. Metropolitan amenities are about an hour away.

George has been an atheist for a long time and says he is entirely comfortable not believing in supernatural beings or what they supposedly expect of human beings. His spouse, he says, describes herself as an agnostic. They met in college, and part of what they had in common was a well-established skepticism. Technically, George says, he

too has to be an agnostic, but he regards the probability of a deity as negligible. George says that as a literary sort of person, though, he accepts the world as mysterious:

I resent the notion that even if you're not religious, you should *still* be spiritual. It's silly.... I [nonetheless] find myself with a deep connection to humanity and ... a profound sense of awe and wonder about the universe. (Case transcript, p. 26)

He has taught literature for 20 years, but the recent shale-oil boom stirred sufficient interest locally in a geology course, and he had the necessary credentials to teach it. In geology he discusses the evolution of the planet, and in English he struggles to include works with actual literary value—inevitably dealing with “controversial” issues (e.g., love, death, politics, justice). Both subjects of study (i.e., evolution of the earth and the deeper themes of literature) seem a bit dangerous to him.

George's own family members were very Christian, but his parents rarely attended church and never discussed matters of faith. George sampled many churches in youth but had grown tired of the dogmas by high school. Like his parents, though, he had very little to say about religion to anyone else until he met his spouse. Their children do not yet know what their parents believe about religion, and the Hoods do not want to prejudice the children's thinking about it. Later on, George is certain, belief and nonbelief will be something they talk about with their children.

Separation of church and state is an inviolable principle for George, but in his district, Bibles appear on most teachers' desks; prayer is everywhere (ball games, teachers' lounge, faculty meetings); and posters with “In God We Trust” are common throughout the schools. No one recognizes these as violations as such, but George uses the principle to explain why he will not tolerate religious references or arguments in his classroom. Parents complain, but the high school principal says this is just how George is. George will not disclose his views on religion; nonetheless he has developed (he claims) a muted reputation as the school's lone atheist. He does not mind. No one confronts him, and he keeps his views to himself. The school recently enrolled the children of a Muslim family, and their presence, George reports, is an evolving “object lesson” in tolerance. George also notes that, because he chooses to live in this place, tolerance must apply to him, too:

I sometimes think that I'm doing the same thing that I accuse others of doing. And that's something that's hard to learn as it can go both ways. I have to be open-minded just as I want them to be open-minded. The street goes both ways. (Case transcript, p. 15)

In this instance and in others, George construes the work of teaching as *objective*. Literary works are valuable in themselves as great achievements; the point is to learn about their significance. Geology develops scientific truths; the point is to understand them. Student's *extraneous* opinions (e.g., about religion) are not, by definition, relevant. Students seem to regard him as serious and strict, but also interesting. George says he loves teaching. And his employers, he thinks, see value in his contribution. No one at work and no one where he lives knows of his atheism, but there are rumors. George reports that students sometimes tell him that other teachers say he is an atheist and that he does not know what he is talking about. But he does not feel dishonest about keeping his views private.

He recently joined an online community of nonbelievers. He finds the community both helpful (for “venting”) and curious—curious because the other members are all newly minted atheists and very passionate, even evangelistic, about their new understandings. George says he is patient with members of the online community who are just starting to explore the ramifications of their nonbelief.

June Racine (community outsider, out-of-the-closet). June Racine has been teaching high school math in a south-central state for about 10 years. The school, enrolling 600, is located in an agricultural county far from any city. The community is Christian, but denominationally varied, and several Jewish families live in town.

June has worked in other schools located near large cities in the state but never stayed long anywhere. When she moved to this community, she hoped it would be for the long term but was unsure if she could herself commit to a rural place.

Part of settling in was a period of cautious engagement. Before revealing much about herself, she wanted to understand the students and community. As she became more comfortable, she voiced opinions more strongly. To her surprise, others valued her contributions. She believes she has become a leader among teachers and feels confident about her teaching. She views these developments as evidence she can fulfill the intentions with which she arrived. Her increasing appreciation of the community and faculty and their growing approval of her have convinced June she could spend a long time here.

June reported that district leadership is careful not to favor one denomination over others, that religion is not promoted in school, and the district upholds the separation between church and school. She notes that a variety of after-school, on-campus religious clubs and activities do receive sponsorship from teachers and are sanctioned by administration, but the clubs are merely offered; they are not mandated or officially promoted.

After thinking about the school's policy toward clubs, June recently started a “Freethinkers' Club,” which meets

regularly and attracts the school's oddball and creative students. Something in June's demeanor alerts students to her tolerance, skepticism, and sense of fairness. She told us how she struggles to foil victimization and bullying, and how gay students in particular seek her advice.

As for her own issues of faith, June describes herself as quite sure that no gods of any sort exist. Nevertheless, though she is adamant about not being agnostic, she struggles with the term "atheist":

Well, I describe myself to myself as a humanist. I'm a little negative on the atheist moniker because it's steeped in negativities about what I don't believe rather than what I do believe. (Case transcript, p. 5)

She appreciates the non-rational features of life. The beauty of mathematics especially appeals, but she also reads fiction and paints. Connections among humans, she says, are difficult to account for in a fully rational mode; ideas like justice, fairness, character, and truth are richly meaningful to her, and also enigmatic. Though raised Roman Catholic, by age 12 she began to think that claims of supernatural powers and beings did not fit her experience. In early adulthood the Buddhist approach to life attracted her, and one of her siblings also became an atheist. Her family still attends Mass but has been discouraged by the prevalence of sexual abuse in the priesthood.

At school, June discloses her atheism to students when they ask and has shared her views with five or six colleagues. Whether Christian or not, says June, these colleagues are trustworthy friends whom she likes because they are open-minded. June also notes that she has many Christian acquaintances in and out of school who know her views. No one presses religion on her, and she says her colleagues and friends regard her perspectives as thoughtful. June is interested in religion and is more conversant with the Bible, she claims, than anyone she knows. She seems to understand people's motives for faith. Their faith does not offend her; it works for them, and that is sufficient reason for her to respect their decisions.

Moreover, as an outsider who appreciates the rural place where she now lives, she is not convinced that her own approach to life is one that everyone should follow.

I gravitated through a lot of groups in school. I was an athlete, I was involved in the theater and choir, I participated in language clubs, and I got to meet a lot of different people from different cultures.... I found I can't tell everybody how they should be able to live; and if somebody wants to live different than me, then so be it. (Case transcript, p. 8)

Mutual tolerance and respect characterize June's pedagogy. She aims to foster reason and skepticism but is

equally concerned to develop kindness and fairness. She wants students to ask questions and think logically but does not believe that logic rules out thoughtful faith. June's pedagogy has balance: It spans thinking as well as caring. Her approach to life and learning embraces a secular sort of "reverence." Though she teaches mathematics, she does not anticipate logical consistency in everyday life, but rather enjoys the charm of life's inconsistencies and ironies.

Comparison Across Types

This cross-case comparison develops themes evident not just across the composite profiles but across all these rural teachers. As noted earlier, four themes emerge from a deep engagement with the transcripts and the extensive, and usually intense, discussions needed for the team to analyze them. Again, though, the purpose is to pull out generalizations that the profiles have been designed to represent as "lived experience": (1) transparency of creed, (2) community attachment, (3) managing the pedagogy, and (4) regionality. This discussion, as well, makes visible the continuous variability of experiences and dilemmas that typologies (such as the one in this study) may seem to obscure.

Community attachment. Across the types, teachers' perspectives fell along a continuum between frustrated and contented with their rural communities. At the frustrated end, concerns about misuse of school funds for religiously-oriented events or about community pressure to include religion in school led to dismay, or even disdain, producing an unwillingness to attach to the community. However, the acknowledgment that "this is just how things are" was the more common response, and most teachers did not allow what they perceived as religious hubris to discourage them from appreciating the local place and people. Most participants, across types, valued stability and long-term rural residence, and many—both insiders and outsiders—had achieved it. The price of their stability and comfort—working and living in highly religious cultures—seemed to them reasonable. (The data set includes many city-based teachers who also live and work in highly religious cultures.)

Nevertheless, decisions about where to reside (e.g., in a neighboring rural community) and about other avenues for connections to like-minded people accompanied some participants' realization that the rural communities where they were employed as teachers were particularly intolerant.¹⁴ The concern for these teachers was their

¹⁴Note the implication of this finding for our classification scheme: The tolerance of a community most certainly influences teachers' assessment of the costs and benefits of disclosure (i.e., if a teacher believes disclosure is necessary for personal integrity, as was the case with some). Teachers described communities differently in this respect, but all were aware that the "worldwide intolerance of atheists" (Norenzayan, 2013, p. 63) was especially

community's level of *willingness* to permit atheists to become attached. Some teachers characterized features that seemed to augur well for such willingness: the presence of several different Christian sects, past dealings with newcomers who held alternative beliefs or even nonbelief, or residents' tendency to accept cosmopolitan norms (e.g., diversity, anonymity). As intimated elsewhere in this study, the character of the particular rural community shapes possibilities for rural nonbelieving teachers. Some rural communities will eject such teachers, but others will accept them. As some of the teachers noted, too, their own skill at negotiating interactions, and their own respectfulness in such interactions, goes a long way, in general, in rural communities.

Transparency of creed. Within the dataset (n=24), in-the-closet community outsiders (n=11) were the most common type, and George Hood's experience illustrates a common approach to remaining in the closet: transparency of creed is *not* a requirement of honesty. Indeed, secular society protects creed with the right of privacy: No one need disclose it.

George has been an atheist for a long time, and he is comfortable with his views. Those who have struggled long and hard with issues of church and faith and have become atheists more recently—such as Sam Wilson—seem to find George's position problematic. They tend to believe, like June Racine, that honesty, especially with students, requires transparency of creed. Community insiders like Sam Wilson (in the closet) and Annette Baker (out of the closet) tend, not surprisingly, to protect their existing relationships from the effects of disclosure. Sam exercised caution by non-disclosure, whereas Annette disclosed prudently but found that word gets around in rural communities. Transparency of creed is for nonbelievers a particularly rural issue, probably *not* because of higher levels of intolerance for atheists, but because of the up-close-and-personal interactions so typical of rural communities (see, e.g., Peshkin, 1978, 1982). As some teachers noted, colleagues often *suspected* their lack of faith, a suspicion that might well be the result of frequent contact.

Managing the pedagogy. Across types there was a continuum between fearfulness and assuredness when it came to managing pedagogy. On one extreme, a teacher would always choose to play it safe; on the other, a teacher could confidently develop inquiry-based curriculum around "controversial" texts or ideas. Of the four participants of the "Sam Wilson" (in-in) type, three avoided risk as much as possible. The three participants of the "Annette Baker" (in-out) type nuanced pedagogy differently: one was governed by fear; one thought about each choice before acting; and one indicated that moral grounding led to transparency and

inquiry, and so proceeded with "risky" pedagogy despite fear. Of the 11 participants of the "George Hood" (out-in) type, several discussed developing inquiry-based pedagogy while also working to conceal nonbelief. Two fit solidly into the "fear of being shunned leading to silence" camp. But the rest seemed confident. Of the six participants of the "June Racine" (out-out) type, five were open, inventive, and confident—dispositions that allowed them to manage pedagogy with assuredness. Note that part of the challenge of managing the pedagogy is worry that "too much" skepticism or too strong an emphasis on thinking might render nonbelief more transparent. This dilemma is sharp for rural nonbelieving teachers, arguably sharper than for teachers working in more cosmopolitan, usually urban, contexts where religious heterogeneity and anonymity are the norm (Chalfant & Heller, 1991; Edgell et al., 2006).

Regionality (addendum). The composite profiles reflect the regions that predominate across the dataset: Annette Baker and June Racine, with quite different experiences, worked in the South. Overall, about half of the 24 teachers worked there, so one possibility is that nonbelieving teachers in the rural South had stronger motives to participate in the study than those in other rural regions. Teachers from the rural South generally, but with notable exceptions, offered a picture of communities that were homogeneously sectarian and did not expect to encounter, or perhaps to tolerate, other creeds. Whatever the region, however, most rural teachers had observed American intolerance for nonbelievers as well as suspicion of non-Christians in general.¹⁵ Some had at one time lived in metropolitan areas (e.g., during college) where they had experienced greater (sometimes much greater) tolerance. One community insider was definitive in her desire to relocate to such a place, a minority was conflicted about moving, and many were content to remain in the region where they lived.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the study was not seeking representativeness, nor was it attempting to quantify differences in the experiences of participants or in characteristics of the communities where they worked. Participants' stories suggested, though, that highly homogeneous communities, which existed across regions, did limit attachment opportunities for nonbelievers.

¹⁵Within the dataset *community insiders*, such as Annette Baker, tended to work in the South. *Community outsiders*—such as George Hood and June Racine—outnumbered insiders, however, by more than three to one and tended to work in regions other than the South.

¹⁶No teachers in the rural sample worked in New England, and only one in the Mid-Atlantic region. In the full dataset on which this study draws (n=85), two teachers worked in Canada, four in New England, seven in the Mid-Atlantic, and one taught high school online (i.e., region—and place itself—was not relevant to the teaching context).

strong in the United States overall (cf. Edgell et al., 2006). Nearly everyone was cautious; no one believed tolerance was assured.

How participants navigated the relative openness of their communities had a lot to do with their personalities, family linkages, social networks, and pedagogical missions. At the level of the granularity of our study, regionality *did not* stand out as a highly salient marker of participants' fear or discontent.

Synoptic Findings

- Most rural interviewees (perhaps 80%) came to nonbelief through encounters with a variety of cultural perspectives combined with problematic experiences in church. Several reported reading the Bible completely and critically.
- Rural teachers' appreciation and use of reason extended to pedagogy. They did not see students' religious beliefs as interfering with the *capacity* for logical thought.
- No rural teacher reported *proselytizing* atheism (or any other form of religious freethinking) to students.
- Rural nonbelieving teachers offered support to students from a variety of marginalized groups (especially LGBT students, but also culturally different students of various sorts).
- All rural teachers reported at least some Christianizing of their schools' cultures, and some reported very strong Christianizing: Bibles on most teachers' desks and crosses in classrooms, prayer preceding all school events, and so on. These incidents were not rare; they were common practice in some schools and districts.
- All nonbelieving rural teachers saw their perspectives as more open (perhaps more "cosmopolitan") than was typical in their communities—especially those where fundamentalism dominated.
- All interviewees, rural and non-rural (n=85) recognized that nonbelievers (atheists, in particular) were an extremely disparaged group in the United States. Many believed they belonged to the *most* disparaged social group in the United States. *Everyone* interviewed thanked the researchers for conducting the study.

Discussion

Findings from the study helped characterize the experiences of rural nonbelieving teachers, and for those interested in rural education, these teachers' perspectives on and strategies for teaching may be of greatest interest because they address the question, "What unusual contributions to rural schooling might nonbelieving teachers make?"

Before answering this question, we consider the link rural teachers made between teaching and their nonbelief. We conducted an audit of relevant transcript data and found that 18 of the 24 teachers explicitly reported such connections; another 4 illustrated the connection more tacitly (i.e., they did not mention religion or religiosity explicitly but indicated an unnamed local opponent to reason, the identity of which can be inferred contextually). Three teachers (including one of those making explicit connections) denied a connection. One of these said that her view of teaching science had not changed because she had become an atheist: she had always prized scientific skepticism and taught it. In that case, perhaps, pedagogically relevant commitments led to atheism. Another (a math teacher) denied an influence, but then also illustrated several ways nonbelief influenced interactions with students. Here are two illustrative examples from the transcripts, which make the connection between teaching and nonbelief explicit (page numbers refer to the individual transcripts):

Teacher 1. I've always been interested in finding and knowing and discovering. And even with English content, there's always stuff to do with that. And, helping other people to do it as well, then, sort of becomes the other end of that. So, I guess that's a way in which ... what led me to freethinking also sort of, in a different path, led me to teaching. (Transcript, p. 9)

Teacher 2. My nonbelief and my desire to constantly ask questions has influenced the way I teach by making the kids ask themselves questions and give me evidence and give me answers. (Transcript, p. 4)

Our findings, then, showed that nonbelieving rural teachers shared a particular devotion to the intellectual aims of schooling. Many rural teachers—in fact many educators in all sorts of locales in the United States—do not see the nurture of intellect (e.g., critical reasoning, inquiry, reflection) as the primary aim of schooling (Howley, Howley, & Pendarvis, 1995). Instead, they typically see aims such as socialization, preparation for economic success, and economic development as more important (see, e.g., Brown, 1991; Duncan, 1996; Theobald & Campbell, 2014).

Among our participants, however, *everyone* described teaching primarily as a commitment to intellectual aims, though with considerable variability in what such a commitment required of them, and indeed, what it entailed. Due to their commitment to intellectual education, the nonbelieving teachers sought to engage their students in projects requiring inquiry, reflection, and critical reasoning. Many contrasted their approach to that of some colleagues for whom a more literal treatment of "academic

knowledge” was sufficient. Several characterized the alternative approach as “indoctrination.” In their own lives, moreover, these teachers—usually after an extended period of difficult reflection and reading—came to view religious belief as incompatible with *rational thinking*, which they all nonetheless saw as fundamental to intellectual work with students.

This apparent contradiction between the teachers’ personal and professional perspectives on rational thinking might have left them with little room for acting on their commitment to an intellectually-focused type of education. Many were able, however, to navigate this apparent contradiction by treating skepticism as a broader aim than religious skepticism. In other words, these teachers did not regard *religious* skepticism as a necessary condition for intellectual skepticism, and they worked from the assumption that students could become better thinkers irrespective of their current religious beliefs. Given their paths to nonbelief, though, many also had reached the conclusion that *narrow-minded* religiosity constitutes a serious impediment to rational thinking, and a few saw all belief in the supernatural (sometimes understood as “spirituality”) as inherently hostile to rational thinking.

Perhaps because some of the participants lived in communities where fundamentalist churches played a broad role in shaping local values (see e.g., Barton, 2012), they were particularly alert to the struggles of students from marginalized groups, especially LGBT students. They often took care to restrain students’ use of slurs (e.g., “so gay”), and a few served as sponsors for groups like the Gay-Straight Alliance or the Freethinkers Club. Some complained of racist practices in their schools, although comparatively few of these rural teachers worked in schools with substantial non-White enrollment.

One of our most common probes, which was relevant in most interviews, was, “Do you consider yourself a spiritual person?” Most teachers said, “No,” but most also followed up by observing that what passed as spirituality, in their varied outlooks, concerned the empathy of humans for one another (cf. Mayhew, 2004, for believers). Combined with the teachers’ devotion to skepticism and reason, their insistence on being actively empathetic led *nearly all of them* to talk about their own commitments to social justice. This combination of qualities suggests to us a secular version of morality. The difference with the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) is that determinations of right action come not from fear of punishment at breaking the commandments of a “Big God” (Norenzayan, 2013), but from observation, logic, and reflection.

As members of rural communities that were typically inhospitable to nonbelievers, teachers varied in their levels of caution. Whereas none was a proselytizing atheist,¹⁷ the

teachers who were out of the closet seemed to think that being open about their nonbelief was a way of being true to themselves. By contrast, those who were in the closet feared repercussions to career or thought that the potential community conflict that disclosure would cause was a cost too high to justify coming out. Some of these teachers—whether or not they had disclosed nonbelief—seemed to take the position that nondisclosure to students was their specific obligation as a teacher: Religious positions were not, in their view, relevant in the literature, history, math, or science classroom.

Whatever their particular circumstances and their particular perspectives on self-disclosure, all the nonbelieving rural teachers we interviewed struggled to live an examined life and were trying to help their students take on that project as well. As earlier findings suggest, however, cultivating the life of the mind can be a fearful prospect in many communities across the United States and elsewhere in the world (Akin & Talisse, 2011; Barzun, 2000; Norenzayan, 2013; Howley et al., 1995).

“evangelizing”—of atheism as a contradiction for any freethinker. In this view, atheism *might* be an outcome of (free) thinking, but *inculcating* atheism would be an action that undermined (free) thinking. Some voiced this view in statements like, “live and let live.”

¹⁷Some interviewees, indeed, viewed the promotion—the

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Appendix A

Guiding Questions

1. What term (for example, atheist, freethinker, agnostic, or some other term) do you use with other people to characterize your stance toward religion? How does that term fit with what you believe?
2. What is it like to be a teacher who is an atheist (freethinker, agnostic, or whatever the interviewee uses as his or her preferred term)? How does it influence your teaching? Your life?
3. Where do your moral convictions come from?
4. Do you have dialog with other teachers about religion or morality? What is this dialog like? If you do not have such dialog, why not, in your view?
5. How do you respond when others in your school talk about their religious beliefs and practices?
6. What are some examples of occasions when you discuss theist or atheist convictions with students?
7. How is religious belief handled in your school? In your community? In your home?