

The Religious Normation of the Nonreligious in the United States (working title)

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So far, research about the relationship between the religious and the nonreligious has almost exclusively focused on the relation of the nonreligious towards religion. The other side of that relationship, namely the way atheists are perceived and treated by the religious, has been systematically understudied. Therefore, my dissertation focusses particularly on the perception of atheists as a group that violates the most basic religious norm: to be religious. I study the religious norms in regard to atheism, how they are being expressed by the religious and how they are at the center of conflicts between the two groups. As a result, the project creates not only new empirical knowledge about an understudied topic, but also develops a new understanding of religion.

I conducted over 158 qualitative (group or individual) interviews of different lengths with atheists and believers who are either of different religious affiliations or nonaffiliated. It is therefore probably the biggest qualitative data-set about the topic worldwide. The project takes an exploratory research design approach, which is based on qualitative data analysis influenced by the Grounded Theory of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. That means that I do not start out with a thesis, nor do I try to fit my data into theories. Instead I start my analysis with open questions and analyze the data by identifying prevalent patterns, refining them with new material and confronting them with contrasting material in order to explore the basic meaning structures of the answers. So instead of using data in order to prove or disprove a theory, I use the data to create theory.

Publications on the topic include:

(2017): Varieties of Nonreligion: Why some people criticize religion, while others just don't care, in: Quack, Johannes/Schuh, Cora (Ed.) Religious Indifference: New perspectives from studies on secularization and nonreligion, Springer, pp. 219-237.

(2016): The Power of Religion and the Secular. Religious Normation and its Consequences for the Civil Rights of Atheists, Patheos. Hosting the Conversation of Faith,
<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/secularspectrum/2016/11/the-power-of-religion-and-the-secular/>

(2015): Der Religionsbegriff der Religionswissenschaft im Spiegel von Nichtreligion und Nonkonformität. Religiöse Normierung als blinder Fleck eines implizit emischen Religionsverständnisses, Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft 23/1, S. 188–206.

(2015): The Blind Spot in the Study of Religion: Religion's Impact on the Nonbelievers, in: Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network-Blog, <http://blog.nsrn.net/2015/03/25/the-blind-spot-in-the-study-of-religion-religions-impact-on-the-nonbelievers/#more-548>.