

ARTICLE

The Unbelieved and Historians, Part II: Proposals and solutions

Luke Clossey¹  | Kyle Jackson² | Brandon Marriott³ | Andrew Redden⁴ | Karin Vélez⁵

¹ Simon Fraser University, Canada

² Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Canada

³ Institut für die Späte Altzeit, Guatemala

⁴ University of Liverpool, United Kingdom

⁵ Macalester College, United States

Correspondence

Luke Clossey, Simon Fraser University.

Email: lclossey@sfu.ca

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Abstract

Taking a cue from their less-than-marginal place in scholarship today, we call supernatural beings the “Unbelieved” and the explicit or implicit denial of them “Dogmatic Secularism.” We argue that objective historians should not discount, in advance, evidence that points to the existence or involvement of the Unbelieved in history; instead, we should cultivate a sceptical attitude towards all sources. In this, the second half of a two-part essay, we first highlight the work of recent scholars who have pioneered a trail beyond Dogmatic Secularism. We conclude with practical suggestions towards a more truly empirical attitude towards sources involving the Unbelieved.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The first part of this essay¹ argues that there is a Dogmatic Secularism implicit or explicit in much mainstream scholarship on the history of religion. This perspective dismisses the possibility that the supernatural, which we here call the Unbelieved, exists, influences history, and is subject to investigation by historians. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, insists that the indigenous belief in the deity Thakur's involvement in the 19th-century Santal Rebellion cannot be taken seriously, but must instead be “anthropologized.” In that previous installment, we survey scholarship on the Santal Rebellion and on the history of religion more broadly that strangely contorts itself by reducing religion to social or psychological explanations.² In contrast, we intend to look back to an older, Pre-Enlightened form of genuine scepticism, that by doubting the *certainty* of all (even everyday) knowledge doubled down on the *possibility* of all (even extraordinary) knowledge. Before the Enlightenment, unbelief was typically specific rather than blanket and intellectually engaged rather than *a priori* dismissive.³

Shifting gears, this installment of our essay begins (Section 2) by calling attention to pioneering scholars who are, already, trying to engage more fully with the Unbelieved. We then (Section 3) add ourselves to their company and try to blaze an even more direct trail, with three specific proposals born of much debate amongst ourselves. The essay ends (Section 4) with our own reflections on the most immediate dilemmas this approach might entail, although we hope in their responses readers will take us through them and beyond. Indeed, we try not to be proscriptive and hope that to inspire new ways of taking the history of religion seriously.

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2 | PIONEERS LEADING US OUT OF THE SECULAR-DOGMATIC HAZE

In recent years, an awareness of the limitations of the secularist perspective has emerged even within critical theory.⁴ Kalpana Ram complains that feminist and Marxist discourses “discount any possibility of the genuineness of a phenomenon like spirit possession,” which thus remains “awaiting a discourse to give it meaning.” In her account, spirits speak, or enter and attack humans. Greater acceptance allows us “to recognize experiences of presence that are available even in a ‘secularized’ world.” She does not ask secular intellectuals to recognize spirits, but “to show that there are aspects of existence ... that can also be illuminated by something as unfamiliar as possession.” Possessed mediums allow us to develop a new kind of agency (Ram, 2013, pp. 4, 63, 144, 273). Similarly, Lata Mani warns against knowledge “construed as a set of procedures for containing and taming complexity” with “foregone conclusions or guaranteed outcomes,” and against “spiritual epistemologies being considered as belief not knowledge.” Instead she reminds how certain “dimensions of sacred and secular frameworks can fruitfully invigorate each other.” Her spiritual approach allows her to be advised by the goddess Kali and to remember how “into my consciousness at this time flowed unbidden the knowledge” of a goat’s past life (Mani, 2013, pp. 2, 4, 165; Mani, 2009, pp. 1, 8).

This essay hopes for something more grounded and less sophisticated, a reintegration of the so-called “sacred” into the normal historical world. We insist on the possibility that Mani’s goat had a past life, but rather than allow that knowledge to flow into ourselves, we hope to expand the scope of the usual empirical investigation to include such claims. We have argued for a sceptical approach that includes the best parts of the sacred and the secular frameworks by not accepting their dogmas and have targeted secular dogma because it has a near-monopoly in the academy.

We have been cheered by the efforts of various historians to push back against what we call here Dogmatic Secularism. Collectively, these endeavours serve as a step towards achieving what Kenneth Mills has called our “near immersion” in the reality of our historical subjects (Mills, 2014, pp. 115–6).

We are certainly not the first historians to deal with this and related problems. Daniel Lord Smail and Andrew Shryock, when discussing the premodern, note that “modernity generates its own oblivions” (Smail & Shryock, 2013, p. 711). Few have expressed the general issue, and its consequences, better than Erik Midelfort, who argues that

When we ignore the awkward realities and contradictions of this or any period, we shortchange the past. We shortchange ourselves as well. If we choose to remember only the ‘progressive’ parts of history, the ones that readily “make sense” to us, we oversimplify the past and our own lives. We cultivate an artificially naive view of the world (Midelfort, 2005, p. 6).

In his introduction to the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, Robert Thurman expresses his annoyance that the text is ascribed to Asaṅga, when Asaṅga himself had insisted that he was merely channelling the bodddhisatva Maitreyaṇātha. Thurman points out that the

modern prejudice that a celestial being named Maitreyaṇātha ... could not exist since there are no celestial beings, there are no heavens in the desire realm, there is no such thing as a genuine revelation, and so on, is nothing but a prejudice, a bit of modernist, materialist, secularist ideology, no more and no less rational than the belief in all of the above (Thurman, 2004, p. xvii).

St. Joseph of Cupertino seems to truly levitate in Carlos Eire’s scholarship on miracles. Noting the sworn testimony of hundreds of eye-witnesses, Eire asks, “what is more ‘childish’: to ignore levitation or to acknowledge its presence in history?” That is, why “is the only fact we can accept about human levitation the ‘fact’ that others, long ago, thought it possible?” (Eire, 2009, pp. 308, 323). In his recent study of Chinese dragons, Timothy Brook finds the “easiest” and “more interesting” explanations of these sightings to be treating them as mass hysteria and as metaphors, respectively. We suggest that treating the dragon sightings as dragon sightings would be even easier and more interesting, but we applaud how his main point powerfully reorients the professional perspective: “Our inability to see dragons as dragons is our peculiarity, not a peculiarity of those who could” (Brook, 2010, pp. 20–1).

Ann Waltner does not address the issue directly, but writes plainly of the Daoist adept Tanyangzi 曇陽子, who “with an audience of 100,000 people present ... ascended heavenward in broad daylight (in the company of a snake) and attained immortality.” During her time on earth “deities ... visited her,” and after her ascension she “appeared” afterwards in dreams in which Tanyangzi “authorizes” the writing of her biography. Impressively, Waltner makes use of Tanyangzi’s religious power to explain the commanding tone she uses in her writings. Waltner is not entirely consistent, however, as she introduces her immortal subject as “Tanyangzi (1557–80),” as if she had died in 1580, and later mentions “the end of her life” (Waltner, 2011, pp. 213, 215, 216, 219, 228–9).

David M. Gordon locates the specific problem in Luise White’s study of colonialized miners in the Copperbelt Province who are *Speaking with Vampires*:

The relationship of vampires with the extractive colonial economy is an effective and engaging metaphor, but one developed by White, and not by the workers of the Copperbelt. Instead, for the inhabitants of Copperbelt town, vampire rumours linked the spirit world to the physical world directly.

He goes on to explain the more general problem:

Neo-functionalist scholarship is yet another interpretive strategy employed by secularists to render spirits into an explanatory framework with which they are at ease. A post-Enlightenment discourse that treats spirits as distant, prayer as an ineffective intervention, and miracles and curses as false makes it difficult to understand a world in which people believe that spirits wield influence...

Gordon has moved us from “Africans steeped in irrational, exotic, or traditional beliefs” (our italics) to Africans steeped in the “rich products of the human imagination” (Gordon, 2012, pp. 3, 6, 8). Similarly, Michael Lambek can describe spirits as “fictional but not simply fictitious” (Lambek, 1996, p. 238). The shift from delusional Africans to Africans acting on their delusions is a necessary first step, but what happens if we allow for the possibility that their beliefs are products of reality, not of the imagination? For truly sceptical historians, exotic and irrational beliefs are welcome, as they are exotic and irrational only relative to our faux-rational Enlightenment perspective.

Frederick M. Smith has located a parallel, if not the historical roots, of the Dogmatic Secularism in the witch hunters of five centuries ago. Some scholars, he notes, “have, it seems, unwittingly taken up the mantle of their clerical forebears, assigning it a place under the rubric ‘hermeneutic of suspicion,’ then superimposed it onto their anthropological subjects.” Those scholars and those clerics share “a totalization of their own ontological worldview and a privileging of it over that of their subjects.” The result of this process is the emergence of “the dominant and still very Christian scientific paradigm, something that most in the modern Western academy have failed to problematize.” Just as Chakrabarty can “provincialize” Europe even while clinging to the European Enlightenment, Smith can call for the “problematization” of the “totalizing academic paradigm” even while maintaining that scholarship must “follow ... the positivist moorings of science, at least to the extent of searching for mechanisms for distant, difficult, or vague ideas, such as possession” (Smith, 2006, pp. 51, 83–4). If we truly provincialize Europe and truly problematize the academic paradigm, what would we be left with? Could we broaden positivism to include the Unbelieved, rather than reducing them to mechanisms?

Robert Orsi has run out of patience with the current scholarly approach to religion. Regarding the usual topics (“the spaces and times of shrines and pilgrimages, ... the circulation of ritual objects, and so on”), he sighs, “we have probably talked enough about all this now.” Continuing to do such studies in the same vein distracts us from the real

challenge of understanding how people meet their gods and how their gods meet them, how humans and their gods make their ways together through the challenges and excitements of life, how the gods become dwellers in this same modern history, independently of their human counterparts, and what they get up to.

For Orsi, the “problem is that we have no idea what to make of the bonds between humans and the spirits really present to them within the limits of our critical theories.” Instead, we merely leave these matters for the theologians to play with. To counteract this, “the presence of the gods and humans to each other in the varied spaces of their

interactions with all the practices and things such encounters generated has to become the domain of critical theory, too, and of history.” Despite this promising battle cry, Orsi continues to use the anthropologizing language of religious studies to deflect a Marian appearance into a number of “sites ... characterized by their multiple instabilities, where there’s an excess of expression and experience” where “the boundary between private and public experience is blurred” (Orsi, 2008, pp. 12–3). These poetic assertions might well be true, but they may still distract from the reality of Mary.

Brad Gregory, who has written *The Unintended Reformation* on how the modern academy gags historians of religion and has explained the problems with asserting, rather than postulating, that God does not exist, responds to this prompt with frustration about Orsi’s proposed solutions. Gregory writes,

We can simply describe as sympathetically as possible how Bernadette experienced Mary’s appearance and understood her message, based on our sources, noting that it is entirely possible that Mary actually appeared to her, but that historians can neither confirm nor deny that appearance (Gregory, 2008, p. 22).⁵

Gregory’s attitude towards religion is opposite to that of the secularists, but he still keeps Mary in a separate category, safe from the secularists’ affronts, but thus also immune from historical investigation. If historians were genuinely sceptical, could Mary return to history?

We are grateful to these pioneers and to their capacity for self-reflection, and urge them to take us even further and to give us even further distance from Dogmatic Secularism.

3 | OUR PROPOSALS: REVIVING TRUE SCEPTICISM

We had several disagreements when composing this essay—most notably on our ability to work with and evaluate sources in which the Unbelieved are prominent—but we all agreed on a number of key points.

We are not calling the Unbelieved “Unbelievable.” Most people today and throughout history have had little difficulty believing in their existence or at least in the possibility of their existence. The temporal nature of the participle “Unbelieved” is meant to suggest that our current professional misconception may not be permanent. Although this essay’s authors have a variety of religious and epistemological beliefs, we all share an open-minded scepticism, and we all see problems in many historians’ dogmatic assumptions—even and especially when implicit—that limit the potential of our historical research. The main point we want to make is

We should not assume that the Unbelieved do not exist.

We are not saying that the Unbelieved do exist. Such an assertion would be as problematic, almost, as the secular dogma we are trying to escape. Even less are we making claims about any particular Unbelieved; we are not asserting, for example, that the Abrahamic god intervened in all human affairs. The problem we flag here is a foundational epistemological issue that goes beyond the context of any one belief system.

We do not mean to assume that all people outside the academy, or outside the West, or before the modern era, all find the Unbelieved compelling or even have similar beliefs about the Unbelieved. The tendency to reduce the vast array of beliefs that exist and have existed into a homogenized “primitive” or “superstition” is another consequence of modernity’s grip on historical writing today.

We do not want to explicitly or implicitly assume that the Unbelieved have indeed done everything historical sources attribute to them. We have to test the evidence about the Unbelieved, just as we would test any evidence. The sources most relevant to the history of the Unbelieved can be difficult to handle, but the same can be said, for example, of the best sources for the history of women and the history of Indigenous peoples. If enterprising historians can breathe life back into the voices of women and Indigenous peoples, to the benefit of our discipline, perhaps we can expand the range of historical actors further to include the Unbelieved as well. Many of the relevant sources, such as the sworn testimony of multiple eye-witnesses, which sometimes buttresses accounts of miracles, are from a positivistic perspective as reliable as we could reasonably expect.

We might usefully acknowledge and remember that we are dealing with nonhuman actors, whom we do not know well. It may even be tempting to test our histories to see if they read the same by replacing references to the Unbelieved with human names—which would suggest that we are treating both categories the same. However, although we want to cultivate the same sceptical attitude towards the Unbelieved and historical humans, treating both the same ontologically is also problematic, as the Unbelieved may well have different abilities, psychologies, motivations, and behaviours than historical humans did. Indeed, in the Lushai Hills of northeastern India, the *ramhuai*'s behaviour more closely approximates that of tigers than of humans, which suggests the possibilities of multispecies ethnography for our enterprise (Thangi, 1906). Correspondingly, the ability of jaguars to act like Unbelieved—as when they target “mainly pagans who rebelliously avoided the Fathers” in a way that “went beyond what was natural,” in the words of a 17th-century Jesuit in Paraguay—equally suggests the possibilities of our approach for the multispecies ethnographers (Ruiz de Montoya, 1993, p. 159).⁶

In conclusion, we propose three strategies for inviting the Unbelieved back into our histories:

1. Adopt a humble, polite, sceptical, and open-minded attitude towards the sources.

James H. Merrell warns that “work in the wider field of early American studies, understanding of the Indians' experience, of their place in early America—and therefore of early America itself—is still handicapped by historians' use of an archaic, Eurocentric vocabulary” (Merrell, 2012, p. 451). We might, as an experiment, try to use the historical subjects' own words. This might be gratuitously inconvenient, too safe, and negligent of our obligations as mediators, but we can still give our sources the benefit of the doubt by exploring the possibilities of a historical vocabulary.

Often miracles have impressive and intriguing documentation. A Jesuit record of crosses appearing in the sky above Nanjing, China, mentions “numberless” witnesses who saw and heard the miracle, and later divides them by reliability into “eleven witnesses, plus many infidels” (“Schema,” [n.d.]). We might try in our thinking and writing to get close to our sources and their authors, rather than pretend to claim an objective, high ground that few historians believe in anyway. Naturally, it is impossible to really get to “know” our sources in an absolute sense, but given that impossibility, we would prefer to read and write near-history than far-history. We can try to minimize the apparent distance between the historian and history. Our approach would be to suggest that theoretical frameworks should be light and consonant with the sources. With that in mind, it would be helpful if history were driven by sources, not theoretical assumptions, which so easily, as we have shown here, lead us astray. It is possible to get close to sources without becoming credulous. In fact, it is only by getting close to our sources that we might overcome our modernist blinders to recover the historical reality.

2. Cultivate an inclusive attitude towards possible explanations and interpretations, which allow the Unbelieved and non-Unbelieved to intermingle.

We should cultivate a truly sceptical and open-minded attitude to all explanations. Writing history becomes challenging when a god like the Abrahamic Yahweh or Jehovah or Allah, an omniscient, omnipotent bulldozer who exists outside of time interferes in worldly affairs. Our histories can still, however, include such a god's actions in time. Additionally, many Unbelieved, like Thakur and the bongas, are known to exist and act within human time and space. Ideally, we would be able to allow the Unbelieved and the mundane to truly intermingle so that economic or political and Unbelieved-related causes can inform each other. Early-modern Europeans experimented with putting both the consecrated host and animal manure into the soil as fertilizer. Historians of religion are interested in the former, and economic historians in the latter, and each only sees half the big picture. A military historian might analyze Uzbek battle tactics, but ignore the army engineers who would conjure up bad weather against the enemy; such warfare is left, as a “belief,” to the cultural historians (Babur, 2002, pp. 421–2).⁷ At the level of discussing the historical subjects' ideas, Denis Boko has written in a way that combines the religious and the scientific when he discusses “Ottoman views on weather [and] their perceptions of weather's interaction with soil, water bodies, the celestial sphere, Allah,

humans, animals and plants" (Boko, 2014, p. 2). We could go further and describe these as factors that could have themselves directly influenced the environment or argue that these collectively could be the components that make up the environment. As good historians, we can privilege some explanations and interpretations over others, but we should not handicap the Unbelieved on principle.

3. Treat the Unbelieved as having their own reality.

Historians have long written about the idea of the Unbelieved, and this is an important and necessary first step. Too often, however, our analysis is utterly dismissive and reductive. Too often we reduce religion to an eisegetical Rorschach inkblot butterfly, where "the meaning found there is drawn from the observer rather than from the object" (Payne, 2002, p. 207; Clossey, 2016). It is reasonable to assume the Unbelieved may exist, on every continent and in every century since the beginning of our ability to record our awareness of them. Their powers appear as diverse and wild as their attitudes towards humans. They share certain characteristics, such as a shyness around scientists and recording devices, and an inability to be imprisoned (physically or epistemologically). Their number is obscure, but such experts as we have estimated that their number greatly dwarfs that of humans.⁸

Accepting the possible reality of the Unbelieved would allow historians access to a new world of causal explanations, ones in greater consonance with the sources themselves. A more sceptical perspective on the existence of the Unbelieved even offers an alternative explanation for historians' refusal to believe in them. In the 16th century, the Buddhist monk Zhu Hong reminded his readers that "If you say you have avoided the influence of demons above, that only you have avoided it, then you are also under the influence of the demonic" (Zhu Hong, n.d.)⁹ Three centuries later, one of Charles Baudelaire's characters advised that "when you hear Enlightenment progress praised, do not forget that the finest of the devil's ruses is persuading you that he does not exist!" (Baudelaire, 1869, pp. 89–90).¹⁰ More playful than the monk, Baudelaire thus homes in on the Enlightenment origins of our enduring blind spot.

4 | IMPLICATIONS

In the 1940s, the mathematician R. P. Boas in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* accused his colleague Nicolas Bourbaki of being not an individual human but rather a group of academics writing under a shared pseudonym. Bourbaki, or "Bourbaki," then apparently in the Himalayas, not so far from Thakur, responded with an indignant letter ("You miserable worm, how dare you say that I do not exist?") and spread the rumour that Boas himself was merely a shared pseudonym (Boas, 1986, pp. 84–5). Perhaps Thakur will reveal that Chakrabarty himself does not exist and will urge us to anthropologize belief in him. Failing that, what will the future of this discussion bring?

If we only accept the modern aspects of the past, the past necessarily looks more modern than it actually was. What effects would a true scepticism have on our periodization of history? What we are attempting to do here has further implications for Eurocentrism, for professional ethics, for the classroom, and even for religion itself. Already Dogmatic Secularism has seeped into religious strongholds. A recent trip to an oracle in a Chinese temple won a written prediction, on the back of which read, "This is only a prophecy. Do not use it to make major life decisions."

In response to Gregory's *Unintended Reformation*, Simon Ditchfield asks an important question:

Where does this leave those of us religious historians who do not profess allegiance to any formal denomination and believe that our continued membership of the secular academy does not disqualify us from making valid contributions to the historical understanding of our chosen subject? (Ditchfield, 2012, p. 511).

We cannot answer for Gregory, but thinking of our own proposals, we hope for a split in the secular academy. Scholars unable to abandon their atheism would write from an atheistic point of view, and we would use their

scholarship carefully, just as we carefully make use today of scholars writing from an obviously and dogmatically Christian or Muslim perspective. Most scholars, we hope, would take up a nondogmatic, polite, and truly sceptical approach compatible with the possibility of religious truth; many historians of religion, such as Ditchfield himself, have always written (and, apparently, thought) in this vein. At the end of the day, the most fundamental difference between Dogmatic Secularism and a true scepticism may be that we avoid gratuitously implying that our historical subjects are stupid. Cultivating an open, polite mind—and acknowledging its importance—may be the most important step towards sharing an intellectual world with people of widely divergent beliefs, and towards revolutionizing the scholarly study of religion.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Luke Clossey, Kyle Jackson, Brandon Marriott, Andrew Redden, and Karin Vélez, “The Unbelieved and Historians, Part I: A Challenge,” *History Compass* 14 (2016): 594–602.
- ² Circulated drafts of this article garnered a range of responses, from airy assertions of the truth of Dogmatic Secularism, to appreciative enthusiasm from those who had been suffering under it. Most helpful have been the suggestions on how we might put these principles into practice, and we have incorporated those into this published version. We are particularly grateful to Chad Denton, Michael Farrelly, Nicholas Guyatt, Jakub Mscichowski, Vlad Vintila, Arlen Wiesenthal, and our anonymous reviewers. We are keen to continue the conversation with a wider audience and welcome feedback directed to our authors or to isaz-info@sfu.ca.
- ³ For example, consider the 11th-century Buddhist philosopher Ratnakīrti's reasoned rejection of the existence of Isvara, a Hindu Unbelieved. See Parimal G. Patil, *Against a Hindu God: Buddhist Philosophy of Religion in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009).
- ⁴ One of our anonymous reviewers has noted parallels, and perhaps one avenue forward, in contemporary philosophy, as in the speculative realism of Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux or in the object-oriented ontology of Timothy Morton.
- ⁵ See also Gregory, 2012.
- ⁶ See also Vélez, 2015.
- ⁷ See also Moin, 2014, pp. 65–66, 264.
- ⁸ For example, see Cyril of Jerusalem (1970, vol. 2, pp. 69–70 [15.24]). The *Ratnajālīparipṛcchā* sutra counts “hundreds of millions of devas” in the audience of one of the Buddha's talks (Schopen, 2005, p. 204).
- ⁹ “即如上所說諸魔。皆悉無之。而曰 我今獨免於魔。亦魔也。”
- ¹⁰ “... quand vous entendrez vanter le progrès des lumières, que la plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu'il n'existe pas!”

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Luke Clossey, Associate Professor of History at Simon Fraser University, is writing a study of the cult of Jesus in the early-modern world. He and the coauthors are the current officers of the Institut für die Späte Altzeit (ISAZ). Although its ultimate origins are obscure, the terms it still uses to mean research (*ransaka*, whence the English "ransack") and annual meeting (*khuraldai*) point towards medieval Sweden and Mongolia, respectively. Its modern history began in 2013, when it was repurposed on the Helm Crag fell as a scholarly association for the promotion of research that defies the assumptions and agendas of western modernity.

Kyle Jackson teaches world history at Kwantlen Polytechnic University and researches histories of environment, healing, and religion in Northeast India; he is the author of "Globalizing an Indian Borderland Environment: Aijal, Mizoram, 1890–1919," *Studies in History* 32 (2016).

Brandon Marriott completed his doctorate at the University of Oxford in Early Modern European History and has published his first monograph, *Transnational Networks and Cross-Religious Exchange in the Seventeenth-Century Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds*.

Andrew Redden, Senior Lecturer, University of Liverpool, researches the history of religion in colonial and modern Latin America; his most recent work is *The Collapse of Time: The Martyrdom of Diego Ortiz (1571) by Antonio de la Calancha*.

Karin Vélez is Associate Professor of History at Macalester College; most recently, she has used 17th-century Jesuit sources to interrogate Catholic miracle narratives.