INTRODUCTION

The secularization thesis, or rather the idea that modernity spells the death of religion, has been demolished. Yet the persistence—according to some the comeback—of religion as a public phenomenon and prominent topic in academic scholarship has still not displaced the notion that we do, after all, live in some sort of secular age; only, it is one that turns out to be compatible with and even productive of some specifically modern forms of religion (less so of others). India has been a prominent case study for demonstrating how religion, especially in its forms of religious nationalism and communalism, can thrive under conditions of modernity and is tightly tethered to the logics of secularism as a political project (van der Veer 1994; Bowen 2010; Cannell 2010; Bilgrami 2016). In the wake of reinvigorated interest in the religion in and of modernity, forms of outspoken irreligion, by contrast, have until quite recently remained somewhat in the dark. It almost seems as if the explicitly irreligious are above all interesting as an occasion to demonstrate how spectacularly wrong they are about what religion is really about, or because they are so dogmatically irreligious as to appear as yet another form of modern religion. In South Asia, irreligion has been largely invisible or ignored except for sporadic but intense media attention in extreme cases (e.g., when rationalist activists or public atheists have been attacked or murdered by so-called religious fundamentalists). However, what these cases do is redirect our attention back to a supposedly pervasive, fierce, and untrammeled religiosity of "those" cultural environments where the denial of god seems extraordinary, foreign, and disruptive enough to be a cause for murder.

How such violent reactions and the public discourse around them relate to a colonial history of Orientalist stereotypes about India, the land of yogic seers and mystic philosophers, is an important story to

be told; the story of this book, however, is about the lives of atheist and explicitly irreligious social activists in the two South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. It is not primarily about their understandings—or misunderstandings—of religion, nor their impact on and reception by their religious surroundings; it is about their understanding of secularity and the cultural politics of their project to practically implement atheism as a way of life in order to realize their vision of a just, moral, and rational society. For my atheist interlocutors, atheism is more than disbelief in gods, and it exceeds a philosophical critique of religion, because they aspire to nothing less than a fundamental reconstruction of their selves, their lives, and their society without and beyond religion. I call this aspiration and project of social reconstruction "Total Atheism" because it is integral to my interlocutors' understanding of atheism. It *is* atheism put into practice, and, as such, it is not optional; for, unless atheism is practically implemented as an actual way of life, it is incomplete and insincere and, therefore, no atheism at all. This book retraces the contested ways in which atheist activists engage with this imperative of practical implementation, with its conceptual, aesthetic, and sociopolitical implications, and with the resulting fragility and ambivalences of their endeavor to make atheism total. As a consequence, I approach atheism neither as a set of specifiable disbeliefs nor as a fixed worldview, a "thing" that one could "adopt," "spread," or "implement," but as an attempt to inhabit secularity as an ongoing project that revolves around the challenge of making secular difference *perceptible* both in and as a way of life.

By focusing on perceptibility, this ethnography of a South Indian atheist movement explores a way to think about the secular within an aesthetic framework and in terms of *lived secularity*: an embodied, historically and culturally contingent, globally entangled way of living in the postcolonial present. At the center of attention is not the secular as a concept or secularism as a principle of governance in modern nation–states, but secularity as an aesthetic quality or figuration of difference, as a question of sensory perception and experience rather than conceptual relations, ideological claims, or philosophical justifications. The notion of perceptibility, however, does not pit perception against concepts, ideology, and philosophy, but refers to their mutual interlacing. The perceptibility of secular difference is a reflexive project and a problem that my atheist interlocutors pose to themselves and to those around them. An anthropology of the aesthetics of secular difference, as I propose it here, does not ask to what extent atheist practices, ideas, or forms of personhood

are expressive of a stable phenomenon, definitional attribute, or pre-existing quality of secularity or whether they really are different in a substantial, absolute, or conceptually coherent sense; rather, it asks how atheist activists reflexively engage with discursive traditions, aesthetic strategies, and conceptual resources that they do in fact *share* with their sociocultural environment in order to make their way of life sensible—perceptible and intelligible—as an instance of secular difference. I therefore approach secularity as a contestable effect of the manner in which atheist activists seek to perform their way of life simultaneously as totally other and deeply familiar, as purely universal and inextricably local, as disruptive and continuous. I develop the concept of ex-centricity to describe a quality of difference that is specific to the historically contingent manner in which atheist activists in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have come to position themselves within their environment. I propose to understand such attempts at ex-centric positioning as an instance of lived secularity not primarily because they are part of an atheist or irreligious project but because of their relationship to a diffuse and heterogeneous sense of negativity that has become constitutive of the—not doubt equally contingent—category of the secular.

In its most immediate and literal sense, this negativity manifests at the grammatical level of the privative or negative affixes of terms like *a*-theist, *ir*-religious, or god-*less*, as well as their Telugu equivalents like *na-āstika* or *nir-īśvaravādī*. This morphology underlies a conceptual negativity of dependent secondariness, insofar as such terms seem to designate above all the absence or denial of something else (for further discussion on such morphological privations, see Bullivant 2013; Lee 2015: 28–47). Historically linked to this is a moral negativity that echoes an original function of such terms as invectives in theological or philosophical polemics both in India and Europe (Minois 1998; Weltecke 2010; Nicholson 2010; see also Chapter 1). In many social contexts, this history has lived on in suspicions and more or less explicit expectations of depravity, immorality, and nihilism associated with those who name themselves with such terms or are called names with them (Brewster 2014; Schmidt 2016; Richter 2018). The moral odium attached to words like "atheism" and their gestures of denial or rejection can also shade into an ontological doubt and uneasiness, a sort of horror vacui, regarding the sheer possibility of a total absence of any relation to god, religion, the transcendent, and so on (Kristeller 1968; Weltecke 2010: 28). A variety of this doubt is the deconstruction of the secular as merely a continuation of religion, and especially Christianity, by other means (for an early critical perspective on this

argument, see Blumenberg 1985). In more recent academic debates, to which I return in detail below, negativity resurfaces as indirectness and a methodological or epistemological uncertainty about how to study phenomena defined or constituted by the absence of what they are not. These are some of the sources that feed into the negativity of the secular, which seems to be further compounded in contemporary India. As mentioned above, persistent Orientalist and nationalist stereotypes of an essentially spiritual nature of Indian civilization tend to mark forms of irreligion or modern atheism—if they are acknowledged at all—as lacking in cultural authenticity and link them with stigmas of foreignness, colonialism, and "Westernization." Even in less nativist discourses, negative notions of inauthenticity persist in the attenuated version of expectations of numeric and/or socioeconomic marginality: if atheists exist in India, they surely ought to be found among an elite minority of Western-educated urbanites from upper-caste and upper-class backgrounds.

I argue that such heterogenous, multiple, and dispersed notions of negativity, otherness, and marginality are not only discursive distortions of irreligion in general or Indian atheism in particular. They are not only historical stereotypes that academic neutrality behooves us to disregard by improving our conceptual apparatus, distancing us from theological polemics, disavowing Orientalist projections, or deconstructing the cultural essentialism of reactionary religious nationalisms. Instead, I argue that these notions of negativity are an integral dimension of atheism and secularity as historical phenomena, insofar as they are a reality that atheist activists—and other irreligious people—encounter experientially in their everyday lives. My atheist interlocutors in South India lament this reality and a major aim of their social activism is to overcome it. For them, the suspected impossibility, alleged immorality, or sociological marginality of an atheist way of life are a misconception, a historical injustice, and a social challenge respectively; they are not problems *of* atheism but problems to be solved *by* atheism, namely by "putting it into practice" (*ācaraṇalō peṭṭaṭaṃ*). Hence, the story I tell in this ethnography hinges on the way in which atheist activists participate in the negativity of the secular, make it their own, and even cultivate it. It is the story of how they try to inhabit that negativity by transforming and revaluing encountered marginality and otherness into a positive form of secular difference, which they seek to reinscribe into Indian civilization as its true, ex-centric core. In order to tell this story, however, it is necessary to engage critically with a dominant methodological tendency in social sciences and humanities to discuss secularity almost exclusively

as a matter of its relationship with religion. In the following section, I retrace the reason for this tendency and the relative paucity of anthropological scholarship on lived secularity to the confluence of a specific critical impetus in scholarship on the secular with an increasing interest in the aesthetic dimensions of religion. After explicating the methodological approach proposed in this book in the second section, the third and last section introduces in more detail my atheist interlocutors and their movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

The Invisibility of Irreligion, the Centrality of Religion, and the Anaesthetics of the Secular

In 1971, Colin Campbell (2013) was one of the first to point out the paradoxical situation that modern social science had posited the decline and ultimate disappearance of religion as an intrinsic process of modernity but neglected to study what it presupposed as the outcome of that process: irreligion as a mass phenomenon. Campbell explained this omission not merely as an empirical oversight but as an intrinsic effect of the theoretical and methodological setup of the so-called "secularization paradigm" and its constitutive role for the development of social sciences. He argued that due to the dominance of functionalist concepts of religion, the presumed disappearance of actual religions could be divorced analytically from the idea of a more basic and persistent social functionality that continued to be modeled on existing or past religions. Explicit forms of irreligion were thus approached primarily as instantiations of a more foundational "invisible" (Luckmann 1967) or "implicit" (Bailey 1998) religious function. If they did not perform that function, they were treated as an ideological claim to a difference that seemed sociologically irrelevant and thus immaterial for social theory. Campbell's second reason anticipated what Charles Taylor calls "subtraction stories" (2007: 22), because he argued that social theory itself articulated a secular standpoint, from which religion rather than secularity appeared as a social phenomenon (or function) in need of explanation. Secularity was tacitly presumed as the baseline for that explanation and the bare foundation of human existence that would simply remain once religion was subtracted analytically or dwindled away historically.

Although both explanations are interconnected, the latter garnered more critical attention within the social sciences, likely because it pointed to a more pressing and embarrassing lapse of social theory to theorize itself and its role in secular modernity. By showing how

social theory was itself invested in ultimately ideological claims of secular difference, it became incumbent on a critical and self-reflexive social science to become "postsecular"[1] by distancing itself from such claims in a way that ended up reinforcing the methodological invisibility of the secular; as we will see below, it was rendered quite literally immaterial. In other words, it took Campbell's call for a sociology of irreligion roughly four decades to find a favorable soundboard because critics of the secularization paradigm have concentrated on its empirical refutation (religion thrives in secular modernity) and/or its conceptual deconstruction (secular modernity is not corrosive to religion but productive of it). Rather than charting the details of this vast and heterogenous debate,[2] I focus in the following on how religion as a concept and a historical phenomenon remained—or became once more—central for thinking about modernity and whatever role the secular may be accorded in it. I argue that the critical impetus to dismantle the secularization paradigm has advanced scholarship on religions (in modernity) precisely to the degree that it has protracted the absence of irreligion as a topic of inquiry.

In order to understand how so and what I mean by critical impetus, we must look more closely at the methodological setup of current anthropological scholarship on the secular and retrace how its blind spot for irreligion ties into the aesthetics of atheism as both a methodological and ethnographic problem of perceptibility. A good—because very influential—place to start is Talal Asad's suggestion that "the secular is so much part of our modern life" that it is best pursued indirectly or "through its shadows, as it were" (2003: 16 and 67, and reiterated in Asad 2018). Though it is difficult to condense the complexity of Asad's study into a single principle, one of its central moves is to relocate the secular to the level of an ontological and epistemological regime that underpins the political, economic, and cultural formation of modernity. Though he reaffirms an intrinsic relationship between modernity and the secular, Asad does not reinstate a secularization thesis; the secular appears here not as the necessarily antagonistic opposite or absence of religion but as a conceptual "grammar" (2003: 25; 2011b: 673) that underlies the development and deployment of particular categories such as religion, irreligion, magic, science, superstition, myth, spirituality, inspiration, agency, and so on. It regulates how modern discourses and institutions produce religion by distinguishing it conceptually and practically from what is considered to be—and therein coproduced as—its various others. The conceptual grammar of the secular is thus much more complex than a simple religious/nonreligious binary (see also Steyers 2004; Fitzgerald 2010;

Meyer 2012; van der Veer 2014). At the same time, Asad's framework is premised on the embeddedness of secular concepts in "a series of shifts in ways of sensing and living" (2011a: 47), which is why the grammar of the secular regulates not only conceptual distinctions but also embodied sensibilities, sensorial configurations, and structures of feeling.

This, however, is where Asad's approach becomes "indirect" on two accounts: first, to describe secular ways of sensing and living would be to describe the genesis and development of modernity as such, which is much too large, complex, and heterogenous a process to become a straightforward, direct object of analysis; therefore, Asad has analyzed indirectly what philosophical, normative, or academic accounts of modernity, liberal democracy, secularism, or religion indicate about their authors' assumptions about the body, the senses, and human nature in general. Second, the secular has been pursued indirectly by studying "a range of sensibilities . . . that make opposites only by excluding affinities and overlaps" (Asad 2018: 2–3); in practice, this has meant studying how those modern accounts and their concepts exclude, misrepresent, devalue, or simply fail to recognize certain *other* sensibilities, including some of the sensibilities in which they themselves are supposed to be embedded. This is the pivotal moment where the methodological focus on secular "shadows" shades into a critical impetus because the grammar of the secular is also a grammar of power (van der Veer 2001; Agrama 2012; Chidester 2014). The shifts in sensibilities and processes of conceptual distinction regulated by the secular are neither neutral nor disinterested but part of the powerful disciplinary institutions of imperial, colonial, and postcolonial projects of modernity.

In this framework, the secular is part of a powerful "moral narrative of modernity" (Keane 2013b), which, on the basis of the so-called Cartesian dichotomy of spirit and matter, projects modernity as a heroic, enlightening, and empowering liberation of the human subject and its universal capacities of reason, agency, autonomy, morality, and so on from all "external"—material, bodily, sensorial, traditional, etc.—and therefore parochial constraints (see also Asad 2003, 2011a). As far as religion is concerned, such post-Enlightenment narratives of emancipatory "disembedding" (Giddens 1991: 21–29) or "purification" (Latour 1993: 10–11) have not led to its inevitable decline, as the original secularization paradigm had anticipated; rather, they provided the ontological and semiotic ideologies for its modern rearticulation in terms of disembodied mental states, doctrines, and more or less ir-/rational beliefs. This is the crucial juncture

for the critical impetus of current scholarship on secular modernity, because it has demonstrated how the secular as an ideological narrative, an epistemological regime, and a colonial institutional assemblage has not only produced but effectively *mis*construed religious—or rather nonsecular/nonmodern—ways of living. The negativity of the secular reappears here not as the absence of religion but as the powerful process of its "excarnation" (Taylor 2007: 288), of its rationalist truncation to matters of disembodied, private, and therefore apolitical belief. Moreover, the disregard or misunderstanding of the material, embodied, and sensorial dimensions of religion is not only an epistemological but a distinctly moral negativity: due to secular modernity's ideological failure to understand how lived religions have "really" worked—i.e., due to its tendency to "make opposites only by excluding affinities and overlaps" (Asad 2018: 3)—its attempts at studying, reforming, or regulating it have been fraught with failure and, more importantly, with violence, oppression, and mechanisms of exclusion (Agrama 2012; Needham and Sunder Rajan 2007; Asad, Butler, and Mahmood 2009; Cady and Fessenden 2013b).

Consequently, critical scholarship on the secular has been linked tightly to scholarship on religion "under conditions of secularity," sometimes to the point where one has been collapsed into the other. This is usually justified, and rightly so, on the basis of a conceptual relationality of the religious and the secular or, more precisely, the secular production of the modern category of religion (McCutcheon 2007). I will come back to this justification below, but I want to mention here two of its practical implications: first, the insistence on studying the secular via its "treatment" of religion has left what is in fact classified as or claims to be irreligious largely unexplored; second, even when it does enter the focus of attention, it often does so as a kind of detour to religion (e.g., when Sonja Luehrmann frames her entire monograph on Soviet atheist activism as an examination of what "the apprehensions and intuitions of secularist modernizers contribute to our understanding of religion" [2011: 1]). Apart from a possible disciplinary bias, resulting from the fact that the secular has been theorized most intently by scholars of religion, the privileging of religion as the aim of academic knowledge production has a more intricate methodological reason. This reason is strikingly reminiscent of the role functionalism played in Campbell's account of twentieth-century sociology, and it brings us back to the question of perceptibility. It is significant that critical scholarship on secular modernity has coincided and to a large extent overlapped with the material, media, and aesthetic turns in the study of religions (for chartings of these turns,

see Engelke 2010; Houtman and Meyer 2011; Meyer et al. 2014; Bräunlein 2016; Grieser and Johnston 2017).

An increasing orientation of religious studies toward the material, mediated, and aesthetic dimensions of religion derives part of its significance and political currency from being framed as a critique and rectification of the coercive distortions or "excarnations" of secular epistemologies. In this book, I focus on the concept of aesthetics because it is gaining increasing traction in organizing a joint methodological framework for studying the sensory, embodied, and cognitive aspects of religious practices and experiences in relation to the material infrastructures and processes of mediation that enable, shape, and constrain them within concrete historical and political contexts—in particular but not limited to the context of secular modernity. Aesthetics is here no longer confined to normative theories of art or beauty but refers to an interest in the historicity of perceptual regimes and their ideological power to regulate not only how people interpret and give meaning to the world—or what transcends it—but how they perceive, feel, and inhabit their worlds as embodied beings. Brent Plate argues that by going back to the Aristotelian concept of *aísthēsis* and early modern epistemologies of sensory knowledge, "aesthetics is currently undergoing a kind of 'rescue mission,' finding in the old Greek term the roots of a body-based, sensual reconception that helps us moderns analyze not only our world, but the world of religious people in many times and places" (Plate 2017: 480). With the pithy metaphor of a rescue mission, Plate captures the point I am driving at: by restoring religion to its aesthetic and material wholeness, we save not only religion but "us moderns" and modernity in general from the negativity of the secular. Under the new dispensation of aesthetics, all human practices (including the production of secular ideologies of purification, disembedding, and excarnation) are to be analyzed in terms of their embodied, sensory, mediated, and materialized dimensions; the moral narrative of secular modernity, however, is the narrative of the liberation from those dimensions. As a consequence, the negativity of the secular as an an-aesthetic counternarrative, as it were, doubles back on itself because it appears to have misconstrued not only religion but also itself; it "turns out, at the limit, to be an impossible project, one that cannot be fully inhabitable in the terms it often seems to propose" (Keane 2013b: 162). In other words, the secular narrative of autonomy from the material and aesthetic planes is undercut by "the inescapably social and material character of the representational practices by which that ideal autonomy is meant to be inhabited" (Keane 2002: 65).

The critical impetus to deconstruct the intellectualist and disembodied bias of secular ideology has been immensely productive for "rescuing" the aesthetics of lived religion but, in so doing, it has been unable to address the materiality and embodied nature of lived secularity as anything other than a *contradiction* or *shadow* of secularity's own normative insistence on its autonomy from the realms of the material, the corporeal, the social, the traditional, and so on. Within this framework, to describe the embodied and material dimensions of lived secularity would be, in a sense, to describe what it is not or what it claims not to be; it would mean to describe the *nonsecular*, and that has meant, if not in theory then in most actual research projects, the religious—or rather, the aesthetic analog of functionalism's invisible religion. Secularism may claim to be not religious, but this claim itself is embodied *like* religions and, more precisely, in a way that has been modeled in actual research on the way religious embodiment defies secular excarnation, or is excluded by it. In the necessary process of coming to terms with its own role in implementing the powerful conceptual grammar of secular modernity, critical scholarship on the secular (and religion) has once again made the secular invisible within its own framework of material and aesthetic methodologies: it has produced its own postsecularity by showing that, apart from having never been modern, to speak with Bruno Latour (1993), we have never been—and cannot be—secular either.

The methodological approach that I propose as an alternative and describe in more detail in the following section hinges on making secularity rather than religion the "direct" center of our empirical attention. In the remainder of this section, I seek to explicate why this requires not only a reversal of attention away from religion and toward the secular, but also an approach that displaces the secular's conceptual relationality to and dependence on the category of religion as its central and decisive definitional attribute. The negative relation to religion is merely one aspect of a much larger and more diffuse negativity of secularity, which I propose as an alternative—but neither the only conceivable nor essential—focus of our empirical attention. I also want to emphasize that my aim in this book is not an apology of the secular. I am in no way disputing the cogency and political expedience of the critical deconstruction of the secular/religious binary or the self-reflexive genealogy of the role played by social sciences and humanities in implementing it in the first place; nor am I arguing that previous scholarship has gotten the secular all wrong or that aesthetic and material methodologies are flawed or unproductive. On the contrary, I seek to extend them to the anthropological study of

atheism as a form of lived secularity. I therefore approach the negativity of secular difference as a problem of perceptibility that can be described ethnographically, rather than positing a methodological a priori of umbral indirectness or uninhabitability. However, this requires a methodological space where claims to being *not* religious become relevant not only with regard to whether and how they misconstrue religion, themselves, or their relation to religion, but how they articulate a project of coming to terms with the negativity of secular difference and, therein, of inhabiting it as a way of life. This is a methodological space where my atheist interlocutors in India are not treated as quasi scholars of religion or mere extensions of an abstract and powerful conceptual grammar of secular modernity but as an embattled minority of flesh-and-blood social activists who seek to live secularity by putting atheism into practice in order to transform their lives and their society.[3]

Especially anthropologists have faulted existing approaches—in particular those inspired by Asad—for an "intellectualist and elitist quality" (Starrett 2010: 649) and for focusing too narrowly on state-driven projects of secularism rather than "ethnographic studies describing precisely in what ways secularisms are defined, appropriated and contested by our anthropological informants" (Bangstad 2009: 189; see also Cannell 2010; Bowen 2010; Baldacchino and Kahn 2011; Schielke 2012; Lebner 2015). This critique is part of a rapidly growing field of multidisciplinary scholarship on topics such as the statistical category of "nones," secular alternatives to organized religion, religious indifference, or explicitly antireligious activism.[4] This body of scholarship is gaining shape as a distinct research field clustering around the category of "nonreligion" but has, so far, been unable to address a persisting challenge for an anthropology of lived secularity (or nonreligion), namely the methodological invisibility of the aesthetics of secular difference. Charles Hirschkind was one of the first to draw attention to what I discussed above as the effects of an indirect approach to the secular. He asked how, if at all, it is possible to approach the embodied nature of secularity directly, in the sense of "a particular configuration of the human sensorium—of sensibilities, affects, embodied dispositions—specific to secular subjects, and thus constitutive of what we mean by 'secular society'" (2011: 633). Hirschkind ultimately argues that we could identify and describe configurations of the human sensorium that go without reference to religion but, by so doing, we would be at a loss to define what exactly makes them secular—other than the absence of religion. It is with reference to this negative relationality of the secular that a number of

scholars have proposed the category of nonreligion as a relational yet positive descriptor.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social fields, Johannes Quack (2014) has proposed a relational approach, where nonreligion is not defined negatively by the absence of religion but positively via specific kinds of relation to religion understood as a culturally and historically variable field. Nonreligion is thus conceptualized as the surroundings (German: *Umfeld*) that demarcate the religious field by relating to it in diverse and positively describable ways such as indifference, optionality, parallelism, antagonism, supersession, and so on. However, nonreligion remains marked by a tension resulting from a simultaneous dependence on and independence from religion because it refers to "phenomena considered to be not religious despite the fact that they are indeed related to the religious field in different ways" (Quack 2014: 442). The two programmatic aims of this approach are thus (1) to describe empirically this tension between dependence and independence and (2) to reflexively integrate academic scholarship on religion into this model, insofar as it is itself not religious but related to religion and therefore part of nonreligious surroundings. In his ethnographic work on rationalism in India, Quack builds on Taylor (2007) and Ulrich Berner (2004) in order to describe a specific "mode of unbelief" that has concrete and identifiable attributes, in this case an epistemic–moral entanglement, an ideology of doubt, and a worldview based on commitment, discontent, confrontation, and dedication (Quack 2012: 19–27 and 272). Lois Lee proposed a similar framework by glossing nonreligion as a "substantial secular" (2015: 4), which is defined not only by the negative relation it maintains with religion but also by a positively specifiable set of beliefs, rituals, practices, or identities through which that relation is inhabited and experienced.

Relational approaches seek to reconcile the use of nonreligion as a heuristic category with an epistemological critique of the secular/religious binary as an analytical device but, insofar as they are relational, the main methodological challenge for their empirical implementation still redirects us to the category of religion. As Matthew Engelke has commented, relational categories are "troublesome" because "all they seem to do . . . is pull us back to what they are trying to get away from: God, gods, and religion. Godlessness, atheism, and non-religion are always beholden to something else" (2015b: 135). Like Quack, who proposes to approach the simultaneity of nonreligion's dependence and independence from religion as an empirical question, Engelke describes how his humanist interlocutors in Britain

themselves are troubled by that tension. However, both authors are aware that this elegant solution finds its limits in those circumstances where religion—whether as concept or social field—is itself not clearly constituted, contested, or otherwise hard to identify (Quack 2014: 454–58; Engelke 2015c); unsurprisingly, such circumstances are to be found most likely, though not exclusively, in premodern times or postcolonial settings "outside" of Europe. That such a parallelization of the premodern with the contemporary non-European comes so easily is also troublesome, but it is symptomatic of the current status of scholarship on nonreligion, which is but for few examples—Quack being one of them (but also Klimkeit 1971; Schielke 2012; Copeman and Reddy 2012; Copeman 2015; Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015)—retracing the secular in the "modern West." The most prominent, incisive, and widely discussed example is Taylor's reclamation of secularity for Latin Christendom (Taylor 2007; for critical discussions, see Warner, van Antwerpen, and Calhoun 2010; Bilgrami 2016). As a consequence, a postcolonial or global approach to nonreligion within a relational framework inevitably pulls us back to early modern Europe and into the controversial debate around the conceptual history of religion in its enmeshment with European imperialisms and colonial expansion (Kippenberg 2001; Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014; Fitzgerald 2010).

I will return to the crucial importance of colonialism shortly, but I want to focus first on another implication of relational approaches, which is already adumbrated in Hirschkind's inquiry about a secular body. While Hirschkind reduced the relationality of the secular to a negative form of triumphalism, which describes a "movement of negation and overcoming by which the secular emerges from the religious" (2011: 643), Quack and Lee opened up the possibility of a more diverse range of kinds, modes, or experiences of relationality in the sense of positively specifiable attributes of nonreligion; yet, for defining or describing what makes them "secular" or "nonreligious," these positive aspects and in particular their aesthetic dimensions remained either insignificant or merely ancillary when compared to their conceptual relationality with religion. I therefore seek to build on relational approaches but also push them further by understanding secular difference as an *aesthetic quality* and the outcome of a *performative positionality*, both being more complex than a conceptual dependence or relationality vis-à-vis the category of religion. In the following section, I argue that the concept of positionality enables not only a direct approach to the "positive," as in aesthetic aspects of lived secularity, but also a postcolonial approach that is attentive to the

historicity and translatedness of categories like religion, secularity, or atheism.

Positionality: From Conceptual Relations to a Presentism of Translatedness

In order to clarify what I mean by positionality, I draw on German philosopher Helmuth Plessner, who used the term in his phenomenological gestalt theory of life or, more precisely, aliveness (Plessner 2016; for a concise summary in English, see Grene 1966). I am here not concerned with the details or the agenda of his philosophical anthropology but with the potential of the concept of positionality for studying secularity as an aesthetic quality of difference.[5] According to Plessner, living beings differ from inorganic things by the way they actively relate to their own boundaries, namely by actualizing them. Their boundaries are not simply the hiatus that delimits them from something else and gives their bodies a figure; rather, boundaries belong to them and are an integral part of their corporeal being that closes them off against their environment precisely by providing a crossing into it. In Plessner's somewhat cryptic diction, living beings exist simultaneously *in* and *into* their boundary and *beyond* it and thereby both against and with their environment (concrete biological examples for this sort of boundary behavior are semipermeable membranes or metabolic processes). This also has important consequences for the way living beings exist in space:

> Every physical corporal thing is in space, is spatial. In terms of measure, its position exists in relation to other positions and to the position of the observer. As physical things, living bodies are not excluded from this relational order. Yet, among space-filling [*raumerfüllende*] bodies, living bodies differ phenomenally from lifeless ones, insofar as they are space-claiming [*raumbehauptende*]. Every space-filling figure [*Gebilde*] exists in a location. A space-claiming figure, by contrast, exists in relation to the location of "its" existence through being beyond it (and into it). (Plessner 2016: 186–87)

Positionality thus refers to the process or capacity of a corporeal figure to actualize its own boundary both with and against an environment (being in and beyond its boundary) in a way that *claims* space not only as a position in relation to other objects in abstract space but as the "natural place" (ibid.) of its existence. Since living beings are also physical objects, they have a spatial position and a concrete figural boundary that can be directly perceived by the senses—measured and

observed—whereas their positionality is an additional quality that can only be perceived indirectly or "intuited phenomenologically" (*erschaut*) (Plessner 2016: 183) in the way they behave with regard to their boundary. Hence, positionality is not an ontological definition of aliveness but a phenomenological quality that *appears* in the way living beings exist by actualizing their boundary and occupying their place *within and against* their environment.

I want to use certain aspects of Plessner's concept of positionality as a way to think about secular boundaries in terms of an emergent or performative quality of difference rather than an ontological, conceptual, or structuralist notion of difference. To say that secularity is a performative effect of positionality implies that secular difference is not a relational quasi space *between* the religious and the secular, or a boundary where one ends and the other begins; this would be a zero-sum scenario where a thing must be either religious or secular for there to be a difference that matters in a way that goes beyond a "merely" ideological, uninhabitable claim. Instead, positionality designates a process or behavior, through which boundaries are actively claimed and actualized as part of oneself, as both a limit against and a crossing into an environment. This implies from the start an "osmotic" or "metabolic" scenario of ambivalent, dynamic, and contested negotiations of sameness *and* difference, belonging *and* otherness. Secular difference, as I understand it here, is not a specifiable boundary (or relation) but a quality that emerges through the manner in which certain people, in my case atheist activists in South India, claim and actively tend to their own boundary and their own place in a given sociocultural, political, and historical environment.

In contrast to Plessner's phenomenological approach, however, I do not presuppose secular difference as a given phenomenon that manifests itself, like aliveness is a phenomenal quality that necessarily appears, insofar as living beings are what they are. In other words, I do not make an ontological argument that secularity *is* a positionality or an aesthetic quality rather than a relational position; instead, I approach secular difference as an *aesthetic problem*, a problem of perceptibility that appears to atheist activists in their endeavor to put atheism into practice. I am not attempting a phenomenology of secular difference but an ethnography of how atheist activists try to *make it appear* by making it perceptible. I propose positionality as a methodological concept that can help us analyze how secularity is not only the result of a claim to being different from religion—though it certainly is that too—but the result of a specific way of tending to and inhabiting one's difference as one's *own boundary* and *place* in

an environment. In this book I want to probe how the concept of positionality can help to describe the quality of secular difference not in terms of *what* secularity is different from (presumably religion), but *how* it is different. While the how is of course entangled with the what, my aim is to explore a methodological space where the elements and figurations of this entanglement and, more importantly, actual ways to live in and through it are not completely or exclusively predetermined by what has been identified as the European conceptual history of the secular. This history is certainly a crucial aspect of the negativity of secular difference, which atheist activists encounter and are forced to confront, but it does not once and for all prescribe the field of possibilities available to them for tending to that negativity as a way to claim their place within their sociocultural and political environments.

Abou Farman (2013), for example, argues in reference to Hirschkind's essay on the secular body that the history of the secular has not stopped with a negative relation of triumphalism. His research on North American immortalism demonstrates that certain materialist and rationalist worldviews may have originated in a negative relation to religion but have, in the meantime, acquired their own "traditions" (Farman 2013: 738) that constitute identifiably secular forms of personhood and embodiment. In order to identify such traditions, however, we require a direct ethnographic engagement with the present, which bridles the critical impetus to genealogically deconstruct the secular/religious binary. This is by no means a call for an "ethnographic present" (Fabian 2002: 80–87) that denies the coevalness of interlocutors or the powerful ways in which the past conditions the present (for discussions of the relationship between ethnography and history, see Cohn 1987; Comaroff and Comaroff 1992); rather, I follow Sanjay Srivastava, who argues:

> In recent times, a certain kind of scholarly work on India has become so over-determined by historical research that there is a tendency to render the present as almost a direct and unmediated consequence of the past. To speak of this propensity is not an incitement to ahistoricism; rather, it is an invitation to think about the present with as much finesse as that which marks so much of recent historiographic research on South Asia. So, for example, the relationships that contemporary populations have with the past and the contingencies of the present as they articulate with imagined futures appear not to interest many analysts; the present is, almost, not interesting enough. This . . . has led to a situation where we do not have as theoretically sophisticated a sense of the postcolonial present as we do of the colonial past. (2007: 8)

It is along these lines that I want to caution against a tendency to presuppose or fix what the secular can be in the present on the basis of critical genealogies of its concept or of a large-scale conceptual grammar it designates. The kind of ethnographic presentism I deploy in the following chapters is not therefore ahistorical, as it includes analyses of the historicity of my interlocutors' attempts to make the secular perceptible. This will lead me into diverse regions of the past, including imaginaries of the prehistory of South Asia, the remembered past of autobiographic narratives, or historical literature on medieval courtly culture, the anticolonial struggle, or the afterlife of the so-called Nehruvian era of independent India. These excursions into plural pasts will not coalesce into a single history of "Indian secularity" that challenges, supplements, or improves existing historical narratives. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, my aim is to "denarrativize" them so as to "denaturalize the present, rather than the past" (2008: 48) and, thereby, open a methodological space for an anthropology of the secular that proceeds via an ethnography of lived secularity rather than conceptual history. The denarrativized and in a sense "undisciplined"[6] history of ethnographic presentism is furthermore a crucial device for engaging with the challenge of a postcolonial perspective on the problematic historicity of lived secularity.

While scholars of religion have debated copiously and controversially whether the modern, supposedly European concept of religion is adequate as an analytical concept (Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997; Smith 1998; Fitzgerald 2000; de Vries 2008), few have doubted that the phenomena, practices, people, or objects construed or misconstrued as religious did in some way or the other exist. Scholars usually query not whether there were medieval Christian monks or ancient Vedic rituals or early modern Muslim sharia scholars but whether they are appropriately conceptualized on the basis of our contemporary understanding of religion. The case is different for atheism and irreligion. Dorothea Weltecke has retraced how, since the sixteenth century, the historiography of unbelief (in Europe) has been "downright obsessed" (2010: 28) with the question of whether total unbelief and a complete absence of religion have ever existed before the modern era, especially since the word "atheism" is conspicuously absent in medieval sources. As a consequence, "The history of atheism, of the Enlightenment, or of unbelief is not the product of historiographic scholarship but of theological, philosophical, and political polemics" (Weltecke 2010: 97–98). More concretely, she faults the existing historiography of atheism for falling short with regard to the crucial methodological challenge of clarifying the relationship between the

word "atheism," the concept, and the complex historical formations it tries to grasp across the epistemological break constituted by modernity. This task, which has arguably been at the center of religious studies for quite some time, turns out to be even more pressing and difficult in postcolonial contexts, where the translation of historical alterity is often assumed to be compounded by cultural alterity.

Insofar as the vocabulary and conceptual grammar of the secular is understood to be intrinsic to modernity, it is also inseparably entangled with projects of European imperialism: the epistemological break of secular modernity has been experienced by most populations outside of Europe as colonial modernity; not that modernity was any less colonial in the metropole or for European colonizers, but its coloniality could be experienced differently. While (some) Europeans could inhabit modernity as universality, colonial subjects were still confined to the "imaginary waiting-room of history" (Chakrabarty 2000: 9). If modernity is understood to involve some kind of shift or break vis-à-vis the past, colonial modernity further compounds that break for being experienced not only as new but also as foreign. As a consequence, South Asianists have addressed the secular primarily as a question of what Sudipta Kaviraj calls "the remarkable epistemic rupture brought in by colonialism" (2005: 124). While the notion of epistemic rupture has been developed in the context of discussions about the ruinous effects of colonial modernity on elite Sanskrit knowledge systems (Pollock 2002, 2008; Hatcher 2007), postcolonial scholarship has subsequently tended to relativize the radicalness of the discontinuity implied by the notion of rupture.

Historical studies on different forms of colonial knowledge have shown that its categorical apparatus—including categories like religion, tradition, science, caste, or, particularly important for my discussion, Hinduism—has been produced in complex "collaborative" projects between colonial officers, European scholars, Christian missionaries, and a diverse range of so-called native informants who, in their functions as traditional pandits, religious reformers, local research assistants, and so on did of course much more than simply procure data or provide information (e.g., Sontheimer and Kulke 1991; Lopez 1995; King 1999; Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2001; Trautmann 2006; Nicholson 2010; Bergunder 2010). If colonial/modern/secular knowledge can appear as originating from "Europe," this has often less to do with its actual history than with an effect of the power differentials characteristic of colonial situations where "complicated and complex forms of knowledge [were] created by Indians, but codified and transmitted by Europeans" (Cohn 1985:

276). Andrew Nicholson (2010: 1–23) argues that an overemphasis of epistemic ruptures has also sedimented as a sort of disciplinary bifurcation, to the effect that postcolonial historians tend to focus either on the precolonial or the colonial period, leaving crucial phases and processes of transition relatively unexplored. The "undisciplined" historicism I propose as part of an ethnographic presentism helps unsettle such reified epochal schemes in order to contribute to what Joel Robbins envisions as "more precise and varied models of cultural change . . . that can comprehend discontinuity but that can also give us nontrivial insights into how processes and projects of both continuity and discontinuity shape cultural transformation" (2007: 31).

One way to engage this theoretical challenge is to draw on the long anthropological tradition of addressing methodological problems of (colonial) continuity and change as a question of translations rather than epistemic ruptures. Translation draws attention to the fact that concepts are not disembodied theory but articulated in concrete, historical languages, which are themselves not neutral containers of meaning but (differentially) powerful means to enact social relations and entire ways of life. Translation is, in a sense, always cultural translation because, as Asad puts it, by translating languages, "We are dealing not with an abstract matching of two sets of sentences but with a social practice rooted in modes of life" (1993: 183; see also Asad 2018: 1–12). An ongoing critical reflection in anthropology has interrogated ethnography's claim to translate the complexity and opacities of "exotic" cultures encountered "in the field" into orderly and transparent scholarly texts (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Leavitt 2014). This is part of a larger interdisciplinary debate on translation based on two interrelated premises: first, an expanded understanding of translation as a metaphor for a whole range of semiotic practices that exceed translations between or within languages (as in glossing or paraphrasing) because they also encompass so-called modal transductions between linguistic codes and other kinds of semiotic modes such as gestures, visual cues, tone, speech act force, style, and so on (Jakobson 1971: 260–67; Silverstein 2003; Keane 2013a); second, an understanding of translation as a productive practice that does not only transfer content from an original to a copy but transforms it in the process and constitutes it *as* content, original, or copy in the first place (for overviews of the field, see Bachmann-Medick 2014; Gal 2015).

On the basis of such an expanded understanding, it is not translation as such that marks colonial or postcolonial situations but a set of specific practical purposes of translation and an unequal

constellation of power between languages, where some do the translating and others are translated—or rather are rendered translatable and, thereby, made to submit to being disproportionally transformed by the translating language (Rafael 1988; Asad 1993; Liu 1995; Rubel and Rosman 2003; Datla 2013). In this context, debates about translatability are not primarily concerned with deciding whether specific translations are good or bad—or possible at all—but with the historically shifting language ideologies and political concerns that regulate what counts as acceptable or efficient translation by stipulating, among other things, the relevant units of translation (words, concepts, practices, cultures, etc.). Incommensurability or indeterminacy are thus taken for granted as intrinsic to translation, which is understood as a dynamic and contested practice whose outcome is not perfect equivalence but an "effect of sameness-in-difference" (Gal 2015: 226; see also Sakai 2006; Hanks 2014). It is thus not on principle but only within concrete political situations and power relations that people are able to decide whether this effect should be seen as a sign of an irreducible alterity of what or who is being translated or as a failure to adequately represent their sameness (Povinelli 2001: 321–25). William Hanks and Carlo Severi therefore speak of an "epistemological space of translation" where "translation in one or another variety is always already in play" (2014: 3) as a historical condition of possibility for all kinds of knowledge and understanding, not only those that take the form of explicit acts of linguistic or cultural translation.

In my approach to atheism in India, I build on this notion of a sort of "historical a priori" (Foucault 2002: 142–48) of antecedent translation, but I am particularly interested in its productivity in the present rather than its historical genesis. This productivity does not consist of a unified or consistent "Indian atheism" as a hybrid outcome of specific acts of translation but rather of a field of discursive and practical possibilities enabled by atheism's antecedent *translatedness*. I want to illustrate my understanding of translatedness with a brief ethnographic episode, which will also provide the entry point to introducing in more detail the people to whom I have until now only referred as "my atheist interlocutors." It is somewhat ironic but ultimately true to my argument about the negativity of secularity that the following vignette may give an idea about whom these atheists are precisely by describing whom they are not.

The Atheist Movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, or Atheism with Capital *A*

Devi and I had met for the first time at an atheist conference where she received an award for her outstanding efforts in the struggle for women's rights. She is regularly invited by different atheist organizations without being an official member of any of them and considers herself a sympathetic yet critical collaborator. Devi does not believe in gods and says so openly in private and in public, but she understands herself as a cultural activist and not an atheist—at least not without qualification. Before striking out on her own as an independent cultural activist, she was a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and used to be in charge of its cultural wing. While I was staying with Devi and her family, who hosted me for several months during my research, I accompanied her for a visit to a famous Hindu temple in Chilkur, around 30 kilometers from Hyderabad. In Chilkur resides Sri Balaji Venkateshvara, a form of the god Vishnu, who is commonly called "Visa Balaji" because he is particularly known for helping his devotees to obtain passports and visas for foreign travel. Devi, however, wanted to meet the temple's head priest, Mr. Rangarajan, with whom she was planning to organize a cultural festival to reinvigorate traditional folk art. What brings Devi and Rangarajan together—besides their shared love for folk art—is a common fight against "superstition" (*mūḍhanammakaṃ*) and, more precisely, against those who exploit the common people's superstition for money and selfish purposes. Rangarajan comes from a family of Tamil Brahmins who have been administrating the temple for some generations and understand themselves as religious reformers. As we entered the temple compound, we were immediately sucked into a stream of hundreds of devotees circumambulating the deity's inner sanctum in order to make a vow or give thanks for receiving what they had asked for previously. When I asked Rangarajan about petitions to "Visa Balaji" and their relation to superstition, he smiled indulgently; what ultimately mattered, he explained, was "devotion" (*bhakti*) for god, not the superstitious beliefs motivating it. More importantly, he was quick to add, their temple was the only one in the whole state that, as a matter of principle, did not accept any money from devotees and thus monetized neither superstition nor devotion.

Leaving the busy temple compound in order to discuss the upcoming cultural festival, we met Rangarajan's father, Soundararajan. Upon seeing Devi, he engaged her immediately in a rather heated

debate. Devi is something of a public personality due to her regular appearances in talk shows on Telugu News Channels, where she is famous for speaking up for women's rights, for criticizing superstitions, and for challenging what she calls the "orthodox" (*chāndasa*) Hindu Right. Soundararajan expressed his disappointment in Devi for neglecting to talk about the plight of temple priests in her TV appearances. "Temples are being looted continuously by the government," he lamented, referring to the Religious Endowments Act, which brings the administration of most Hindu temples under state control and has therefore been a key controversy in debates about Indian secularism. If she was so busy criticizing fraudulent Neo-Hindu godmen and the political aberrations of religious nationalism, Soundararajan questioned, why not also demand that money be spent for the renovation and preservation of ancient temples, the "real culture" of India? He went on to give a concise exposition of Indian cultural history with a critical focus on the Non-Brahmin movement in the neighboring state of Tamil Nadu, which is known for its atheism (on which I discuss more below). He concluded: "First, you shouldn't think that you are the only one working for revolution. And, while you are an atheist and against idol worship, you have to remember that it is also of Indian origin. We also live and die here." Devi retorted that atheism is a part of Indian heritage too, and that there are also several atheist *darśana*s (classical philosophical schools). "Yes, it is part of our heritage," Soundararajan conceded, "and I know that atheists are no *rakṣasa*s [demons]. They are also human beings, but the [Non-Brahmin] politicians are the real *rakṣasa*s. Look how your atheism is no longer atheism but completely changed." "I am not an atheist," Devi interjected. "I am against the exploitation of the people in the name of god." The conversation continued in that manner for a while.

I did not understand why Devi had denied being an atheist and was glad when the topic came up again a few days later, when she told me that Rangarajan had called to apologize on his father's behalf. I mentioned how surprised I was that Soundararajan had expected her to speak up in favor of temple priests, knowing full well that she is an atheist. Again, she said, "I am not an atheist," with a somewhat mischievous smile betraying her enjoyment of what must have been a puzzled look on my face:

> Stefan: But, you don't believe in god.
> Devi: No, I don't.
> S.: Um, I don't understand.
> D.: Well, I am an atheist, but not a *nāstika*. You have to understand, *nāstika* in India means not believing in the Veda.

S.: But you don't believe in the Veda.
D.: What's there to believe?
S.: Okay, but you don't follow their rituals.
D.: No, I don't . . . It is like the Buddha, who is often misunderstood. The Buddha was not a *nāstika*, he was a *nirīśvaravādī*. In the early sources, people still differentiated between *nirīśvaravādaṃ* and *nāstikatvaṃ*. That is lost nowadays. In the early sources, *nāstika* means "against the people"; that's what they say. But I am not against the people, neither was the Buddha.

This vignette illustrates above all a complex yet commonplace multilingualism that makes matters of translation central for any discussion of atheism in India. While Rangarajan spoke Telugu with Devi, who had grown up in a Hindi-speaking environment in Madhya Pradesh, Soundararajan had chosen to talk in English, which was also the language Devi and I used to converse. In their family, however, Rangarajan and Soundararajan speak Tamil. Regardless of which "vernacular" was used, many of the key terms in our debates were derived from Sanskrit or, indeed, ancient Greek. If we had spoken to one another in different languages, our conversations may have played out differently, but they would have still occurred within a discursive space permeated by antecedent translations. My lack of understanding created—unintentionally—a situation that forced Devi to make this basic translatedness explicit by stating that she was *not* an atheist, only to explicate in a following speech turn that she was indeed an atheist but *not* a *nāstika*. Since current dictionaries and actual linguistic practice leave no doubt that the word *nāstika* is in fact translated as "atheist," Devi mobilized the Buddha as a historical instance of an alternative way of—and word for—being an atheist: *nirīśvaravādī*. Rangarajan made a similar move by drawing on the political movement of Non-Brahmanism as a form of atheism that he rejected as no longer authentic or legitimate. Though I seemed to be the only one hung up on questions of disbelief in god, based on my understanding of the English word "atheism," this does not mean that this word or its meaning was irrelevant or necessarily secondary to its Telugu, Tamil, or Hindi translations.

Irrespective of which language they use, people like Devi, Rangarajan, and my atheist interlocutors can and do draw on a wide variety of both English and Telugu as well as Sanskrit and, via Hindustani, to a certain extent also Persian and Arabic conceptual frameworks for talking about atheism. By using the Telugu word "*nāstika*," competent speakers may metalinguistically imply or explicitly paraphrase it in terms of the conceptual history of one of its English translations (it can also be translated as "orthodox," just

as "atheist" is also translated as *nirīśvaravādī*)—and the same if they happen to speak in English or any other language. In some instances, they may highlight the incommensurability of translations to make a point (or to respond to an anthropologist); while in others, they may gloss over them or try to conceal them entirely. More importantly, these options are not bound to actual linguistic competences in the respective languages or philological knowledge because they are available even within monolingual behavior due to the translatedness of terms like "atheism."[7] My aim in this book is not an exhaustive conceptual history or some higher-order ethnographic translation that brings clarity to the shifting, overlapping, and often contradictory translations of "atheism" encountered "in the field." Instead, I am interested in how different people in different situations draw on the incommensurability, indeterminacy, and historicity of existing and contested translations. I am interested in what kinds of histories these translations make available and how they impinge on the ways in which my atheist interlocutors can relate to those histories in order to claim their place and identity (i.e., their positionality within them).

Devi and Soundararajan are unlikely to agree on how exactly to define "atheism," and they certainly do not reject it for the same reasons. They do agree, however, that it refers to something undesirable, something negative. As their conversation demonstrates, their negative evaluations of atheism are not grounded in its association with disbelief in god, which Devi openly professes and Soundararajan seems not to mind terribly; rather, they stem from a more diffuse social and historical imaginary associated with the Sanskrit-derived Telugu adjective *nāstika* and its nominalization *nāstikatvaṃ*. Coming from a Communist background, Devi condensed this imaginary in a leftist idiom as being "against the people" and stressed atheism's social negativity, whereas Soundararajan linked it to Tamil Non-Brahmanism—an understandable choice for a Tamil Brahmin—and evoked a much older tradition of linking *nāstika*s with the negativity of the xenological and dehumanizing category of *rakṣasa* (demon). What sets my atheist interlocutors apart from people like Devi and Soundararajan is neither their definition or preferred translation of "atheism" (on which many of them disagree, as we will see in Chapter 1), nor their understanding and radical rejection of religion; instead, the central argument of this book is that the internal coherence of the atheist movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana as well as its claim to being different from its social and cultural environment reside in the way it positions itself with regard to the diffuse and heterogenous negative imaginary of *nāstikatvaṃ* translated as "atheism."

What differentiates the atheist movement from its opponents as well as from allied progressive, leftist, or secular movements, from critics of superstition like Soundararajan and Rangarajan, and even from radical detractors of religion like Devi is the way they relate to that negativity: they try to harness its social potency by transforming it into a positive form and quality of secular difference. Atheists inhabit that difference not through specific traits, practices, traditions, ideologies, or worldviews that are necessarily exclusive to them—or different from religion—but on the basis of their positionality (i.e., of how they produce their boundaries through what they share with their environment, namely the negativity of atheism *as well as* most of the cultural, social, and intellectual strategies used for transforming it). Theirs is a difference–in–sameness. This is why the perceptibility of secular difference is not just a given but a problem, a project, and why I conceptualize the quality of difference characteristic of the atheist movement with the geometric metaphor of ex-centricity.

English dictionaries define "eccentricity" as a deviation from a circular path or, in its figurative meaning, from social convention. It describes a shape whose support or axis is off-center or askew but not entirely outside or severed from an assumed standard. An eccentric person appears odd, strange, even bizarre for transgressing conventions, but that transgression still remains "legible" in reference to them, as a form of agency, a more or less meaningful act of defiance; an eccentric is neither totally other nor outright insane, but simply a bit off. I use the orthographic distortion of ex-centricity in order to distance my use of the concept from its pejorative (or celebratory) connotations, while seeking to retain its potential as a metaphorical descriptor for the ambivalent quality of atheists' positionality of difference–in–sameness, including the ambivalent value judgments resulting from that positionality. The chapters of this book will explore the diverse aspects of negativity feeding into the imaginary of atheism/*nāstikatvaṃ* and the ex-centric ways in which atheist activists position themselves within it in order to make their secular difference perceptible. Who, then, are these atheists?

The "Field" and the History of the Atheist Movement

Fieldwork for this book was conducted during a total of fourteen months between 2013 and 2015 in the two mainly Telugu-speaking states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and in particular in the districts around and between the cities of Hyderabad and Vijayawada.

Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were created as separate states in 2014, by disintegrating the until-then unified Andhra Pradesh, but the new state borders did not noticeably affect the practical affairs of the atheist movement. While individual members had various stakes in and opinions about state bifurcation, the movement as a whole did not participate in any significant or programmatic way in the movement for either separate Telangana or united Andhra (for the role of secularity in the Telangana movement, see Binder 2018). In comparison to other states, especially Kerala and Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are not particularly famous for an organized secular tradition, which may be partly due to the diversity and organizational heterogeneity of Telugu atheism as well as its distance from party politics.

I speak of an atheist "movement" because there is no dominant or in any way representative organization but rather a host of atheist activism of different forms, sizes, and types: at the smallest scale, there are dedicated individuals who write and publish books or journals with a rather limited outreach into an immediate environment of personal networks; there are small groups of people who meet more or less regularly in informal or loosely organized settings like discussion groups, issue-based public meetings, or online communities; there are localized, on occasion even residential, institutions, which may or may not be affiliated with larger, officially registered organizations with formal membership. Some but not all of these organizational forms are affiliated with supraregional or international umbrella organizations such as the "Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations" (FIRA) or the "International Humanist and Ethical Union" (IHEU). From the smallest to the largest scale, organizations usually cluster around individual leaders or a particular family, and many of the splits within the larger groups could be described as secessions of factions forming around new leaders.

Affiliations are furthermore fluid and despite a tendency toward atomization and differentiation at the organizational level, and at times fierce rivalry between particular groups or individuals, most active members have plural affiliations and participate in events or programs regardless of institutional ties or ideological allegiance to those who organize them. I have therefore decided against a systematic overview of existing organizations and will introduce them individually as they appear in the course of the following chapters (a systematic overview is provided in Venkatadri and Subba Raju 2003). While the actual contours of the atheist movement seem relatively easy to discern—a fruit of the labor to make them perceptible—they

are rather difficult to "define" in terms of either organizational structure or ideology; in fact, there is not even a commonly recognized self-designation for the movement but rather three main factions clustering around the labels of atheism/*nāstikatvaṃ*, rationalism/*hētuvādaṃ*, and humanism/*mānavavādaṃ*. I will discuss the issue of names in detail in Chapter 1, where I explain why I chose to use the term "atheism" even though not all of my interlocutors adopt it as a public self-designation. In the following, I will use capitalized Atheism/Atheist or Total Atheism to refer to the larger movement and to differentiate it from those who self-identify as atheist/*nāstika*—or people like Devi who are atheist but not *nāstika*.[8]

Though I have not collected quantitative data on membership or caste and class composition, it is safe to call the Atheist community a minority, especially when compared to so-called "mass movements" like the Communist, women's rights, caste, or many religious movements. The small size of the movement becomes tangible in extended personalized networks. Most Atheist activists tend to know each other at least indirectly. As far as social profiles are concerned, activist members of the Atheist movement are almost exclusively male, at least middle aged, and hail predominantly from Hindu backgrounds. The movement has historically been dominated by leaders and intellectuals with family ties to central Coastal Andhra (Prakasam, Guntur, Krishna, and Godavari districts). Educational, caste, and class backgrounds of activists are in fact diverse, but a majority of activists, and certainly those in leadership positions, tend to be well-educated, hail from medium ranking or dominant caste backgrounds, and can be described as middle or lower-middle-class. The image of the English-educated, upper-caste, upper-class, elite Atheist may be pertinent as a tendency, but it is also in many cases aspirational rather than factual and should not be exaggerated. Most of the published literature and nearly all events are in Telugu language, and while many of my interlocutors were able to speak in English, there is also a sizeable number—also at leadership levels—with very limited command of English. There are also Atheist activists with working-class and more importantly agricultural backgrounds as well as vocal Dalit and lower-caste factions within the movement. Throughout the book, I address age, education, caste/class, and gender less as categories to sociometrically map the Atheist movement but as factors that "qualitatively" condition how individual Atheist activists experience and try to transform various forms of perceived, claimed, or ascribed marginality—including the "marginality" of elite status—into a positive form and quality of ex-centric secular difference.

I approach the contentious issue of Atheism's history in a similar way. While the colonial genealogy and modern development of the Atheist movement is largely uncontested among my Atheist interlocutors as well as their critics, a bone of vehement contention concerns historical narratives of the precolonial roots of Atheism in India. In his aforementioned ethnography of a rationalist movement in Maharashtra, Quack (2012: 47–99) provides a concise historical overview of organized rationalism and atheism in nineteenth and twentieth-century India, which is equally pertinent for the Atheist movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Quack retraces how the organizational history of contemporary rationalism began in the 1930s but has a longer intellectual history leading back to the publications of nineteenth-century British secularists and, by implication, to European Enlightenment discourses. Following Hans-Joachim Klimkeit (1971), he locates the immediate prehistory of what I refer to as the Atheist movement in an intellectual environment made up of various colonial social and religious reform movements such as the Bengal Renaissance, the Theosophical Society, or the Satyashodhak Samaj, the incipient independence and Communist movements, as well as the Gandhian movement. Another crucial ingredient of this environment is critical discourses on Indian religions promulgated by Christian missionaries.

The Atheist movement shares this historical background with a larger milieu of so-called progressive (*abhyudaya* or *pragatiśīla*) movements that comprises leftist, feminist, Dalit, Adivasi, and anticaste movements as well as smaller identity movements like the Telugu Muslim minority movement, the LGBTQ* movement, or certain sections of the Telangana movement; it also extends to organizations for education and science popularization, human rights, democracy, social service, or developmental aid. Progressive movements are usually considered allies but occasionally become the cause for fierce ideological boundary work, which is then decried by some as a sort of narcissism of minor differences. In fact, many of my Atheist interlocutors were or had been at some point associated with other progressive movements, and overlapping memberships and sympathies are not uncommon. Due to such intersections, argumentative styles and ideological factions within the Atheist movement can be mapped onto elective affinities with four important sources of inspiration: Communism, Radical Humanism, Non-Brahmanism, and the Gandhian movement. I will briefly discuss each of them, except for the Gandhian movement to which I return separately in Chapter 5 because only one, albeit a very influential, Atheist organization currently aligns itself explicitly with it.

Many of my interlocutors are also Communists or have found their way into the Atheist movement via Communist and other leftist organizations, especially their student wings. The majority of active Atheists has grown up on the brink of the so-called "Nehruvian era" (Parekh 1991; see also Chapter 4) and lived through a phase of a distinct form of socialist populism at both national and regional levels. S. V. Srinivas (2013, 2015) argues that in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, radical leftist propaganda forms and content have been transformed into a popular mass culture through commercial mainstream cinema, which has in turn influenced dominant styles of performing politics—irrespective of actual policies that were often grounded in conservative visions of a supposedly benevolent neofeudalism. In other words, explicitly leftist style, rhetoric, and concepts such as "class exploitation" or "revolution" have permeated political culture and popular vocabularies to an extent where they need not necessarily indicate a commitment to Communist ideology or politics. The Atheist movement is no exception, and it is strongly influenced by Marxist social theory as well as leftist cultural movements like the Progressive Writers Association or the People's Theatre Association (V. Ramakrishna 1993, 2012; Panikkar 2011), to the point where some in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana would readily equate Atheism with Communism. However, many Atheists, including those with explicitly affirmative stances toward Communism, criticize Communist organizations for downplaying or betraying certain aspects of their radical and potentially unpopular cultural agenda—above all their official irreligiosity—for the sake of electoral politics.

This ambivalent stance toward Communism is particularly strong among those Atheists who are inspired by M. N. Roy's Radical Humanism and his argument that official Marxism had become a dogmatic orthodoxy and "began to degenerate into a faith" (Roy 1999: 14; see also Roy 1981; Pant 2005; Talwar 2006). While the Radical Humanist movement failed to establish any lasting institutions in the region, M. N. Roy's call for rationalism, materialist monism, individual freedom, and universalism as well as his preference for education and revitalization over against violent revolution have struck deep roots in the ideology and conceptual vocabulary of the Atheist movement (Innaiah 2012). It is indeed characteristic of the internal dynamics of the Atheist movement that the supporters of Roy's antidogmatism are sometimes taunted for being overly dogmatic about their Radical Humanism, turning it into yet another quasi faith.

I will devote more space to the third source of inspiration, the Non-Brahmin movement, because its influence is particularly

significant for my interlocutors' cultural politics and their project of practical implementation (i.e., the ways in which they try to put Atheism into practice). Although it is often conflated with its most famous and politically successful manifestation in Tamil Nadu (Pandian 2007), I approach Non-Brahmanism as a heterogenous discursive formation that is internally divided along lines of language, region, caste, class, gender, religion, or political affiliation. What holds this discursive formation together is, first, a critique of Brahmin predominance in social, political, and cultural matters and, second, a tendency to justify this critique at least partially with recourse to a certain interpretation of the so-called Aryan migration theory.

While there is a long tradition in Indian cultural history of criticizing Brahmins as fake, unproductive, or parasitical (e.g., Halbfass 1988: chap. 15; Thapar 1989; Olivelle 1993; Narayana Rao 1993), the representational and political economy of colonial India introduced an important shift in this existing discourse because it produced a "new form of Brahmin power" (Pandian 2007: 63), which in turn provoked a new form of critique. In their function as custodians of Sanskrit culture and learning, Brahmins appeared to European Orientalists as the pinnacle of traditional knowledge and, therefore, an important class of "native informants" for projects of colonial knowledge production (Cohn 1985); as a consequence, they were also the first to profit from that knowledge by gaining access to English education. The educational privilege of Brahmins was particularly strong in Southern India, due to the comparatively high number of private educational institutions that produced a select and exclusive "mandarin class" (Frykenberg 1986: 65) of predominantly Brahmin elites. Brahmins could plug themselves into colonial structures of administration, material benefit, and authority and, moreover, use these structures to bolster their claim that Sanskrit culture represented not only Hinduism but India's civilization and, later on, its nation (van der Veer 1994; Trautmann 1997; T. Sarkar 2013). Especially in South India, affluent Non-Brahmin communities from agricultural or merchant backgrounds, who profited from colonial restructurings of the agricultural sector and slowly increasing educational opportunities, started challenging this new colonial form of Brahmin power. Though their caste-status was low in Brahmanic schemes of ritual hierarchy, their economically dominant status enabled them to demand their share of power in the political and cultural spheres as well. Crucial for their self-assertion and their reclaiming of "self-respect" was the narrative of Aryan migration.

This narrative is based on a nineteenth-century theory positing that around the second millennium BCE, nomadic tribes from Central Asia migrated into the Indian subcontinent. Early Vedic texts, whose authors self-identify as Aryans (Sanskrit: *ārya*), were interpreted as the oldest surviving sources of the contact and clash between the culture of these newcomers and that of the native peoples of the subcontinent; this culture contact has been considered to have brought forth ancient Vedic culture, which ultimately developed into Brahmanism and from there into what is today called Hinduism (Bryant 2001; Bergunder 2004; Trautmann 2006; Bronkhorst 2015). The Aryan-migration theory was developed in the larger framework of an imperial ethnological project that used the linguistic concept of language families—later on also racialized categories of physical and social anthropology and nowadays archeology and genetics—to uncover the "deep history of the world" (Trautmann 2006: 34; see also Dirks 2001; Hellmann-Rajanayagam 2004; Bryant and Patton 2005). This history was considered "deep" because it lay hidden in the structures of languages and human bodies that went beyond conscious human memory recorded in the discursive content of historical documents, like the Vedas for instance. The notion of a linguistically and racially marked "deep history" of Indian civilization fell on particularly fertile political grounds in South India, where landed Non-Brahmin elites with their stakes in agriculture could project themselves as the original "sons of the soil" and dispute the Brahmin-dominated Congress movement's claim to national representation (Hardgrave 1965; Irschick 1969; O'Hanlon 1985; Pandian 2007; S. Ramaswamy 1997). They were furthermore backed by a sustained polemics against Brahmanic Hinduism promulgated by Christian missionaries, who were themselves often trained as philologists and considered Brahmin elites not only particularly recalcitrant to proselytization but also the main obstacle for the conversion of "lower" rungs of society (Dirks 1996).

In its Non-Brahmin interpretation, the theory of Aryan migration told no longer of the genesis of Indian civilization but of its distortion, degeneration, and destruction; it told the story of the dispossession of the original Dravidian inhabitants of the subcontinent at the hands of foreign, Sanskrit-speaking, Aryan "invaders." The reinterpretation of "migration" as "invasion" cleared the ground for a cultural politics of historical revisionism that challenged an increasingly hegemonic Brahmanic perspective on Indian civilizational history and was spearheaded by the "Self-respect movement" founded by E. V. Ramasami (Diehl 1977; Pandian 2007). It enabled reconfigurations of what anthropologists would later call "great" and "little" traditions

(Marriott 1955), because it allowed Non-Brahmins as diverse as Dalit Neo-Buddhists, Vellalar Shaiva-Siddhāntins, or Kamma Neo-Kshatriyas to project the cultural visions and religious ideologies of their respective communities as the original, indigenous, great tradition of India (Geetha and Rajadurai 1993; Bergunder 2004; Bate 2005; Keiko 2008).

Although the Non-Brahmin movement in the Telugu speaking parts of South India was less successful politically than its counterpart in neighboring Tamil Nadu (see U. Ramaswamy 1978), it has had a deep impact on the Atheist movement in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, not least because twentieth-century Non-Brahmins like E. V. Ramasami started using the words "atheist" and "*nāstika*" as self-designations. What distinguishes the contemporary Atheist movement's uptake of Non-Brahmanism is its indiscriminate equation of Brahmanism with all forms of Hinduism and all forms of caste consciousness, as well as the idea that Aryan invaders did not only bring Hinduism but religion as such and thereby destroyed an original, Indian proto-Atheism; this Atheism was "proto" because it existed before there was any Theism to be negated (for a famous example of this thesis, see D. Chattopadhyaya 1969). This narrative of destruction is crucial for how atheists position themselves within Indian civilization because it explains not only the absence of Atheism from "mainstream" (as opposed to ex-centric) histories but also the negative affect and moral judgments commonly associated with it: they appear here as the effects of centuries of religious propaganda concocted by Aryan invaders in order to weaken indigenous proto-Atheism through Hindu ideological warfare. For most of my atheist interlocutors, their history begins with an ancient, pre-Vedic materialist culture that has manifested itself throughout the course of Indian history in the form of various social or religious dissenters and reform movements, the most commonly mentioned being materialist philosophers called Charvakas, the Buddha, various bhakti movements, and, to a lesser degree, certain forms of Tantrism. I agree with Quack that it is hardly possible to historically verify this narrative of precolonial continuity but disagree in his assessment that this "thin genealogy" (2012: 49) functions mainly as an argument for Atheists to repudiate accusations of being Westernized. As far as my interlocutors in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are concerned, their historical narratives lie at the very heart of their self-understanding and are foundational for their project of putting Atheism into practice. As we will see in the following chapters, to tell and thereby rectify the history of Atheism is a central part of what it means to "become" an Atheist.

Structure of the Book

Chapter 1 unpacks this notion of becoming an Atheist by following debates within the movement about the nature and name of Atheism and by tracing the historical preconditions of these debates to the complex translatedness of atheism/*nāstikatvaṃ*. What is at stake in these debates is less the search for an authoritative concept or definition of Atheism but a dispute about how it can be put into practice in a manner that is publicly perceptible as sincere. The chapter retraces how the reflexive and contested onomastics of Atheism articulate a moral ideal and conceptual grammar of *practical sincerity*, which underlies and regulates Atheist activism by distinguishing "talking" and "doing" as two separate yet linked categories of atheist practice. While Chapter 1 may appear abstract or less readily recognizable as "ethnographic" than the following chapters, it is in fact an attempt to understand conceptualizations of Atheism as a form of *practice* that is integral to Atheist activism as a reflexive project. Rather than presenting a merely descriptive doxography, the aim is to retrace how concrete debates about abstract conceptual issues are part of the practices they intend to conceptualize.

Chapter 2 focuses on the kind of practices categorized as "talking" and analyzes how the autobiographic narratives of two male activists articulate the ideal of practical sincerity as a secular, ex-centric figuration of historically entrenched cultural notions of male personhood, community, and propriety. By selecting the life stories of a senior ex-Muslim and an unmarried ex-Dalit, the chapter highlights how atheist activism becomes a conduit for transforming marginalized masculinities into a positively revalued positionality of secular difference. Chapter 3 examines how Atheist practices of oral propagation are enacted in an "oratorical mode" that interpellates listeners into the relations of affect and power that structure the Atheist civilizational narrative and social imaginary of "Aryan invasion." Focusing on the entanglement of content, narrative structure, and rhetoric strategies, I relate the performative efficacy of oral propagation to its ex-centric positionality within the historically shaped representational economy of postcolonial India.

Chapter 4 turns to the category of "doing" and examines how Atheist activists utilize the sociopsychological properties of stage conjuring in order to expose the complex cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms that they consider responsible for the persistence of harmful forms of "superstition." The chapter

contextualizes Atheist acts of exposure in relation to state-driven discourses on modernization and "scientific temper" as well as Hindu regimes of visuality. I conceptualize exposure not primarily as a tool of cognitive disenchantment but as an aesthetic form for making secular difference perceptible as an instance of benign pedagogic power.

Chapter 5 addresses the Atheist movement's commitment to social equality and its disavowal of religious and caste communalism. Focusing on contemporary ramifications of a colonial discourse on religious "sentiments," the chapter approaches humanism and casteless as a range of public practices that occur within affectively and historically structured, material spaces where they reinscribe social hierarchies into differential allocations of agency and affect. Chapter 6 describes Atheist marriage practices in relation to patriarchal and androcentric gender relations that both enable and constrain my interlocutors' project of realizing Total Atheism as a practically sincere way of life. It analyzes the Atheist movement's ambivalent relationship to Hindu reformist and nationalist discourses on female bodies and domesticity, which allows them to distribute the burden of embodying the ex-centricity of secular difference unequally between men and women.

Notes

1. Under this heading, first coined by Jürgen Habermas (2001), some scholars are trying to work through the entanglement between social science and the secular by examining—and frequently welcoming—a resurging relevance of religion and spirituality within public and academic spheres (e.g., Gorski et al. 2012; Braidotti et al. 2014). According to Patrick Eisenlohr (2014: 195–96), however, talk of the postsecular evokes a "contradictory scenario" because "our comparative concept of religion which seems so fundamental to the current discussion about a religious 'revival' and a decline of the secular is actually unthinkable without the conceptual and governmental operations separating the religious from the nonreligious that constitute such a key part of the secularization thesis." For a similar critique, see Russell McCutcheon (2007).
2. Different streams of scholarship on the relationship between the religious and the secular have formed around critical distinctions of various cognates of the secular, like secularization (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999; R. Warner 2010), secularism (Bhargava 1998; Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and van Antwerpen 2011; Cady and Fessenden 2013b), secularity (Taylor 2007; Schielke 2012; Lebner 2015; Bilgrami 2016), or the postsecular

(Habermas 2001; Gorski et al. 2012; Braidotti et al. 2014; Lloyd and Viefhues-Bailey 2015).

3. Secularity's function as a modern grammar of power is often retraced—and critiqued—through the workings of liberal democracy and the modern nation–state, its legal systems, and its doctrine of secularism. Especially discussions of the supposed exceptionalism of "Indian secularism" show how secular activists, like the atheists with whom I am working, do not simply extend or inhabit the power of secular modernity but may in some respects, though not in others, be excluded from it. The secularism of the Indian state is sometimes considered special in its decidedly benevolent and affirmative stance toward religion in general and religious pluralism in particular. As a political project of governance, Indian secularism does not regulate religions by keeping them out of politics or the public sphere but by claiming to accommodate all religions with equal respect so as to avert the corruption of India's unity in diversity into potentially violent forms of communalism (Bhargava 1998; Needham and Sunder Rajan 2007; Tejani 2008; Bajpai 2018). In this discourse of Indian secularism as inclusive religious pluralism, it is precisely the irreligious and especially atheism that are either ignored, explicitly excluded, or declared so marginal as to be irrelevant—by both politicians and academic observers.
4. The rapid growth of this scholarship is documented by a bibliography (updated till 2015) provided by the website of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (https://nsrn.net/bibliography/ [accessed 30 November 2018]).
5. Plessner also uses the term "eccentricity" for describing the positionality specific to human beings as opposed to animals and plants. The concept of ex-centricity I develop in this book, however, is not related to Plessner's use of the term and I certainly do not suggest that ex-centricity as I describe it, or secularity for that matter, is in any way a foundational or essential attribute of human beings.
6. This historicism is "undisciplined" because I am not trained as a historian, but I also mean something else by it: a productive crossing of disciplinary boundaries. My approach to the historicity of lived secularity resembles what Jack Halberstam calls a "queer" or "scavenger methodology that uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behavior" (2003: 13). My aim is thus to use ethnographic research for identifying new historical themes that have so far appeared irrelevant for or unconnected to "the" history of the secular.
7. Another way to conceptualize what I mean by translatedness is the concept of translanguaging, which has been developed on the basis of post- and decolonial theory (Ortiz 1947; Glissant 1997; Mignolo 2000), cognitive linguistics, and language pedagogy. Translanguaging does not refer to a translation between "two separate languages nor to a synthesis of different language practices or to a hybrid mixture. Rather translanguaging refers

to *new* language practices that make visible the complexity of language exchanges among people with different histories, and releases histories and understandings that had been buried within fixed language identities constrained by nation-states" (García and Li Wei 2014: 21). While translanguaging refers to a specific linguistic competence of bi- or multilingual speakers, I understand translatedness as an attribute of concepts or, more precisely, of the relationship between concepts and language. As such, the translatedness of concepts is the outcome of a past process of translanguaging, but the use of translated concepts by individual speakers does not require them to be bi- or multilingual.

8. In direct quotes and when referring to European discourses or academic literature, I use the lowercase without italics for atheism and its cognates. I will handle the capitalization of theism accordingly (i.e., capitalized Theism does not refer to belief in god or designate a specific form thereof; it refers to the opposite of Atheism or the Atheist movement as defined in this Introduction and Chapter 1).