

# 1

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019



## Atheism, New Religious Movements and Cultural Tension

Podcast with **Chris Silver** (8 April 2019).

Interviewed by **Kris Black**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/atheism-new-religious-movements-and-cultural-tension/>

**[Kris Black](#)** (KB): *How many kinds of atheism are there? Are there different kinds of atheists, different kinds of atheism, and what's the deal between new religious movements, non-religious belief and cultural tension? Dr [Chris Silver](#) joins me today – and welcome, Chris!*

**Chris Silver** (CS): Thank you!

**KB**: *We're here to talk about your wonderful previous work and your current work in atheism and new religious movements. Why don't we just start with visiting briefly your previous work on the six different type of atheism?*

**CS**: Sure. Well, I should also mention I got my start as one of the assistant editors of the Religious Studies Project!

**KB**: *That's right!*

**CS**: Back in 2011-2012. So it's strange to be on the other side of the microphone.

**KB**: *In the other chair!* (Laughs).

**CS**: Yes. It's really weird so hopefully I don't embarrass [Chris](#), [David](#) and [Tommy](#). So here goes, guys, I'll try. Yes. So a number of years ago Tommy Coleman and I . . . Tommy Coleman's now at Coventry University in the UK, a former both under-grad and graduate student of mine. I was in the process of

**Citation Info**: Silver, Christopher and Kristeen Black. 2019. "Atheism, New Religious Movements and Cultural Tension", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 8 April 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 4 April 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/atheism-new-religious-movements-and-cultural-tension/>

# 2

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

working on a doctoral degree in Learning and Leadership at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga and was really, really interested in a sort of fallacy – particularly in psychology but even wider in sociology – that some others had about atheism and agnosticism. So, for example, you'd see a lot of surveys and you'd have all, you know, where people would identify their beliefs or their religious and spiritual associations. And you'd always see “atheism” and “agnosticism”. Sometimes you'd see “none”: n-o-n-e-s, or “unaffiliated”. But, you know, with that community growing – we've seen this in [Pew Forum](#) and . . .

**KB:** *Fastest growing demographic.*

**CS:** Yes. So it just bothered me because, you know, I thought there was more complexity there, and I was afraid that by us collapsing all that variability into a nominal variable we're missing some richness that could be captured. But through the inquiry I wasn't exactly sure what was going to be the most efficient way to do that. So I'd both say that I was blessed to do this study, and I also apologise profusely! Because when you're the first person to try to do something like this you don't know what you're doing! So I don't ever claim that it has predictive power, although we have got a lot of anecdotal feedback from atheists and agnostics saying that it really resonates. So anyway, we set out originally, Tommy and I did, and we conducted a series of interviews with people from all around the US and we started discovering exactly what . . . . We started finding very common themes.

**KB:** *Themes of non-belief?*

**CS:** No. Of non-belief and how they identify to others, you know, other things like their opinions of religious believers and how they interact with them. And how they interact with families. And so what we did was we sort-of did a mix of both grounded theory and then sort-of social constructionism with a little sprinkle of phenomenology on top!

**KB:** (Laughs). *That's nice!*

**CS:** And basically we're trying to look at what is the shared reality. Initially we set out to try to find what terms of identity they used. But we failed miserably!

**KB:** (Laughs).

**CS:** I mean, because everyone had a different (understanding) depending on who they were reading. If somebody was reading Sam Harris or somebody was reading Dawkins . . . everybody had . . . . They

**Citation Info:** Silver, Christopher and Kristeen Black. 2019. “Atheism, New Religious Movements and Cultural Tension”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 8 April 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 4 April 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/atheism-new-religious-movements-and-cultural-tension/>

# 3

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

used the (same) terms, but the definitions were radically different. But the sort-of diamond in the rough here was, when we said “Alright, well, if we don't have agreement with the terms, we've got to do the definitions.” And all of a sudden, just cleanly, these themes started emerging of agreement. And so all of a sudden we started finding that there are attitudinal behavioural dimensions common among different kinds, including like how they saw the world and those kinds of things. So Tommy and I – who's an editor of the RSP, I believe, still – he and I then started thematically pulling those together and sharpening them.(5:00) And so, for a second study, we then started using various psychometrics like the [Big Five](#) and the [Ryff Psychological Wellbeing Scale](#). We used the [Rokeach Dogmatism Scale](#).

**KB:** *Oh, right.*

**CS:** And yeah. So when we made all these measures we ended up finding some decent effects between the different groups, and significant differences and different aspects. And so it was cool. And so we actually promised our participants, you know . . . We shared the results. We set up this webpage so that they could see what their efforts went towards. And all of a sudden one of the participants, it turned out, was actually a journalist.

**KB:** *Oh?*

**CS:** And he picked up our results. And the next thing you know we're on the *Christian Post*, CNN and I mean . . . I didn't know what to do! And we had some wild stuff happen! Like, first of all, some folks misrepresented our work – but I still appreciated the shout out! Like the *Christian Post*, for example: their [leading head](#) was, “Atheist Might be Standing Next to You in Church”!

**KB:** *Oh! (Laughs)*

**CS:** Because one of our groups that we found was this, what we call “ritual atheist agnostics”, which are basically their atheists but they still . . .

**KB:** *Right. Active non-believers.*

**CS:** And since then, there's been evidence in the Netherlands, and a few other places, that have found similar patterns.

**KB:** *Yeah. So what was the name of that? If someone wanted to find out about that article . . .*

# 4

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

CS: I think we, what did we call it? Atheists and non-belief . . . six types. . . (Correction: [The Six Types of Nonbelief: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study of Type and Narrative](#))

KB: *Six types of atheists and non-belief?*

CS: Something like that. I'm a terrible scholar! I can't even remember my own work!

KB: (Laughs).

CS: But yeah. It was in that. And so it's been published. It's in, most appropriately it's actually in *Psychology of Religion and Mental Health* (Correction: *Mental Health, Religion and Culture*)

KB: *There you go. In that journal.*

CS: Yes. And so that's a good international journal. So it's not Tier One, but they do some really great interdisciplinary work. And that's why we went for them versus some of the others, because we wanted to have a wider range . . .

KB: *A wider audience . . .*

CS: Even though they may not have as many readers, they have great interdisciplinary work. So, perfect.

KB: *OK. So what was the feedback that you got from that?*

CS: So, you know, we've had . . . interestingly, not one secular community ended up really . . . and I mean secular in a broader sense . . . I mean, a lot of folks said that it resonated with them. I got invited to the [Center for Inquiry](#) at Buffalo, New York, to present. I'm very humbled by that. I've been invited to various universities around, to sort-of share some of the results.

KB: *Oh, that's great!*

CS: And of course, I always lead with the disclaimer that this is just an attempt, it's not going to be perfect. I'm sure that there are amazing statisticians out there who could do light years better cool stuff than I ever could. Originally, the goal that Tommy and I had was to start the conversation.

KB: *And that's what it's done.*

# 5

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

**CS:** And Tommy's gone on to do some really, really [cool stuff in atheism](#). He's written some very powerful pieces in terms of theory which have been really good, so I'm incredibly proud of him for that. Also I've got my graduate student now, who just presented, actually, on concealment and disclosure. He just created a [non-belief concealment scale](#) and has had really robust results, regional differences that are really interesting. I'll use the stats terms and then put it in English. It's got a really interesting factor structure, which means that there's very clean sub-scales that are there, that have been used.

**KB:** *So you can project trends?*

**CS:** It's like an institutional kind of concealment, versus a personal kind of concealment.

**KB:** *Right*

**CS:** And so, warmly received by sociologists and psychologists. He's got some really good feedback, but also, people went: "Yes! This needed to happen!" So, really proud of [Cameron Mackey](#). I should mention his name! Because I'm very, very proud of him. This was his big day. He did a good job.

**KB:** *Wonderful!*

**CS:** And so, yeah. I've been very, very lucky.

**KB:** *Yeah. Well, I'm sure that work will take on even more projects in future. So we'll look forward to that.*

**CS:** I hope so.

**KB:** *That would be great. OK. So let's just shift a little bit now to your current work on the new religious movements, and the cultural tension that's happening between religious belief and non-belief.*

**CS:** Yes. (10:00) So for a long time – and I need to give a shout out to some other colleagues who have been working on it – for about since 2000 I've been working with colleagues from Bielefeld, Germany, on . . . research originally started on faith development, but we've actually shifted to faith styles. We've got a number of books as well. There's [academic publications](#) on the topic. So my shout out would be to Dr [Heinz Streib](#) who's at Bielefeld University, Dr [Barbara Keller](#) who's at Bielefeld University, [Ramona Bullik](#) who's been a long time on the project manager and she's been working on

**Citation Info:** Silver, Christopher and Kristeen Black. 2019. "Atheism, New Religious Movements and Cultural Tension", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 8 April 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 4 April 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/atheism-new-religious-movements-and-cultural-tension/>

## 6

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

her doctorate at Bielefeld. And then, of course, I was academically born and raised by Dr [Ralph Hood](#). And so I've been working with him since the early days. And so we've collaborated with Bielefeld now for eighteen years. That's half my life! And so we've got to co-author a [book](#). And you've got to realise in my mind I'm a nobody! So I mean, seriously, I really am. I'm not saying that like some kind of “humble start” or something. I really am nobody. So we did a book on spirituality. Multiple chapters of qualitative quantitative, mixed methods design. And we're working on some other . . . . We've got two more books in the works that we're working on right now, as well as a couple of manuscripts. But we're actually going to do a longitudinal study of people's changes in their belief and faith. And we've actually been able to find some of the original participants from eighteen years ago!

**KB:** *Oh, wow!*

**CS:** And then we've also got some, over the years, that we're tracking now. So we've had generous funding from the John Templeton Foundation, we're now actually going to some pretty heavy, longitudinal, mixed-methods work. And I'm sure you can appreciate how that's a massive thing. . .

**KB:** *Yes.*

**CS:** So one of the things I've been looking at is, I've been interested in social cohesion and how ideology sort-of signals group membership. And so this is sort-of a spin-off of Streib, Keller and Hood's work but it's not to say that it *is* there work – and I want to make sure there's some clarity on that – although I do have their support in terms of the data analysis and things I've done thus far. But the way that the theory goes – and there's been some preliminary findings already – is that, if you think of . . . I assume the audience is probably mostly academics and theologians, social science researchers,

**KB:** *Students.*

**CS:** Students, yeah. If you think of a particular cultural context anywhere – it could be Utah, it could be Tennessee, it could be New Zealand or Africa – you'd sort-of accept the fact that there's this cultural norm of a particular tradition which is, like, in the middle – they're not really controversial, or anything like that – but everybody knows this is the norm, right? We've actually theorised that . . . we call that group in our book . . . . Well, we borrow from [David Bromley's work](#) on apostasy and style of exit from back in the early 2000s. But we call that an “integrated” group, meaning like, they're just culturally . . . there's virtually no social tension. So that group could be Methodists in Eastern

## 7

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

Tennessee, it could be Mormons in Utah. It's whoever the norm is in that geographic context. Then, the more you're sort-of moving away from the centre of the bell curve and you start moving out into the maybe say . . . The bottom line is, we're starting to move away from the norm that you get in that middle area. We call those “accommodating”. It means they participate in society, but there may be certain behaviours, rituals, attitudes, beliefs; something that still makes them stand out just enough to create cultural tension. But they still tend to participate. So if you think of being, say, Mormon, you know, in Southern Georgia, right? So, yes, you go to church on Sunday like everybody else, but you have this additional theology which they would go . . . they'd look at you a little . . .

**KB:** *Mmm. A little suspect.*

**CS:** (15:00) Like in Chattanooga, Tennessee, which is where I'm from, an example would actually be the Seventh Day Adventists. They're actually pretty common, because they've got a university there, they've got Seventh Day Adventist churches but in their mind, they think that others, of course, are judging them for being a little different. Sometimes they aren't and sometimes they are. But that would be like an accommodating group. But then – and this answers your question – there's what we call “opposition” groups. Which are broadly called subversives. These are groups that have no real interests in participating in the larger culture. In some cases they make their own micro-culture, so that they sustain themselves and they try not to participate as much as possible. An example I would use is, in Chattanooga we have this group called the [Twelve Tribes](#). They started there. And they're a new religious movement. I don't like the term cult because it now . . . while in the sixties it was used as a sociological term, it now carries this media stigma. Quite frankly, there are some incredibly wonderful people that I've gotten to know in that tradition. But yeah, their beliefs are very much different from others. And so oppositional doesn't mean that there's something bad about them. It just means that they plainly stand out from . . .

**KB:** *From the norm.*

**CS:** So the way . . . so my modification, where I'm going with this theory, is that I believe that much like a bell curve, the more you get out on the tails the more distance there is between the members, in position. I actually have a view that the more a group differs from the norm, the more social tension there is – and therefore, the more likely that there's going to be inter-group prejudice.

**KB:** *Interesting.*

# 8

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

CS: This is my argument

**KB:** *Within both groups?*

CS: Yes. Because, if you think about it . . . So, if you think of the bell curve and the mean's right in the middle, one side would be like religious and spiritual groups, right, that are inter-normative – everyone accepts they're part of the culture, I mean, yeah, you get a weirdo now and again, but most everybody's, you know, pretty cool. But then you start moving out, and you start getting into not only more fundamentalism, and more sort-of . . . if you think about institutional and structural authoritarianism, rigidity . . . depending on which discipline of sociology or psychology you're using, there's different terms.

**KB:** (Laughs).

CS: But the more you're moving out to the tails: a) the more protective you are of your group and you're looking for any signal – be it verbal, behavioural – but you're trying to look for authenticity of who's in your group, versus those that are outside. Right? So the more you're out this way, the more prejudiced you're going to be of the norm. But here's the other thing: from the norm's perspective, the more prejudiced you're going to be of the outside.

**KB:** *Right.*

CS: Now, that's only one side of the bell curve. So, then, think about the other side of the bell curve. This is where we get into spiritual. So, folks who are spiritual, not religious. They're not trying to half-identify with something. But it's moving into a more individualised belief system as opposed to more structural. So, you know, as you're moving out you start getting into non-affiliated, religious nones, agnosticism and then atheism. Here's the beauty of it: it's like the bell curve plots one side on the other. In theory the tension should be the same, the behaviours would be the same, the attitudinal dimensions of rigidity would be the same.

**KB:** *Yeah. That's fascinating!*

CS: And from our six types data we already know that anti-theists are just as dogmatic as fundamentalists!

**KB:** *Right.*



## 9

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

**CS:** So the point is, we've already got some evidence of this. And when I say we, I mean . . . this is, of course, where I deviate from my colleagues although I hope it doesn't create confusion that they're doing this too. They've been very kind and given me some of their data. But what's interesting is . . . I will give a shout out to Dr Streib that he has this measure called the "[religious styles scale](#)". It predicts these categories *really* well. And what's funny is, he didn't make the scale with this intention.

**KB:** *Oh really? But it fits perfectly?*

**CS:** Yeah. So we did . . . I'll give the stats term and then I'll translate in English. So what I did is, I did binomial regression which allows us to create group identity. So, essentially, you're predicting nominal identity and you're looking to see, what are the certain measures that contributed to variants of that prediction? So, "Does a measure predict the group?" in English. Sure enough, at least with the integrated and accommodating groups, it's good and it's strong. And so there is some interesting potential there. So one of the things I'm going to speak about tomorrow is that I actually think that the oppositional should be the same way. I mean, you've already got some clean evidence. **(20:00)** We've already got somewhat related evidence in some of these other studies that not just me, but some much more brilliant people like Cotter, [Lois Lee](#), [Ryan Cragun](#), definitely, on the atheism side. And even on the new religious movements' side, you look at [Gordon Melton](#), again Bromley, shout out to [Lorne Dawson](#) who was one of my professors when I was at Milford Laurier University, a long time ago. They've got some really interesting stuff that does seem to parallel what I'm suggesting.

**KB:** *It sounds like you've got a really good theoretical lens, a good foundation there, a really good base that you can . . .*

**CS:** We'll see what happens! But, again the problem I have is there's so many brilliant people out in the world, but I still feel compelled to study it. So what I'm trying to do . . . before . . . I was trying to do it as just me, but then I started to collaborate with other people, because that way they can help me. And I'm also completing a doctorate in social psychology at the University of Tennessee Knoxville and I'm working with a wonderful advisor by the name of Dr [Michael Olson](#) who does [dual process theory](#) research which is cognitive . . .

**KB:** *Oh, right.*

**CS:** And what I like about what I'm working on here is that it taps into some of that. So there's this sort of . . . if you think about it in social terms, you know, when somebody's so radically different than you

# 10

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

*could* have these sort-of feelings of disgust for somebody that's so radically different. Not to mention anxiety, prejudice, anger, sadness. And so, interestingly enough, my current dissertation – as soon as I get it proposed and can start pulling data (almost done – the proposal, anyway!) – is to actually study high status individuals like Christians, mainly integrated Christians, who believe they're stigmatised.

**KB:** *Ah. Yes.*

**CS:** In the post-Trump era we've seen some . . . but it's been around for a while, this theory. But I want to look and see, you know: do we see the same kinds of psychological patterns for someone who is high status, who has enjoyed “privilege” to use the sort-of liberal term . . .

**KB:** *And by high status you mean like someone who's been the norm, who's already experiencing circumstantial privilege?*

**CS:** That's right. They're in the norm. They've enjoyed privilege but then at the same time, for whatever reason, they feel like they've been discriminated against. But mainly, the big thing is that if they lose status will they self-report feeling stigmatised? And so we have an experiment where we actually tell them they're losing status, versus a condition where we say they're not.

**KB:** *And kind-of see what the reaction is?*

**CS:** Yes. So, we'll see.

**KB:** *I know there are some groups who use persecution and loss of status as a kind-of confirmation of themselves. Is that the kind of thing . . . ?*

**CS:** Yes. That's kind-of it, it's interesting. But we're also going to look at white males, too. So that way we're not just *making* it about religion. We're going to see, what do white males believe? And again there's some at least preliminary correlational data that seems to indicate that some people feel this way. It's not to say everyone who's Christian feels that way, or every male. But in (audio unclear), because I'm an Appalachian kid, so I'm from the country – I'm sure you can't tell from my accent at all!

**KB:** (Laughs). *No.*

**CS:** But the other side of it is that you think about those who've grown up in Appalachia, in extreme poverty, and they're being told they have privilege. And so that creates a certain interesting level of

**Citation Info:** Silver, Christopher and Kristeen Black. 2019. “Atheism, New Religious Movements and Cultural Tension”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 8 April 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 4 April 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/atheism-new-religious-movements-and-cultural-tension/>

# 11

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

cognitive dissonance. So how would the person who's grown up in that environment, how would they respond to sort-of diversity initiatives, and what is that there? It's not a judgement that I'm making. I'm just saying that from a psychological perspective, what does that look like socially?

**KB:** *Yes. And what does that mean out in society?*

**CS:** Absolutely. And so when you have a West Virginia coal miner who's supporting Trump, you know, who's like “We're going to bring coal back. And we're going to . . .” you know. And because I think in some ways . . . I think I can say this with some certainty, from my own anecdotal experience, is that they feel like they've not been a part of the national narrative.

**KB:** Right. They haven't been part of the network. They haven't had that status.

**CS:** That's right. And so, if you define privilege in terms of things like seeing themselves on TV – absolutely. The definition works. But if we talk about in terms of opportunity for employment, opportunities for resources **(25:00)** . . .

**KB:** *Power to make change.*

**CS:** Education access. In many respects I see very similar patterns with my students – my undergrads, at least – those who are first generation college students from Appalachia, and some urban folks. Now, the urban folks probably have more adverse kinds of challenges but the point is, I gave a diversity talk one day at our university, about dual process theory (Thankyou, Dr Olson!). And what was fascinating was, was I'd made this similar argument and would you believe after I gave the talk I had a number of folks who were sort-of the minority advocates, and – wait for it – conservative opinions and beliefs, all come up and say that they agreed with my view.

**KB:** *Wow!*

**CS:** Radical positions that were like, “Yeah. What you said makes complete sense.”

**KB:** *It really resonated with them.*

**CS:** And what was crazy was – remember this is post-Trump – they were talking amongst themselves about how they agree about their socioeconomic inequities, and that is what brought them together. And they actually had a constructive conversation. I almost cried!

# 12

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

**KB:** *Yes.*

**CS:** Because, when you think . . .

**KB:** *Well and that's what I was wondering about this polarisation, that there is such a big divide. Is there a place for that type of coming together?*

**CS:** Yeah. And I think we're . . . I'm totally pulling a Chris Silver and going down a rabbit hole, I'm sorry!

**KB:** (Laughs).

**CS:** But I think we're in an interesting moment here in history. Because for the first time, not only do we have access to any information we ever wanted, we're highly diverse, we interact with far more people than any of our ancestors ever did. So there's interesting both social, cognitive, evolutionary . . .

**KB:** *On every level.*

**CS:** Yes. So we're at a weird nexus in history and I think, for some of us, we've moved too fast. And I think some of the things we're seeing is that they feel that they don't have a voice, but also I think they haven't had time to adjust to all the change.

**KB:** *Right.*

**CS:** And in many respects some changes need to happen and they've got to make that change. But then at the same time . . . I think a lot of this uncertainty and fear that we have about change is also driving some of our closed-minded attitudes. And I'd say this from not just the right but also it's now on the left.

**KB:** *Awesome*

**CS:** But it's an interesting time. It's a really interesting time. So cultural tension, for me – I'm going to circle back round – cultural tension, for me, is a really interesting aspect and that, to me, how we signal to others our group membership, it's no longer about discourse, it's about tribalism.

**KB:** *Ah. Wow!*

**CS:** Sorry I've just . . .

**Citation Info:** Silver, Christopher and Kristeen Black. 2019. "Atheism, New Religious Movements and Cultural Tension", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 8 April 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 4 April 2019. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/atheism-new-religious-movements-and-cultural-tension/>

# 13

## Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 4 April 2019

**KB:** *Fascinating stuff here! Really look forward to reading more of your work. And best of luck with your dissertation and your continued success with Six Types of Atheism.*

**CS:** Yes, I don't know what we're going to do next. I'd like at some point to talk to more intelligent people. Might buy Ryan Cragun a beer!

**KB:** *There you go! (Laughs).*

**CS:** Chris Cotter would be interesting.

**KB:** (Laughs). *Alright. Well, thanks for joining us!*

**CS:** No, thank you again. And shout out to all my old buddies at the Religious Studies Project! Thank you, guys.

---

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at [editors@religiousstudiesproject.com](mailto:editors@religiousstudiesproject.com). If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial- NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. The views expressed in podcasts are the views of the individual contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROJECT or the British Association for the Study of Religions.