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## Barriers to Belief: Why do the Resistant Resist God?

### Abstract

Barriers to belief in God and Christianity in an increasingly antagonistic culture are considerable. Reasons for resisting belief were studied in an intellectually-driven population of educated atheists in Western culture (N = 50) through survey and interview analysis. This mixed-method research study evaluated a broad range of functional (socio-cultural, psycho-emotional, existential, experiential, moral, volitional) and substantive (intellectual and spiritual) variables influencing disbelief. Based upon extensive data collection, these findings advance the case for viewing obstacles to belief as diverse, interactive, and complex in nature. These barriers should not be easily reduced to broad brushed presumptions, but should be engaged thoughtfully, compassionately, and uniquely with each individual.

### Keywords

contextual, socio-cultural, personal experience, moral, intellectual, integrated

### Cover Page Footnote

Jana Harmon is a former adjunct professor for Cultural Apologetics at Biola University. She holds an M.A. in Christian Apologetics from Talbot School of Theology and a Ph.D. in Religion and Theology from the University of Birmingham in England. Her doctoral research studied religious conversion of educated atheists to Christianity in six contemporary Western countries.

Although many non-believers practically presume the benefits of a Judeo-Christian understanding of themselves and the world, theoretically speaking, non-believers and Christians see the world and themselves in starkly dichotomous ways. With disparate starting points as to the nature of ultimate reality, their answers to big questions of the cosmos, life, and human nature manifest entirely different conclusions. Their resulting views and presuppositions are as close as magnetic poles – highly repellent and contradictory. Over the decades, even over the centuries, writings, debates, and conversations between skeptics and Christians have persisted, each side standing their ground with unwavering stalwartness, seemingly unmoved by rival arguments and evidence. Each side convinced that their own worldview as the most reasonable and moral way to think and live. Barriers built between them seem to pose no impasse.

Although this dispute used to be an academic affair among intellectuals, the chasm grows in more personal and familiar ways. Homes once filled with believers are now fragmented, religious belief doubted and rejected. Non-religious homes, schools, and cultures perpetuate a secularized, naturalistic and/or post-modern understanding of reality. Conservative religious belief and believers become negatively stereotyped as unattractive, unintelligent, unscientific, irrelevant, delusional, and even evil. Lack of exposure to authentic, embodied forms of Christianity become more distant over time with religious faith or belief removed from consideration as a viable option. Rejection of conservative religious institutions is on the rise, applauding Christianity's demise. Staggering cultural criticism of conservative religious belief fuels an encroaching acceptance of skepticism. Naturalistic forms of atheism now inhabit the Western world with greater acceptance, esteem, and influential presence as the only option for a rational, intelligent, educated, free-thinking person, or so the narrative goes. As Os Guinness poignantly states, we are living in an 'Anything but Christianity' moment.<sup>1</sup> Returning towards the antiquated, deluded superstition of belief becomes an anathema for some. Moving from disbelief to belief in God and Christianity would be a repugnant thought and even more repulsive action. Still others do not even think it worthy of consideration at all.

After three years of graduate study in Christian Apologetics, it became clear to me that the cumulative case for the Christian worldview was strong and compelling. In the years that followed, however, it also became evident that what was convincing for me as a Christian was not as convincing for the non-believer. No matter the substance of the arguments and evidence presented, disbelief and doubt in the skeptic persisted. The best philosophical or scientific debates, arguments and writings appeared to increasingly fall upon deaf ears, surrounded by ever increasing cultural ridicule and dismissal. Barriers to belief remained

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<sup>1</sup> Os Guinness, *Impossible People*

solidly erected against Christianity, the walls and distance growing with greater speed, strength, and distance.

The mounting rebuff of the Christian worldview caused me to contemplate the complexity of forming, holding, and changing beliefs. It is often thought that if someone had the right information, they would believe, but that is not always the case. After all, we are individuals with mind, will, and emotions. Beliefs are typically formed for more than rational reasons. French polymath Blaise Pascal acknowledged the role of both our passions and reasons when forming beliefs, “*People almost invariably arrive at their beliefs not on the basis of proof but on the basis of what they find attractive.*”<sup>2</sup> And, what someone finds attractive is tied to personal experiences, moral choices and desires, as well as intellect. Our beliefs are not merely rational, and neither are we.

Beyond internal complexities are the external socio-cultural and educational influences that also affect the shaping of our views, the way we make sense of reality, of our own story. According to Tim Mueller, “*Nobody holds beliefs in a vacuum. Their convictions are wrapped in a story, a story of how they got there and why they believe what they believe.*”<sup>3</sup> As Christians, we need to be careful about our presumptions of others, what we think they may need, or what will change their minds. While it would be an easy temptation to distill non-belief into a simple thesis as to why individuals or groups resist belief in God, the reality is we are complex beings with complicated lives. Reductionistic presumptions do not serve either the skeptic or the Christian understanding well.

This appreciation for the human complexity and individual stories sparked an investigative journey to consider barriers to belief in God and Christianity, particularly in the contemporary educated Western atheist. The research informing this article was drawn from my doctoral research with fifty former atheists from six Western countries who converted to Christianity. Each person completed a survey and participated in a lengthy interview exploring their perspectives and self-perceived motivations on how and why they held and changed beliefs from atheism to Christianity. It expresses their motivations, views, and experiences, appreciating the fullness of their insider perspective on their own conversion. Part of this study was dedicated to understanding the variety of influences and motivations towards disbelief as well as obstacles preventing belief. By studying the most resistant demographic who ultimately changed towards faith, it is hoped that their perspectives will inform our understanding of barriers against belief and will be insightful for Christians

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<sup>2</sup> PASCAL, B., 1623-1662. (1958). *Pascal's Pensées*. New York :E.P. Dutton.

<sup>3</sup> MUEHLHOFF, T. (2017) *Winsome Persuasion: Christian Influence in a Post-Christian World*, IVP Academic.

towards understanding and engaging with those who are resistant towards the reality of God and faith in Jesus Christ.

### Variety of Barriers

In an effort to capture the broad range of barriers to belief, each respondent selected reasons for disbelief among a variety of positive and negative variables. As an example, Brad<sup>4</sup> listed twelve distinct reasons supporting his once held atheism ranging from lack of intellectual evidence and rationality to negative experience with Christian hypocrisy, from social and moral disdain to a personal distaste for religious people and institutions. There was hardly an unchecked box on the survey. He took extra time to type in his former strongly atheistic view that “Christians were deluded and superstitious people who needed to change their false presuppositions and false beliefs”. For him, atheism was objective, known through science, logic, and experience. There was no doubt that God did not exist. He enjoyed the benefits of disbelief not only intellectually, but in the social relationships it gave and the moral freedom it granted. Brad was a convinced atheist with no intention towards changing.

In prior decades, the academic literature has been disciplinary focused, promoting reductionistic reasons for holding certain views instead of appreciating the complexity and multiplicity of influences. However, more recent scholarship has begun to appreciate and assess a variety of reasons for non-belief. Although intellectual reasons are often offered as primary barriers against belief in God, non-intellectual influences are increasingly recognized. Caldwell-Harris et al.’s survey study of American Atheists (N = 42) (2011) demonstrated a mixture of reasons for disbelief, including issues of science and logic, university influence, as well as negative experience with and/or views of religion or church.

#### 2011 Caldwell-Harris Survey Study of American Atheists - Reasons for Non-Belief

How did you come to the belief that God did not exist?			
Didn't make logical sense	47%	Other	21%
Didn't comply with science	12%	‘Eyes opened to new world views in college’	
Disappointment/emotional	0%	‘It just occurred to me there was no one living in the sky or they had no effect on my life’	
Negative personal experience	9%		
Hypocrisy of religion/church	15%	‘By the time I was in college I was a total feminist and continue to be to this day. Most [religions]	
God did not meet expectation	3%		

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms were assigned to all respondents to protect their anonymity.

Don't remember	6%	seem heavily patriarchal and obsessed with obedience and punishment.'
Left blank	15%	Note: Percentages sum to 128% because some respondents provided > onereason.

[Green: intellectual; Yellow: personal/experiential; Blue: spiritual]

Similarly, Bradley (2014) surveyed reasons for nonbelief in God (N=520, U.S.).<sup>70</sup> Participants were asked to endorse reasons for non-belief including: Intellectual (rational argumentation based on philosophy or science), God Relational (character or actions of god(s) that are proposed to exist along with subsequent experiences of disappointment, anger, or mistrust), Socialization (influenced by the beliefs of those around him or her – individuals and/or sociocultural environment), Anti-religion (negative experiences with religious individuals and institutions), and Intuitive (decisions based on preconscious factors not directly articulated), Emotional (negative emotional feelings towards god(s)), Agnostic (abstaining from both belief and disbelief in god(s)), and Existential (meaning, connection to others and the universe, facing death). The endorsed reasons for non-belief show intellectual rationale as the primary motivator for disbelief, followed by intuitive, experiential, emotional, and relational factors:

#### 2014 Bradley Atheism Study - Reasons for Non-Belief

Variable	Descriptive Statistics	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
<i>Reasons for Nonbelief</i>				
Intellectual		79.46	26.15	0-100
Emotional (Negative)		23.93	29.00	0-100
Emotional (Positive)		24.80	30.08	0-100
Socialization		26.42	29.58	0-100
Bad experience with religion		42.54	36.06	0-100
Intuitive		53.74	32.69	0-100
Good experience with secularism		38.64	34.83	0-100
Relational		35.23	34.43	0-100

[Green: intellectual; Yellow: personal/experiential]

Even though particular theories or even theologies suggest certain rationale or motivations underlying or promoting disbelief, caution needs to be exercised in generalizing particularities to the whole. These studies reinforce the variety of barriers to belief, setting the stage for the range of hindrances to belief that must be considered. Based on this data, disbelief typically entails an integration of factors. Each person presented a different narrative and combination of influences, unique in motivation, strength, and expression towards

and against different worldviews. A person forms and holds beliefs and barriers to other beliefs for a variety of reasons, both positive and negative.

In this article, we will discuss the range of internal and external influences working together which build barriers of disbelief in the skeptic, their source and motivations, and how they manifested the lives of skeptics. Specifically, we will review contextual, socio-cultural, experiential, psycho-emotional, moral, and intellectual obstacles to belief. Although spiritual obstacles are not specifically addressed apart from subjective doubt and disappointment with God, it is presumed that spiritual blindness, depravity, and deception also contribute to this accumulation of barriers. This inclusive approach provides greater clarity into the obstacles that are often the unseen, unrecognized weighty reasons below the tip of the iceberg preventing the possibility of considering God or Christianity in an open or meaningful way.

### **Contextual Barriers to Belief**

A complaint often lodged against religious belief is that someone only holds those beliefs because of where they were raised, the context in which their beliefs were formed. From a philosophical perspective, this objection is a genetic fallacy describing how beliefs were formed and not the substance of the belief itself. Regardless, context of belief formation cannot merely be dismissed out of hand as being inconsequential, but rather sets the stage and provides exposure to and experience with certain beliefs and associated expectations and behaviors. While context does not determine the truth of a belief, it can and does bear influence on the acceptance of a belief, upon its plausibility and whether an idea or belief system is worthy of consideration in the first place. For British missiologist Leslie Newbigin (1986, p. 10) cultural religious plausibility was a critical determiner towards belief.<sup>5</sup> In his view, a society's social structure creates the conditions promoting which beliefs are plausible, worth acceptance, and typically taken for granted without argument, and which beliefs heretically dissent from the consensus. Peter Berger (1967) maintained all religious traditions require a legitimizing social community to support their continuing plausibility. If legitimizing social structures do not support religion as worth belief, then, from a sociological perspective, religion will fade.<sup>6</sup>

In Western culture, the plausibility of religious belief, particularly conservative forms, has decreased over the past few decades. Although the secularization thesis has not fully materialized as sociologist Berger and others

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<sup>5</sup> NEWBIGIN, L. 1986. *Foolishness to the Greeks, The Gospel and Western Culture*, Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>6</sup> BERGER, P. L. 1967. *The Sacred Canopy*, New York, New York, Doubleday.

anticipated, Christianity has experienced a marginalization in key areas of influential culture rendering its serious consideration suspect at best, deluded and inane at worst. Intellectually, religion has become something that merely provides functional benefit and nothing more. Secular academics duly reject the *sui generis* nature of belief and ontological substance of a transcendent reality. In their view, someone joins a religion because of what religion provides (i.e., ‘what belief does’) in the way of belonging, acceptance, experiences, safety, etc. In the context of contemporary modernity, asking the question of objective truth in religion (i.e., ‘what belief is’ or is grounded upon) is a non-starter, a categorical error. In a secularized lens, belief is reduced to mere subjective, experiential truth and nothing more. Contemporary Western context promotes an effective loss of the plausibility and legitimacy of religious belief. Berger’s words from 1974 ring true today (p. 132):

The functional approach to religions, whatever the original theoretical intentions of its authors, serves to provide quasi-scientific legitimations of a secularized worldview. It achieves this purpose by an essentially simple cognitive procedure: The specificity of the religious phenomenon is avoided by equating it with other phenomena. The religious phenomenon is ‘flattened out’. Finally, it is no longer perceived. *Religion is absorbed into a night in which all cats are grey.* The greyness is the secularized view of reality in which any manifestations of transcendence are, strictly speaking, meaningless, and therefore can only be dealt with in terms of social or psychological functions that can be understood without reference to transcendence.<sup>7</sup>

Complicating secularism, post-modernity has infused the broad cultural understanding of truth as relative. Religious belief in this pluralistic context is reduced to one among many personal choices and individual expressions, disconnected from objectively grounded reality. Although religious truth becomes purely subjective, not all brands are socially acceptable. Conservative forms of belief, particularly Christianity, are viewed through a negative, even oppressive, lens. It becomes not only unbelievable (not real or true), but unattractive (not good or relevant) and even dangerous (evil). Altogether, the progressive loss of religious plausibility in social contexts shrinks the role of religion in social life and individual consciousness. As religion is increasingly conceived as merely social or psychological construction, it is delegitimized. This

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<sup>7</sup> BERGER, P. L. 1974. Some Second Thoughts on Substantive versus Functional Definitions of Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13, 125-133.



dominating functional approach to religion effectively denies religious content. It diminishes religious differences to the point of inattention and reduces substantive thought and transcendent experience to any other ordinary phenomenon.

Thus, the plausibility of religious, particularly Christian belief in God and Christianity often informs a person's openness or resistance to faith. Contextual implausibility of religious belief in Western societies, then, becomes a foundational obstacle preventing serious consideration of God and Christianity. It is the water in which the possibility of seeing religion as true or good sinks or swims. Of course, a general lack of plausibility manifests itself through specific barriers to belief. The perspectives and stories of former atheists help us these obstacles and gives us insight as to how and why they rejected belief in God and Christianity.

### **Socio-Cultural Barriers to Belief**

Both larger socio-cultural voices and more personal social influences like family, friends, and colleagues contribute to potential barriers against belief. Christian apologist John Dickson once said, "We often like the ideas of the people we like" and that statement concurs with religious conversion research. We are drawn towards ideas and ideologies that conform to where we are, who we are with, and what we desire. Again, social acceptance or understanding does not determine the truth of an idea or attitude. Nevertheless, the acceptance and promotion of ideas within our social context can affect our perceptions of truth, particularly if they become presumed, untested, and prevalent. It is not surprising that our environments nurture our beliefs and attitudes towards or against certain ways of perceiving the world generally and religion specifically. The growing number of atheists, agnostics, and nones within Western culture increasingly view conservative religious believers in a negative light and desire social separation.

According to Guenther's (2014) ethnographic and interview data from 15 participants, skeptics see religious believers as a group wholly unlike themselves – from naïve, gullible and/or stupid to narrow-minded, tyrannical, and even evil, posing a social and/or political threat to education and society. The more devoted the religious person, the least likely non-believers desire to interact and the more social distance they create between them. The greatest level of hostility towards religion and religious people was directed towards evangelical Christians and Mormons, particularly their religious leaders and institutions.<sup>8</sup> An increasing lack of exposure to authentic Christians and Christianity can create barriers to belief, building walls of distrust and disgust from a distance. The resulting unfamiliarity,

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<sup>8</sup> GUENTHER, K. M. 2014. Bounded by Disbelief: How Atheists in the United States Differentiate themselves from Religious Believers. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29, 1-12.

unwarranted judgment, fear, and distancing which can and does occur between distanced groups make personal and social connection, exposure to intelligent, embodied Christianity and conversion less likely. This distance creates lesser opportunity to directly interact and may also inadvertently encourage negative stereotypes of religion and religious people that are picked up through negative socio-cultural messaging. Carolyn said, “*There is that kind of tick that the name of Jesus has and so if you don’t have somebody who is in your family or who is a friend or crosses your path, really what other cultural message are there? They are not that plentiful.*” The former atheists interviewed in my research confirmed Gunther’s findings. Nearly half of respondents (48.0%) reported a general lack of exposure to Christian beliefs, viewing naturalism as a culturally presumed perspective.<sup>9</sup> Aaron stated:

*A difference with my atheism is I don’t think I actually heard an actual set-out deductive case for it. It was just something I accepted as part of the culture I was in. I absorbed the criticism and skepticism of that culture which is one that is necessarily sort of skeptical and almost anti-religious. You don’t need to hear an argument. When you speak to people, they’ll say there’s not any evidence. They haven’t examined any evidence for it They haven’t actually read any books or exerted any time into examining the best case for Christianity or theism. They’re just saying common things they’ve heard.*

Negative cultural stereotypes of Christians seen through technology and media (i.e., social networks, film, art, television) also undermined its desirability and plausibility. Raised in Australia, Joseph reported being two generations removed from exposure to Christianity. His perception of religion and religious believers was informed by the negative Christian caricatures on television and through education (macro-culture) as well as what he heard from his family and friends (micro-culture):

*I grew up thinking that religion is stupid, for the weak. It is something innately inherited from my mother, and possibly the idea, I think a bit of a superiority complex, that atheists are intellectually superior to believers. As a child, I thought there must be some kind of god or something, but that was rationalized away to some degree...Even though I was a miserable teenager, I*

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<sup>9</sup> Countries represented in the study included US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and France, some more removed from active dominant expression of Christian religion than others.

*always had a high view of my intellect and the one thing I could always lord over others was that I wasn't some stupid, crazy, religious nut job.*

Educational institutions and the cultural elite also influenced atheistic belief. Formal education led towards atheistic belief at the level of high school (64.0%) and university (47.0%). Joseph continued,

*For a big part of the population, particularly for the cultural elites, religion is regarded as like pornography. It is a horrible, dirty, disgusting thing that we allow people to do because we live in a free society, but it should be kept in a paper bag where people don't have to see it or be affronted by it... That's kind of where I was, mostly ignorant of religion, partly against it, and a little mystified as to why people continued to do this.*

This combination of lack of socio-cultural exposure and negative exposure undermines both the plausibility and attractiveness of Christianity. When study respondents were asked to report their views on the nature and cause of religious, particularly Christian beliefs, the overwhelming perception was negative, reinforcing reasons for disbelief. Most participants viewed religious belief in God as merely stemming from socio-cultural influence (62%), as a harmless, irrational projection of psychological need (48.0%), and/or a desire for an idealized father figure (13.73%).

Sean described belief in God as an “invisible friend, completely fictional” and Joshua thought God represented a “cultural babysitter.” Jessica thought belief in God as “more of a Santa Claus figure. He was someone Christians looked to solve their problems or to give them things they wanted and told them what to do, what rules to follow.” Matthew commented, “I thought Christians were just deluding themselves, not a harmful delusion, but, ‘Why don't you just deal with reality the way that is?’ and ‘Why are you kidding yourself with this nonsense, with miracles and all of this stuff? Obviously, we don't see any of that stuff.’ If anybody tried to talk with me, I would get hostile and defensive.”

Others negatively regarded belief in God as ‘dangerous’ (38.0%), with God an effectively ‘abusive, malevolent, fictional figure’ (20.0%). Melissa thought theism as “mostly benign but potentially dangerous, like many strongly held beliefs.” Kyle, Jason, and James respectively espoused the repressive nature of belief as held by “illiberal, unimaginative, inhibited, closed-minded people,” “an imposition on my rights,” or “the curse of the earth.” Todd recollected, “In college was where I started thinking that it wasn't sometimes good and sometimes bad but, if there was a dominant theme, it was more harmful than anything else.

*It convinced large groups of people to do really stupid things and act inhumanely, unethically, or immorally. I put Christianity in the bucket with all other religions.”*

More than half (60.0%) associated embarrassment with theistic belief; and nearly half (49.02%) perceived belief as essentially irrelevant, described as by Amanda as an “*unnecessary explanation*” and George as “*factually false, more-or-less disproven, as disbelieved by modern science*”. Others thought God as ‘uncaring/absent’ (22.0%). Only a small minority (12.0%) considered God as a ‘potential reality’ prior to conversion. Some respondents particularly viewed the Judeo-Christian God with greater animus, while allowing the possibility of other forms of spirituality when moving from atheism towards belief in the supernatural. Christopher stated, “[I] *generally considered Christianity dangerously ignorant while considering other forms of spirituality perhaps well-meaning but naive, or even potentially true.*”

Perceptions of Jesus similarly varied regarding his historicity, character and nature. The predominant perspective viewed Jesus Christ of Nazareth as a ‘historical figure, nothing more’ (52.0%). Nearly half (46.0%) considered Jesus to be a historical man who, over time, grew through fabricated legend into God. Others held the historical Jesus was a good moral teacher (38.0%), or perhaps a social revolutionary (16.0%). Close to one-quarter (24.0%) deemed Jesus to be purely non-historical myth. Sean thought Jesus was “*entirely fictional/folklore/tall tale/made up character (i.e., Santa Clause, Paul Bunyan, John Henry, Pecos Bill.*”<sup>10</sup> A minority of respondents held to the historical reality of Jesus but as a negative figure, ‘a deluded man with illusions of grandeur’ (8.0%), or ‘a man who deceived for selfish gain’ (4.0%). Five respondents (10%) reported a lack of consideration of the person of Jesus due to their primary position as a non-theist. Kyle stated, “*I didn’t even think of him very much. It was easier to get hooked on the general absurdity of theism in general.*” Dennis responded, “*I did not have any significant view of Jesus. Why consider him as a non-theist?*” Greg remarked, “*I don’t recall a lot of direct thoughts about Jesus himself. I mostly challenged the belief in God.*”

When questioned as to their perspective on Christianity, the strongly dominant view among nearly three-fourths of respondents thought it was a ‘man-made religion’ (74.0%), and/or a ‘false, antiquated, and/or superstitious ideology’ (74.0%). Other negative perceptions of Christianity included its portrayal as non-relevant (60.0%), judgmental (42.0%), intolerant (38.0%) and even dangerous (18.0%). Christopher believed Christianity’s “*moral positions were dangerous and outdated.*” Alternatively, a minority perceived Christianity as good for moral training (10.0%) and a promoter of social justice (6.0%). Others remarked on the

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<sup>10</sup> This presumed mythological view was interesting in light of affirmed historical veracity of Jesus even among contemporary skeptics.

presumed nature of Christianity's social and/or psychological construction. James viewed Christianity as "*mere tradition, of no substance for those in the West who were simply born into it.*" Amanda commented, "*I had this impression that no intelligent person really believes this stuff. They might go to church because their family does. It's a tradition and it's pleasant, but there's no reason.*" Kyle viewed Christianity as born from psychological need as "*a construct by people who couldn't handle the complexity and animal-like depths of human nature, and of nature itself.*" Nicholas believed the Christian story to be beautiful but untrue, stating, "*Even if it looked appealing, I was convinced there was nothing to it.*" George questioned, "*I thought the Gospel, of Christ taking my punishment, freeing me for a relationship with God ingenious and beautiful, but was it true?*"

Other negative impressions included Christians as intolerant (42.0%) and hypercritical (36.0%), generally holding a negative, critical view on life (20.0%). A minority viewed Christians through a positive lens, acknowledging Christians as 'good, sincere people' (22.0%), 'morally upright' (13.73%), and/or 'holding a positive, purposeful view on life' (4.0%). When respondents were asked as to whether they considered themselves as to open to the theistic worldview, they reported a high level of resistance.

Overall, a negative stereotyping of religious belief, Christianity, and Christians once existed in the minds of the former atheists. With loss of cultural and intellectual plausibility, Christianity was readily disregarded as unworthy of reasonable consideration. 'Religion is absorbed into the night in which all cats are grey' as per Berger's analysis. No serious hearing of Christianity or Christians was granted. Once designated as implausible, Christianity's ability to contend for intellectual respectability was lost in the atheists' negative perceptions. Amanda stated, "*I just had this impression that no intelligent person really believes this stuff...When you think that way, before they even speak anything, you've already dismissed them.*" Presumed implausibility and undesirability powerfully construct a stalwart barrier against belief, often barring any possibility of an honest or open hearing.

### **Personal Experiential Barriers to Belief**

Another roadblock to belief is personal exposure and experience, of what happens around and to someone. Whether occurrences are positive or negative, all contribute to a view of reality, creating barriers or bridges towards or away from God. A lack of general exposure to religion or authentic religious belief propelled many towards skepticism or dismissal. Of the fifty former atheists researched, most reported no practice of religious faith in their home (58%). Less reported exposure to a form of nominal Catholic or protestant Christian faith (26%), and even fewer experienced an active religious Catholic or protestant

Christian faith (18%). When asked as to primary reasons for atheism, George said, “A big factor was my parents. Both treated religion and religious questions as unimportant, irrelevant, unnecessary to living life.” Dennis described his non-religious home as influential towards his perceived irrelevance of God:

*I grew up in a household that was areligious. They weren't irreligious, but they were areligious. There was no discussion of religion. There is no discussion of faith. My dad left my mother, my brother and I went I was seven years old. So, I really didn't have a father figure in the house, and my mom never talked about faith. I was close to my grandparents, especially my grandmother. I would say in some sense they raised me more than my mother did, but they were also areligious. They didn't say anything bad about religion, but they never talked about it. It never came up. So, I was not exposed in the house at all to anything about faith. And my friends, none of them were, none of their parents were religious either. I was in a world where religion and faith was just absent. It was a non-issue. So, I didn't think about it a lot.*

Any lack of personal, familial exposure to the Christian worldview created a vacuum filled by negative socio-cultural and educational messaging regarding the irrelevance, undesirability and tacit dismissal of God and Christianity. This negative socio-cultural exposure to and experience with institutional Christianity also contributed to the development of disbelief due to perceived hypocrisy (48-50%) and intolerance (22%)<sup>11</sup>. Negative personal encounters with Christians (34%) also led some away from religious belief. An incident of gross Christian hypocrisy was the final impetus in his adolescent life causing David to ‘give his life to Satan’:

*Some of it was personal experience with Christians. there was a time after my mom had kicked my dad out of the house and after they had been divorced. There was a mission fieldworker who came over to our house. I thought, ‘Whatever, that's cool.’ I had some friends over for my birthday party. I was 15 or 16. At some point, I went to ask my mom something. I couldn't find them. They were in the bedroom. I knocked on the door and walked in and they were naked. That left a bad taste towards Christianity.*

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<sup>11</sup> Most likely increased in today's current Western culture.

Christians were also perceived as socially ‘odd’ or ‘weird’ although others recognized diversity among Christians whether in sincerity or pragmatics. Dennis commented, *“I did not formulate a significant view of Christians. I was uninterested in them and did not have any positive or negative views about them other than I thought they were a bit socially odd.”* Christopher recalled, *“I mostly demonized Christians, but there were a few genuinely thoughtful, sincere, compassionate people whose lives were a constant reminder to me that I could not paint Christians with such broad strokes. There were, I fear, rare.”*

Further, general negative life relationships, experiences, and events also create doubt and disbelief in God. Either ‘God is not real.’ Or, if He exists, ‘God is not good.’ He is either not ‘there’ or if He is, is not ‘fair,’ their perceptions based upon certain expectations and disappointments.<sup>12</sup> Emotional abuse, physical abuse, abandonment, or absence of a father has been correlated with atheism, according to Paul Vitz.<sup>13</sup> Although healthy maternal and paternal relationships (10%) contributed to non-belief for some, troubled and/or absent relationships with mothers (14%) or fathers (28%) created resistance to belief among approximately one-fourth of the former atheists in the study. As an example, Jennifer’s troubled relationship with her father distanced her from belief in God. An atheist at 14, she recalled:

*I grew up not trusting fathers as I had been abandoned by mine...My father was in and out of our lives. He was gone quite a bit. And when he did show up he was very difficult or violent or despondent or what not. So, by extension, I wasn’t going to trust a father, and certainly not an eternal father...I was working several jobs and supporting my family. My dad was in and out of my life. The road of my adolescence with him in particular was rocky. This informed my distrust of any spiritual father, by extension. My mom was a single mom raising us and she was drinking at night. I was putting her to bed after she was drinking, and I was working through college. I was so busy surviving.*

Jacob was raised in a Christian home and perceived God as a caretaker until his own father disregarded his caretaker role through infidelity and abandonment of the family. At age 14, Jacob’s loss of trust in his father transferred to loss of trust and belief in God. He recalled,

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<sup>12</sup> The problem of evil is foundationally grounded upon a certain individualized expectation of a Judeo-Christian understanding of an omni-benevolent, omniscient, omnipotent God, per C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Vitz’s theory from *Faith of the Fatherless*

*About halfway through middle school my family began to change. My family started not being as involved in the church. My father began to not come home as often. Eventually my parents divorced and that certainly hurt my faith, not perhaps at that moment but more so gradually without the leadership, the guidance on a daily basis...I didn't see him for about six years. I didn't understand why it could have happened or why it would have happened, why someone or parents who were so involved in the church, why this could have happened to them. That was very groundbreaking for me. And also, I just prayed for the relationship that they would not divorce, and then it did. So, I felt very unheard.<sup>14</sup>*

A lack of response from his trusted earthly and Heavenly Father emotionally propelled Jacob towards disbelief. Prolonged negative life experiences prompted disbelief in two-fifths (40%). Gary described his difficult childhood as fueling his doubt and disbelief:

*God was mocked, and He wasn't relevant at all. I didn't even think about it other than, as I started to get a bit older, I did make a decision to reject it. But that happened through a couple of really painful experiences. These people would talk about, 'Oh, God loves you.' Those messages might creep in and I would be like, 'If He loves you, there is no way this stuff happens. This is ridiculous. There's no way. These people are just dense...If there was a God loves us, then I wouldn't feel the way I felt. I wouldn't go through what I was going through...That there's no way it's real. Because if it was real things wouldn't work like this. I wouldn't have an alcoholic father. I wouldn't go through the stuff that you go through with an alcoholic parent. In my story, there was sexual abuse [from a neighbor]. Once that happened, life got very dark for me.*

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<sup>14</sup> <sup>14</sup> Jacob described the devolution of his faith: "I grew up in a Christian family who attended church regularly. Divorce and adultery plagued my parents, and after the splitting of the family, I gradually lost faith. Left unguided without a place to receive proper Christian apologetic responses, I embraced relative ethical and moral truth, and religion became merely a cultural influence to me. Christianity is one of the many. This eventually led my belief into the naturalistic worldview. Eventually, after years of atheism, the question of God lost its importance; the thought of the question of why we came to be became dumb to me - as Richard Dawkins puts it, the question of 'why' is sometimes a very stupid question."



Adam described a loss of security in his family due to the divorce of his parents at age 12. This along with ‘trouble in the world’ combined with his belief in a naturalistic worldview resulted in disillusionment and rebellion against authority figures who were viewed as uncaring, absent or irrelevant. They fueled his movement towards atheism:

*It appeared like every authoritative structure seemed to be failing me – whether it be my parents or the government or the church. They all seemed to be failing and so I thought it would be better for me to make up my own version of truth. I don't think I made a conscience decision to do so until well after the fact. It seemed better to me to base things on my experience rather than to base things on failing institutions.*

Contrasted to prolonged negative experience, sudden traumatic events contributed to atheism in nearly one-third of the participants (30%). Jessica recalled her confirmed disbelief after a heartbreaking event:

*When I was 22, my best friend died in a car accident, and any remaining shred of thought of praying or anything like that was gone. She had actually gotten involved and some pretty rough things, drugs and such. She had been sober for only three months when she died. The accident was not her fault and I thought, “Okay God, you are a horrible, horrible thing if you are real because that's disgusting. Why would you do that? Are you laughing? You just put all of her friends and family through this and then she just comes back around, and you just snuff out her life. Is this a sick joke? On one hand I would've sworn up and down that I did not believe that God existed and on the other hand I blamed him for what was going on...That one just sealed it.*

Jeffrey soberly recalled the devastating loss of his brothers as the sudden onset of his atheism:

*In October of 1977 when I was 7 years old, we experienced a house fire and my younger brother didn't get out of the house. He died with smoke poisoning. And my older brother who was 11 at the time, I remember him walking out of the house and he was on fire. And they put him out, put him in the ambulance and I sat at his feet. I was sent to church the week after and the minister said, ‘Come and we will pray,’ and I ran away. I said, ‘If that is what*

*God has done to my brother then I don't want anything to do I with it' and I became an atheist. My brother survived for 5 days and then died. He had third degree burns over 90% of his body and it was probably a blessing that he did die. But I could have nothing to do with religion.*

One of the most remarkable barriers to belief is a felt absence of God in someone's life. More than half of the participants reported non-belief due to perceived lack of *subjective* evidence for God (60.0%). Former atheists reported suffering in others' lives (26%) unanswered prayer (20.0%), and personal pain (16.0%) fostering doubt and/or disappointment with God. Timothy spoke of his felt lack of God's presence or action as related to his sister's health: "*When she was 14, my sister was diagnosed with a neuromuscular disorder so she couldn't walk. She was getting worse. I didn't really know what to make of that disease. It was my own private disappointment or sadness and it grew.*"

In hindsight, more participants reported a higher personal, subjective influence for atheism 'as a Christian looking back' than was recognized and/or admitted during the time of their atheistic belief. Whereas only 4% declared solely personal/subjective reasons for disbelief initially, 25% affirmed solely personal/subjective reasons when reflecting back on authentic reasons for atheism. This shift may be due to the robust assertion of atheism's rational superiority and intellectual grounding by its most vocal proponents, with personal reasons generally held to be secondary. Nevertheless, subjective reasons for disbelief plays a greater role was admitted by the atheist in the substantiation of his/her worldview.

Alternatively, positive life experience, identity, and desire for independence are also barriers to belief. Many respondents appreciated atheism as self-affirming and satisfying with God seen as irrelevant to life. One-third of atheists reported 'no felt perceived need for God' in their lives (34.0%) When all is going well, personal or spiritual need often goes unrecognized and unattended. A high sense of self-worth promoted atheism in one-third of respondents (34%). Atheism "*had a certain psychological appeal*" for Michelle who felt "*superior to others who needed faith.*" Sean felt "*more intelligent and sensible by nature, which made me feel great about myself.*"

For some, atheism provided not only a perceived better way of life but also a more esteemed identity, particularly if intellect was highly valued. They enjoyed being associated with the intellectual 'brights'.<sup>15</sup> While many reported a positive sense of satisfaction within atheism prior to conversion, slightly more than half (54.0%) 'did not find atheism to be generally satisfying but soberly

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<sup>15</sup> A reference to the New Atheists' self-description.

accepted it as truth.’ Scott stated, “*Early in my life, there was no alternative possible in my view. Later, it wasn’t satisfying but was still the only option.*” Per Kyle, “*Even when atheism didn’t satisfy me, it still seemed more satisfying than belief in God.*” These statements echo the lack of or negative exposure to the fullness and depth of the Christian worldview.

### **Moral Barriers to Belief**

Author James Spiegel contends that “immorality leads to unbelief” in atheists.<sup>16</sup> Although drive towards moral autonomy was a prominent factor influencing non-belief, it was not as overwhelmingly comprehensive per self-assessment, at least at the conscious level, as Spiegel suggests. A ‘desire for moral freedom’ led nearly half (46%) towards atheism, ‘moral constraints on personal behavior’ contributed to non-belief for one-third (32%) and, approximately half of respondents appreciated atheism’s ‘allowance of freedom in personal choices’ (48.0%).

Similarly, half (48%) believed they lived freely and enjoyed the freedom allowed in making personal choices. Moral autonomy allowed pursuit of personal pleasure without guilt. Greg stated, “*At first it was fantastic. I could do whatever I wanted. There was no one to judge your behavior. You could write your own moral blank check, so to speak in a way. I definitely took advantage of that in my early 20s I would say...I only tended to realize atheism’s negative implications in my thirties. I tended to ignore them in my twenties and enjoyed the moral freedom it provided.*” As a ‘Christian looking back’ on reasons for atheism, desire for moral autonomy (42.0%) ranked second to intellectual reasons among the respondents. Kyle’s desire for moral autonomy contributed to his disbelief:

*I think for a while the attractiveness of atheism was defined by it not being Christianity. It’s attractive to think I am not going to be judged. It’s attractive to think that I could sleep with anyone I want or use whatever language I want or make any decisions that I want or go and get drunk or whatever. At least theoretically, it seemed like the idea of freedom and casting off shutters and being liberated. I wanted this God stuff to be false. I lived under my parents’ authority so much of my life. I am a free man now. I don’t want a cosmic authority, please. You figure out that all of this God stuff is not true, so naturally, as you would do with anything else that is rubbish, you throw it away because you don’t need it and you can breathe a sigh of relief and do what you want.*

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<sup>16</sup> SPEIGEL, J.S. (2010) *The Making of an Atheist: How Immorality Leads to Unbelief*, Moody Publishers.

Although several former atheists used language transparently describing their pre-conversion lives as hedonistic, there were equally as many who self-described as holding to standards of good, decent morals, even troubled by the immorality of others. More than that, they were troubled by the reality they could not ground their felt standard of morality. In his non-belief, Joseph struggled with grounding his personal moral standards:

*I have to say one other thing that did baffle me was, I had this strong sense of right or wrong but I also knew that there was no ontological basis for it, that ultimately whether you help an old lady across the road or whether you push for in front of the truck, it is ultimately morally meaningless. I still liked a certain sense of chivalry, that there are certain things young man shouldn't do. Even when I joined the Army, there were certain things my Army friends were doing that I thought were just wrong, you know, seducing young girls at any expense was one of them. That kind of a thing, 'I thought I just can't do that. That ain't right.' ...You can ascribe right and wrong to it, but ultimately it has no basis. If we are all evolved animals, then there is nothing wrong with just behaving like animals in the technical sense. And yet, I have a strong sense of what ought not be. But I never reconciled that in my own mind. And said that was a tension I lived with for a while, but with moral absolutes in there somewhere but no reason for having them.*

As with any other presumed assumption contributing towards disbelief, desire for moral autonomy can be motivating for some, but not for all and should not be broad-brushed or presumed. Each individual's personal reasons for resisting belief are different and should be acknowledged as such. Of course, Romans 1 reminds us that all are rebellion against God, repressing truth in unrighteousness, but we need to be careful not to falsely caricature all skeptics as actively living morally reprehensible lives just as Christians resist negative stereotyping.

Moreover, our own grounded morals also potentially raise a barrier against belief when we as Christians fail our own standards. Lack of experiential authenticity or expected transformation caused many to readily dismiss God or faith. As one former atheist remarked, "*The city on the hill analogy works both ways.*" Perceived 'Christian hypocrisy' raises a red flag for many non-believers, whether at individual or institutional levels. Our personal lives and enacted moral standards can and do attract or repel others towards or away from the Gospel

based upon our own faithfulness or lack. In the eyes of fifty former atheists negative exposure to and experience with Christianity contributed to the development of disbelief due to perceived hypocrisy (48.0-50.0%), intolerance (22.0%), and negative personal experience (24.0%). As an atheist, Jason saw no need to seriously think about God because faith did not seem to make any practical difference in those he knew who were professed Christians:

*I saw all of the people around me living as if there was no God, my parents were nominally religious in that we said our prayer at night, but it wasn't really meaningful to anybody. It was just what we did. That's where I decided that I didn't believe it and there was really no need for me to really think about it.*

Further, negative reporting of failed Christian leaders and institutions compounded by increasing cultural indictment of Christians as morally out-of-step, restrictive, and immoral continue to erect walls of resistance from the elite down to popular culture, undermining its desirability and plausibility.

### **Intellectual Barriers to Belief**

Western secular voices promote these narratives of presumed moral and intellectual superiority to religion, one of the most common barriers to belief in God. Oftentimes, skeptics first assert disbelief in God or Christianity due to its lack of grounding in truth, rationality, evidence, or science. When respondents were asked as to their primary reasons for disbelief in God and Christianity, the majority reported a lack of intellectual evidence for God. Conversely, non-belief is considered the more sober-minded, courageous, progressive view of reality towards 'throwing aside the chains of religion.' Alister McGrath (2006) describes atheism's redemptive story, freeing humanity from Christianity's oppression and intellectual ineptness, and many non-believers believe it<sup>17</sup>:

*[Atheism is] the explicit denial of all spiritual powers and supernatural beings, or the demand for the elimination of the transcendent as an illusion. For some, it was felt, the mirage of religion might comfort. Christianity, after all, inculcated a soothing possibility of consolation in the face of life's sorrows. But increasingly it was argued that this illusion imprisoned, trapped, and deceived. By any index of its capacities, Christianity, like all religions, was held to be deficient. Intellectually, its*

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<sup>17</sup> MCGRATH, A. 2006. *The Twilight of Atheism: The rise and fall of disbelief in the modern world*, United States of America, Doubleday, Random House, Inc.

*central ideas were ridiculous and untenable; socially, it was reactionary and oppressive. The time had come to break free of its clutches, once and for all.*

In Charles Taylor's view (2007, 574-575) scientific materialism combined with autonomous moral authority compose a powerful contemporary story that "functions as unchallenged axioms, rather than as unshakable arguments."<sup>18</sup> Naturalism refutes the concept of a transcendent ontological supernatural being or objectively falsifiable religious truth. There are merely subjective truths constructed and established by communities, useful fictions which further survival. Within the skeptical paradigm, belief in God and Christianity is perceived as childish, superstitious, non-scientific thinking. Most study respondents held Christians to be 'irrational, deluded' (72%), 'weak, needy' (60%) and 'uneducated, superstitious' (62%) people. *Not one participant in the study responded positively to the perception that Christians were educated people (0/50; 0.00%).* This strongly adverse impression among atheists was common among non-believers who held themselves as an intellectual superior group. For Greg, Christians were:

*...weak people, weak intellectuals. I thought, 'Only people who just don't have the intellectual honesty and guts have to rely on this [religion] to get them through life. If only they were courageous and faced the reality that there is nothing out there in the universe. It is just a universe full of cold dead particles. And, carpe diem. Have as much fun as you can while you can. And that's about it. That's all life is, right?' I remember thinking that atheism was a mature perspective for strong adults and religion was for weak children and old ladies.*

Brad thought Christians needed to "*shed their false presuppositions to change their false, superstitious beliefs*" and Richard conceived them as "*brainwashed.*" Those who wanted to resist these negative labels also affirmed an elevated sense of self. Amanda said,

*It really affected how I thought about the world, especially my evolutionary mindset. I was very conceited. I thought, 'Well, I'm smart, talented, and this and that. I'm definitely ahead of the pack*

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<sup>18</sup> TAYLOR, C. 2007. *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

*here and so my thinking was that I'm more evolved than these [religious] people.'*

Two-fifths (42.0%) thought atheism provided firm, rational answers to issues of life and reality. Jacob remarked, *"It was satisfying to establish a rational truth and the feeling of victory was affirming after adopting a naturalistic worldview that dispelled a 'primitive' mindset."*

The elevation of science as juxtaposed with religious superstition also reinforced barriers against belief. Slightly more than half (58%) perceived a lack of objective scientific evidence for God. Scientific claims led three-quarters of the respondents towards atheism (74%). This finding cohered with the perception of irreconcilability between science and religious belief (52%). Ryan describes the pervasive dismissal of religion within the scientific community:

*It was just taken for granted that a mindless, development over time is how things just were. That was something that I just sort of adopted. It wasn't really like you have to reconcile two kinds of things like well there is a creation and there is science and how do you put those two things together. It was that there was no reason to assume that there was some sort of creator for any of it was probably how I would have said it. It was not something that you had to reconcile. It was like, 'Here science. Science wins. That's it.'*

Other forms of insufficient evidence for God included philosophical (54%) and historical (40.0%) data. Supernatural claims of the Bible caused disbelief for two-fifths (42.0%), and Christianity appeared to be irrational for half of the respondents (52.0%).

Lack of perceived substantial intellectual Christian response also proved to be an obstacle to belief. Approximately half of the former atheists reported doubts and uncertainties (50.0%), unanswered questions (52.0%) and tendency towards questioning (48.0%) contributed to their atheism. Jacob said: *"When I would ask hard questions, no one seemed to have an answer...At the same time, if I had cogent answers for things and no one had a response to them, then I would just assume that I was right."* Jason, among others, did not thoughtfully ground his disbelief but rather presumed it as intellectually true:

*I don't know that I thought that much about it at the time. I had a lot of vague notions and feelings and general beliefs, but they weren't really founded. I was not an analytical atheist. It was just an identity...God was a man-made construct, a mechanism for*

*controlling people, and a crutch for people that were weak and needed to believe in something. It was just unevolved thought that unscientific people had. I had these vague ideas. For me, it wasn't as if I had this really deep understanding of scientific principles to say, 'Well, this is why we don't believe in God.' It was a generalized, 'Well, we know about evolution and we know about the formation of the universe' and all of these types of things. So, why do we need to even talk about God?*

While some thoughtfully considered the logical endpoints of their worldview, approximately one-fifth (22.0%) justified the negative implications and, slightly more than four of every ten subjects (42.0%) ignored them. Jessica stated, *"I ignored and justified the implications, but occasionally wondered if there might be more to ultimate purpose and meaning in life, life after death, and reality beyond the physical/material universe."* When asked whether he thought about any negative aspects of atheism, Justin stated, *"Not at all. The way I phrase it is that if the smart people around me didn't believe that, and didn't do anything about the existence of God, there was not even a motivation to think about the issues. It is like a settled question. Why even bother? Why even think about those matters? So, it was a very different atheism than the French existentialist atheists."*

Strongly held presumptions may prevent an openness towards consideration of alternate perspectives and potential evidence. Volitional will against change erects a stalwart barrier against religious belief. Many candidly admitted resistance for more than intellectual reasons. Nearly two-thirds (62.0%) 'did not think anything would be sufficient to change their atheistic worldview.' The majority of atheists (72%) were either highly convinced (28.0%) or moderately convinced (44.0%) on a scale from 'uncertain' to 'highly certain' of their non-belief.<sup>19</sup> Nearly half of respondents (44.0%) expressed a general unwillingness and/or a lack of desire for belief in God. Forty percent (40.0%) 'did not want to believe that Christianity was true' and a comparable number (38.0%) 'intentionally avoided and/or refuted any evidence which positively affirmed God's existence.' Volitional resistance provides insight as to why intellectual arguments and evidence may not be granted a fair hearing. For philosopher Dallas Willard (2012), naturalistic presuppositions can undermine the pursuit of knowledge beyond the closed universe perspective. He asserts that if you believe from the outset there is no knowledge [beyond naturalistic

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, this convinced understanding exceeded perceived confident knowledge of God's non-existence. Although slightly more than half of the respondents asserted a 'strong' form of atheism (55%), only one-third (28%) expressed a high level of epistemological confidence underlying such belief.



materialism], you won't seek it. Then your belief that there is no knowledge will confirm itself.<sup>20</sup>

However, the non-believer's intellectual barriers to belief may be challenged when implications of their worldview come to the fore. Naturalistic atheism entails certain implications regarding the nature of reality, including loss of objective grounding for morality, rationality, truth, free will, and consciousness. For those who are willing to confront these logical consequences, the intellectual barrier may produce a cognitive dissonance creating positive tension towards considering another perspective. Jeremy acknowledged cognitive disconcertion with loss of authentic free will choices: "*As a naturalist, I had to concede one hundred percent that I am not thinking, that I am not acting. That to me just did not mesh with reality.*" When reflection of the stark, deterministic implications of naturalism or experiential reality did not align with expectations, cognitive or emotional dissonance motivated openness for some towards finding a better explanation of reality. Paul's realization of atheism's inability to ground truth produced openness towards further consideration:

*This actually makes no sense for me as a nihilist because we are dealing with truth claims which I believe didn't really exist. And then I actually realized this was such a foolish thing to believe. I'm going to make truth claims day in and day out and claim that the truth does not exist. That was a light bulb moment. How could I miss something so fundamental? That got me into the whole issue of 'What is truth?'*

Religious discussions with Christians also created perceived deterrents to belief. Although exposure to informed, articulate Christians prompted reconsideration for some, the overall quality of many Christian interactions left a perception of ineptness. Only one-fourth of atheists (24%) found Christians to be 'informed regarding the content of Christian beliefs and worldview.' Only a small minority (14.0%) saw Christians as 'able to substantively respond' to their questions. Approximately half of these discussions were met with an impression of the Christian's inability to adequately respond (56.0%). Respondents perceived a general ignorance of Christians regarding their own beliefs. James stated, "*I was amazed to find them to be quite pleasant people albeit very ignorant of facts.*" Justin stated, "*I didn't know any real Christian and those who still professed Christ didn't seem to be very confident, and I didn't press them because embarrassing them wouldn't have brought about much of value.*" On report, the Christians lacked knowledge and understanding of scientific evidence

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<sup>20</sup> WILLARD, D. (2012)

(52.0%), were uninformed regarding content of Christian beliefs and worldview (40.0%), and were unable or unaware of the need to ask good questions (48.0%).




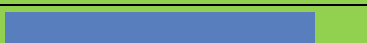









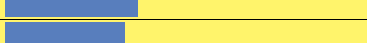






In addition to content, the pragmatics of Christian engagement was also perceived to be lacking in the atheists' perspective. Amanda stated, "*Most evangelical Christians I have known in the past seemed to lack significant knowledge of science and tended to be defensive when questioned.*" One-fourth of respondents negatively characterized Christians as 'closed to and/or avoiding interactive dialogue' (28.0%), 'defensive' (26.0%), or 'more prone to talk than listen' (26.0%). Conversely, only a minority of respondents positively observed Christians to be 'open to and/or initiating substantive content' (24.0%), 'good, discerning, interested listeners' (24%), 'winsome and confident' (16%), and 'able to ask good questions' (12%). However, many had little to no direct personal exposure to Christians or did not directly seek interaction with Christians, so direct engagement was significantly limited in their quest. This 'absence of presence' in the lives of non-believers proves to be yet another barrier to be overcome. Dennis stated, "*I had minimal interaction with Christians prior to conversion.*" Greg asserted, "*I didn't actively seek input from Christians at that time. My investigations were conducted alone.*" Ryan stated, "*I would say probably 80 or 90 percent of my contemplation was through reading or listening to something like one directional audio versus actually having conversations with people. That came later.*"

### **Integrated Barriers to Belief**

Disbelief is rarely a monolithic phenomenon. Resistant walls to belief are built with many and varied motivations. Each barrier feeds upon another developing an intertwining of mind, emotion and will reinforced by exposure and experience. For example, Ron's resistance first developed after a personal tragedy fueling emotional pain. His sudden disappointment with God and disbelief became wrapped in intellectual armor, social distancing and anti-theist anger, becoming an 'evangelical atheist'. Justin's atheism was culturally and intellectually presumed, granting him positive social standing and moral license. Jeremy's disbelief was grounded in the example of an intellectual, scientific father supported by antagonistic atheistic friends. Jennifer's barrier to belief began with an abusive, alcoholic father, surrounded by a culturally agnostic community and lack of exposure to authentic Christianity.

Corroborating prior literature, the fifty former atheists' self-assessed reasons for rejecting belief in God and Christianity revealed a montage of barriers to belief:

**2019 Harmon – Reasons for Non-Belief – N = 50)**

Responses	Count	%	Percentage of total respondents
lack of subjective evidence for God, personal	30	60.0%	
lack of objective evidence for God, scientific	29	58.0%	
lack of objective evidence for God, philosophical	27	54.0%	
irrationality of Christian belief	26	52.0%	
irreconcilability between science and religion	26	52.0%	
religious hypocrisy of Christian leaders	25	50.0%	
religious hypocrisy of Christian institutions	24	48.0%	
lack of exposure to Christian belief, generally	24	48.0%	
unwillingness, lack of desire for belief	22	44.0%	
supernatural claims of the Bible	21	42.0%	
lack of objective evidence for God, historical	20	40.0%	
moral constraints on personal behavior	16	32.0%	
negative personal experience with Christian people	12	24.0%	
suffering in the lives of others	13	26.0%	
negative social consequences of belief	12	24.0%	
intolerance of Christians	11	22.0%	
unanswered prayer	10	20.0%	
personal pain in my life	8	16.0%	
negative vocational consequences for belief	0	0%	
Other (please specify)	5	10.64%	

[Green: intellectual; Yellow: personal/experiential; Blue: spiritual]

### Conclusion

This research confirms a variety of barriers that prevent belief in a resistant population. Many influences act and interact to effect someone's willingness to believe or not to believe. Primary reasons for disbelief include socio-cultural, personal experiential, moral, volitional, and intellectual variables, including but not limited to: (1) lack of exposure to authentic forms of Christian belief, grounding, and lived expression; (2) negative exposure or experience with Christians or Christianity. (3) functional reinforcement of diminished and/or absent perceived socio-cultural, moral, and/or intellectual plausibility or attraction

towards religious people and beliefs; (4) negative life experiences and/or perception of incompatibility of suffering/evil and the existence of a good, knowing, powerful God; (5) lack of felt personal, subjective evidence for God; (6) lack of personal desire or willingness to consider religious belief as a viable option; (7) positive personal experience, education, freedom, opportunity, social or vocational affirmation, sensed justification and/or desire for non-belief; (8) substantive *a priori* naturalistic materialistic presuppositions excluding a potential supernatural reality; (9) presumed irreconcilability between science and religious belief. Based upon these results, the functional, non-rational component of atheism should be considered as a strong contributor to the development of nonbelief as well as often-stated rational, intellectual barriers. This integrated understanding of barriers to belief provides greater capacity and clearer answers as to why and how non-believers reject belief in God and Christianity.

Regardless of studies and generalizations, it is important to see skeptics, their beliefs, motivations, and identities through their own eyes, experiences, and views; and, to seek towards understanding of who they are, why they believe as they do, and what is important to them. What each person substantiates about their own resistant worldview, the story it tells, how and why they hold it as true varies from person to person. This is particularly important in this experience- and emotionally-driven, individualistic post-modern culture. The stories of secularized science, post-modern's expressive individualism, and moral autonomy strengthen and encourage disbelief, building perceived barriers of the weakness and implausibility of religion and religious belief. Patterns of belief arise within certain populations and stories of consensus are accepted, but each person is a person, not merely a set of propositional beliefs that inform a worldview. It is that person who must be engaged in a personal way to discover how and why they formed the beliefs and outlook they hold.

Presuming what someone believes because they identify with a particular worldview can be dangerous and off-putting. More than that, assuming that someone understands the implications of their worldview is a further stretch. Although deep reflection and critical thinking can lead to worldview choices, other motivations influence beliefs. Many adopt a narrative that matches their desires for themselves and the world and identify with it. In this age of distraction and technology, it may simply be something that 'sounds good' to them, having been briefly exposed to it. They may not have taken a reasoned journey towards their beliefs but may have accepted it as a matter of natural course within their culture, friends, or family.

We need to step back and more carefully consider a more holistic paradigm of belief formation and resistance within a larger framework to both understand the variety of barriers to belief to more effectively and individually engage with those who are resistant to the gospel. For, despite the high

resistance, skeptics can become open to consider the possibility of another perspective. They can come to believe and live as if God exists and that such belief is intellectually and existentially plausible, attractive, relevant, and good. God can overcome any barriers to belief. All of those who participated in the study as former atheists became passionate followers of Jesus Christ.