Defining 'Religion' and 'Atheism'

Defining 'religion' and 'atheism' is a topic with many different dimensions. I begin with a general survey of types of definition. I then turn to philosophically contentious questions about the definitions of 'religion' and 'atheism'. Next, I make some brief remarks about the contested nature of the terms 'religion' and 'atheism'. I then consider the prospects for offering ameliorative definitions of 'religion' and 'atheism', in the style of Haslanger (2000). Finally, I apply some of the preceding discussion to questions about 'religion' and 'atheism' in non-Western contexts, with a particular focus on Thomas (2017). I argue that there is a pressing need to revise the survey instruments that are used to collect data about global attitudes to 'atheism' and 'religion'. While the discussion is everywhere brisk, I hope that it draws attention to questions that have often been neglected in academic disputes about the definitions of 'religion' and 'atheism'.

1. Definition

There are many different types of definitions. We can distinguish, at least, between the following kinds of definitions: (a) dictionary; (b) ostensive; (c) real; (d) stipulative; (e) explicative; (f) nominal; (g) descriptive; and (h) ameliorative. (See Gupta (2015) for discussion of most of these kinds of definitions.)

Dictionaries provide information about words for practical purposes. Often, dictionaries provide information about pronunciation, etymology, appropriate use and rough synonyms (perhaps in languages other than the one to which the term in question belongs). Dictionary definitions rarely prove useful for philosophical purposes. Examples of dictionary definitions: *Religion* is belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers—especially a god or gods—which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence and worship. (OED). *Atheism* is lack of belief or strong disbelief in the existence of a god or gods. (Merriam-Webster).

Ostension provides definitions by direct demonstration. Use of ostensive definition is limited. If you cannot point—either literally or figuratively—at something, then you cannot provide an ostensive definition of it. Ostensive definition is easiest in the case of singular terms—e.g. proper names. Attempts to define kinds by ostending instances of those kinds have variable degrees of success. Examples of ostensive definitions: *Religions* are Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the like. *Atheists* are Richard Dawkins, Rebecca Goldstein, Avijit Roy, Susan Jacoby, Hafid Bouazza, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Agomo Atambire, Maryam Namazie, and the like. (Historically important atheists include, among countless others: Ajita Kesakambali, Wang Chong, Abu al-'Ala al-Ma'arri, Lārī Mehmed Efendi, Jean Meslier, Paul Henri d'Holbach, George Eliot, Emma Goldman, Jawaharlal Nehru and George Orwell.)

In principle, real definitions give an exhaustive list of the essential properties of that which is being defined. That is, in principle, real definitions tell you what properties are necessarily intrinsic to that which is being defined if there is anything that answers to the definition. In practice, it is doubtful whether there is much at all in our universe for which we can give real

definitions. Examples of putative real definitions: *Religion* is belief in spiritual beings (Tylor, 1871:424). *Atheism* is a lack of belief in gods. (American Atheists, 2020)

Stipulation provides definitions by fiat. One obvious uses for stipulative definition is in the introduction of new terms. A slightly less obvious use for stipulative definition is in the introduction of a new use for an already existing term. Often, stipulative definitions for already existing terms have limited ambition: they are made for the purposes of a particular argument, or discussion, or the like. Examples of stipulative definitions: *Religion* is passionate communal display of costly commitments to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents. (Atran and Norenzayan, 2004: 17) *Atheism* is critique and denial of the major claims of all varieties of theism. (Nagel, 1967: 460)

Explicative definitions are a species of stipulative definition of already existing terms. In principle, explicative definitions offer refinements on extant imperfect definitions. That is, in principle, an explicative definition is a suggestion about what we should mean—or perhaps about what it would be good to mean—by a given expression. Examples of putative explicative definitions: *Religion* is a relatively-bound system of beliefs, symbols and practices that addresses the nature of existence, in which communion with others and otherness is lived as if it both takes in and spiritually transcends socially grounded ontologies of time, space, embodiment, and knowing'. (James and Mandaville, 2010) An *atheist* is a person who does not believe in the existence of God. (Smith 1991: 35)

In principle, nominal definitions give 'the meanings' of words. Unlike dictionary definitions, nominal definitions do not seek merely to provide sufficient information to generate good enough understanding of that which is being defined. Rather, nominal definitions seek to provide sufficient information to generate fully adequate understanding of that which is being defined. Examples of putative nominal definitions: *Religion* is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider godlike. (James 1902: 31) *Atheism* is the attitude of a person who lives as if God does not exist. (Zdybicka, Z. (2005: 20)

Descriptive definitions are nominal definitions of various degrees of strictness. Extensionally adequate definitions are exempt from actual counterexample. Intensionally adequate definitions are exempt from possible counterexample. Analytically adequate definitions are exempt even from hyperintensional counterexamples. In practice, it is doubtful that we have analytically adequate definitions for many philosophically interesting terms. It is a contested matter whether there are purposes for which we need analytically adequate definitions of philosophically interesting terms that belong to non-formal domains, i.e. to domains other than mathematics, logic, formal game theory, and the like.

Ameliorative definitions are species of both explicative and descriptive definitions. Like explicative definitions, ameliorative definitions offer suggestions about what we should mean—or about what it would be good to mean—by expressions given our political purposes and aims. But, like descriptive definitions, ameliorative definitions are intended to meet the highest achievable levels of strictness when it comes to the determination of extension (what actually falls under the definition), intension (what could merely possibly have fallen under the definition), and hyperintension (what could only impossibly fall under the definition) . Haslanger (2000) generated an on-going discussion of ameliorative definitions of 'man', 'woman', 'black', 'white', and so forth.

2. Wars of 'Religion'

There are extended academic debates, across a range of disciplines, about 'the definition of religion'. These debates are mostly concerned with attempts to construct real or descriptive definitions of religion. Some critics—e.g. Smith (1963), Fitzgerald (2000)—say that attempts to give real or descriptive definitions of 'religion' import a western or Judaeo-Christian bias into the study of other cultures. Some critics—e.g. Asad (2003), Dubuisson (2007), Josephson (2012)—say that attempts to give real or descriptive definitions of 'religion' cannot do justice to the complex history of human culture. Some critics—e.g. Norenzayan et al. (2016)—say that attempts to give real or descriptive definitions of 'religion' cannot do justice to the complex variations in current human culture.

There is no denying that the phenomena that we wish to discuss are very complex. In particular, it is important to remember that there is a distinction between internal ('participant') perspectives and external ('observer') perspectives. From an internal perspective, our interest is in social structures and practices dedicated to fulfilling ultimate 'externally imposed' purposes: satisfying the wishes of ancestors, or the gods, or God, or meeting the requisites for escape from the cycle of death and rebirth, or the like. From an external perspective, our interest is in social structures and practices that enable some measure of mastery of people's existential anxieties about death, deception, disease, catastrophe, pain, loneliness, injustice, want, loss and so forth, that justify and enable certain kinds of hierarchy and oppression, and that provide clear in-group / out-group marking for members. Practices that are particularly important include rites and rituals concerning purity—food, hygiene, sex, and so forth; relevant social structures are those supporting religious enforcement of social hierarchies of sex, gender, race, class, and the like.

Given the complexities involved, it is easy to make mistaken identifications of what is globally—as opposed to merely locally—significant. For example, as many have observed, there is an emphasis on ortho*doxy* in some Christian communities that differs markedly from the emphasis on ortho*praxy* in some Hindu communities. This is the important truth in the writings of those who claim that 'religion' is a distorting lens: it can be highly distorting to view the other religions of the world through the lens of your own religion. But it is consistent with acknowledgment of this point that we can distinguish 'religious' and 'non-religious' elements in the social structures and practices of non-Western cultures. In particular, much of that which marks social groups within cultures is concerned with geographical, class, gender and racial structures that have no clear relation to either the fulfilment of ultimate purposes or to the management of people's existential anxieties, the justification of hierarchy and inequality, and in-group / out-group marking at the widest cultural level.

To take one clear example: it is clearly not a religious matter whether one supports the Delhi Capitals—rather than, say, the Chennai Super Kings or the Sunrisers Hyderabad—in the Indian Premier League. Obviously, to a very significant extent, support is likely to be determined simply by geography: if you take Delhi to be 'home', then you will likely support the Delhi Capitals. This allegiance has nothing to do with whether you identify as Hindi, or Muslim, or Jain, or Christian, or whatever. While it is a mistake to suppose that there is an absolute divide between religious considerations and other cultural considerations, it is also a

mistake to suppose that we are unable to identify non-religious aspects of non-Western cultures.

This is not so say that we should suppose that we *can* give real or descriptive definitions of 'religion'. One of the lessons of twentieth century analytic philosophy seems to be that it is extraordinarily difficult to settle on agreed definitions of any philosophically important terms: 'knowledge', 'causation', 'artwork', 'property', 'belief', and so forth. Perhaps this is because something like Wittgenstein's family resemblance view of our concepts is correct; or perhaps it is because, while there are precise delineations of the boundaries of our concepts, our use of our concepts does not rely on our making those precise delineations explicit.

I do not propose to say more here about the history of philosophical, phenomenological, functional and sociological definitions of 'religion'. Given the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' perspectives—and the related distinction between 'local' and 'global' perspectives—it is plausible that much of that history is a pointless shouting match in which people trying to define different things confusedly take themselves to be attempting to define the same single thing.

3. **Wars of 'Atheism'**

There is also considerable academic contestation about the definition of 'atheism'. According to some, 'atheists' are all of those who are not 'theists'. According to some, 'atheists' are all of those who are not some particular kind of 'theist'. According to some, 'atheists' are all of those who suppose that there are no gods and that there is no God. According to some, 'atheists' are all of those who suppose that there is no God. According to some, 'atheists' are all of those who suppose that some particular God does not exist. According to some, 'atheism' is a particular species of irreligion. According to some, 'atheists' are all of those who hate a particular God. And so on.

Given the history of the word 'atheism' in English, and given the diversity in current use of the term, it is important that those who make academic employment of the term are prepared to stipulate a precise meaning for it. When I have used the term, I have stipulated meanings for four terms: 'theism' is the claim that there are gods or is a God; 'atheism' is the claim that there are no gods and there is no God; 'agnostics' are those who suspend judgment between 'theism' and 'atheism'; and 'innocents' are those who have never considered whether there are gods or whether God exists. This use is patterned on a fourfold distinction that extends to all claims: for any claim that p, either I believe that p, or I believe that not p, or I suspend judgment whether that p, or I am innocent whether that p. On my use of the terms 'atheist', there are religious atheists. On my use of the term 'atheist', there are non-naturalist atheists. On my use of the term 'atheist', there are spiritual atheists. And so on.

I do not say that everyone is obliged to adopt my stipulative usage. Moreover, given the history and current use of the term in English, you cannot use my stipulative definition to correctly interpret many texts in which the word 'atheist' makes frequent appearances.

In the social sciences—particularly, psychology, sociology, and political science—over the past sixty years or so, the word 'atheist' has regularly been used for non-innocents who fail to be theists or who fail to be theists of a particular kind. Social scientific work which purports

to show that theists enjoy social advantages of various kinds relative to atheists are misunderstood if you interpret their results on my understanding of 'atheist'. There is a significant—but far too often neglected—body of work in the social sciences which suggests that, most likely, theists enjoy no social advantages relative to atheists, in my sense of the term, at least in most prosperous democracies. (For one example, see Paul (2005) (2009).)

When the term 'atheist' was introduced into English from French, more than half a century before the word 'theist' came to have currency, it was a generic term of abuse for those who failed to hold orthodox religious views. Well into the eighteenth century, it was almost universally maintained that there could not be 'theoretical atheists'—serious reflective people who held the considered opinion that there is no God—but rather only 'practical atheists'—wicked people who knew that God exists but acted as if there were no God, and, in particular, no damnation for the wicked. That flexible category could include heretics, witches, religious reformers, apostates, those largely untouched by religious sentiments, and many other types as well.

Of course, as freethought gradually gained a more secure foothold in the West, the term 'atheism' came to be viewed as a badge of honour by a small, but steadily growing, proportion of the population. In the early twenty-first century, in some countries in the West, there is only minority disapproval of atheism; and, in the early twenty-first century, in most countries in the West, there is a very significant part of the population that does not disapprove of 'atheism'. While there are remnants of archaic attitudes from earlier centuries in some laws in some jurisdictions and in some patterns of practice, most people in the West have bid regret-free farewell to the seventeenth century laws in the UK that provided for capital punishment for those who made repeated public profession of 'atheism'.

4. Contestation

One question that the preceding discussion might be taken to pose is whether there is a common understanding of terms like 'religion' and 'atheism'. Some have supposed that there are essentially contested—or essentially contestable—evaluative terms, such as 'fair' or 'artwork', for which there is no common understanding; some have supposed that 'religion' and 'atheist' should be included among these terms. (See Gallie (1956).) Some have supposed that, while we should not think that there are essentially contested—or essentially contestable—terms, we should insist on a clear distinction between our shared understandings of certain evaluative terms and our divergent theorisations of those evaluative terms. (See, for example, Hart (1961) and Rawls (1971).)

I think that, regardless of what you maintain about these claims about evaluative terms like 'fair' and 'artwork', you should be sceptical that there are similar claims to be made about 'religion' and 'atheist'. There may be 'essential contestation' about whether, on the whole, religion is good for humanity; but I do not think that it is plausible to suppose that there is 'essential contestation' about whether something is religion that runs parallel to 'essential contestation' about whether something is fair or something else is a work of art. Similarly, while we may have diverse theories about the merits of religions, it is not plausible that we have diverse theories about what are the central cases of religions. A judgment about whether something is a religion or whether someone is an atheist is not, in itself, an evaluative

judgment, even if it is true that, for a given person making such a judgment, there are future evaluative judgments that follow hot on its heels.

What I have just said is not in conflict with the further thought that it is possible for people to advance persuasive definitions of 'religion' and 'atheism'. For example, someone might claim to define an 'atheist' as someone who has yet realised that God exists; and someone else might claim to define a 'theist' as someone who has not yet realised—and perhaps will never realise—that God does not exist. Of course, such 'definitions' are rhetorical cheap shots: they merely hinder, and do not in any way advance, serious discussion of differences of opinion.

There may be some who think that my treatment of persuasive definition is cavalier. In particular, some may think that, when it comes to certain kinds of questions about identity, we all take certain views to be 'unthinkable', or 'beyond the pale', or the like. Moreover, some may think, when it comes to discussion of views that are beyond the pale, the only proper response is ridicule. I think that there are at least two reasons for being sceptical about any view of this kind. The first obvious point is that doxastic distance is a symmetric relation: whatever justification you take yourself to have for supposing that others' views are beyond the pale, they will take themselves to have analogous justification for supposing that your views are beyond the pale. The second obvious point is that we know, from a range of other contexts, that bullying behaviour typically issues from deep-rooted insecurity: if you are prepared to think that your engaging in bullying behaviour is acceptable in a given context, the most plausible explanation is that you really do not have anything good to offer.

5. **Ameliorative Definition**

One thought that perhaps deserves some exploration is that we might offer definitions of 'theism' and 'atheism', and 'religious' and 'non-religious' on the model of the ameliorative definitions of gender and race provided by Sally Haslanger. That is, following Haslanger (2000), we might think to frame the following accounts of 'theists' and 'atheists' for societies—such as those in the UK and Western Europe in the seventeenth century—in which some kind of theism is the dominant ideology:

S is a *theist* iff:

> (a) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain features presumed to be evidence of S's positive standing in the eyes of God or the gods;
> (b) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact dominant and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position; and
> (c) the fact that S satisfies (a) and (b) plays a role in S's systematic privilege—i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social role is privileged and S's satisfying (a) and (b) plays a role in that dimension of privilege

S is an *atheist* iff:

> (a) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain features presumed to be evidence of S's negative standing in the eyes of God or the gods;

     (b) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact subordinate and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position; and

     (c) the fact that S satisfies (a) and (b) plays a role in S's systematic subordination— i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social role is oppressive and S's satisfying (a) and (b) plays a role in that dimension of subordination

Moreover, again following Haslanger (2000), we might think to frame the following accounts of the 'religious' and the 'non-religious' in a society in which a particular religion is the dominant ideology:

S is *religious* iff:

     (a) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain features presumed to be evidence of S's positive standing on the path to salvation;

     (b) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact dominant and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position; and

     (c) the fact that S satisfies (a) and (b) plays a role in S's systematic privilege—i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social role is privileged and S's satisfying (a) and (b) plays a role in that dimension of privilege

S is *non-religious* iff:

     (a) S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain features presumed to be evidence of S's negative standing on the path to salvation;

     (b) that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact subordinate and so motivates and justifies S's occupying such a position; and

     (c) the fact that S satisfies (a) and (b) plays a role in S's systematic subordination— i.e., *along some dimension*, S's social role is oppressive and S's satisfying (a) and (b) plays a role in that dimension of subordination

These definitions should be thought of as additions to the definitions of 'man', 'woman', 'white', 'black', 'upper class', 'lower class', and so forth that are provided by Haslanger and those who have followed her lead. There are many intersecting dimensions of privilege and oppression; the position of a wealthy white male Christian in the seventeenth century in Western Europe was different in many ways from the position of a poor, non-white, female atheist in the seventeenth century in Western Europe. (While some have denied, and many have doubted, that there were poor, non-white, female atheists in the seventeenth century in Western Europe, I think—following Ryrie (2019)—that we have clear evidence that there were atheists among the 'common folk' throughout Christian Europe from the beginning of the second millennium.)

I am not suggesting that these ameliorative definitions are appropriate everywhere in the twenty-first century. In particular, for example, I do not think that there are any legitimate purposes that would be served by the adoption of these definitions by atheists and irreligionists in the circles in which I move in Australia in the twenty-first century. While there remain unfortunate historical legacies of times in which there were legitimate purposes

that would have been served by the adoption of these definitions by atheists and irreligionists—for example in seventeenth century England—I think that it is not at all plausible to claim that there is structural oppression of atheists and irreligionists in the circles in which I move in twenty-first century Australia. However, it is at least an open possibility that there are legitimate purposes that would be served by the adoption of these definitions by atheists and irreligionists who move in other circles in other parts of the world in the twenty-first century.

6. 'Religion' and 'Atheism' in Non-Western Contexts

Discussion of religion and atheism in any context requires careful attention to what we mean by 'religion' and 'atheism'. In particular, if we are talking about some context other than our own, we need to be clear about whether we are using the terms 'religion' and 'atheism' as they are typically understood in our context or as they are typically understood in the context under examination. This need for caution ramifies if we are using 'religion' and 'atheism' as translations for terms that belong to a language other than our own. (For contrasting takes on the matters discussed in this section, see, for example, Berger (2014), Dalacoura (2014) and Quack (2011).)

One important consideration here is that it may be that we have much deeper knowledge of variability and specificity in our own context than we have of variability and specificity in other contexts. If we are Australian Methodists, we may well have a vivid appreciation, not merely of the range of differences in the religious beliefs and practices of Australian Methodists, but also—at least given appropriate sensitivity and interest on our part—of the range of differences in the religious beliefs and practices of other kinds of Australian Christians. Perhaps, if we are Australian Methodists, we will have some appreciation of the range of differences in the religious beliefs and practices of Australians who identify with other religions, and of the range of differences in the beliefs and practices of Australians who identify as non-religious. However, if we are Australian Methodists, we may have little or no appreciation of the range of differences in the religious beliefs and practices of people who live on other continents. For most of us, at some point, our representations of the religious [or non-religious] beliefs and practices of others consist of little more than ill-supported stereotypes.

Consider Thomas (2017), which aims to 'show the limitations of Western atheism to capture the everyday life of Indian scientists' (45). According to Thomas, ethnographic data shows that Indian atheistic scientists—unlike Western atheistic scientists—call themselves 'atheists' even while accepting that their lifestyle is very much part of tradition and religion:

> I met many scientists who called themselves 'atheists', 'agnostics', and 'materialists'. However … parallels cannot be drawn between their ideas of atheism or non-belief and their Western counterparts. It is problematic to look for a homogeneous category [of atheists]. (47)

Thomas conducted extended interviews with a range of self-described 'hardcore atheists'—Rajiv Kumar, Ashok Baruah, Gracy Gomez, Iqbal Rizwan, Nagendra Rao, Ramesh Iyer, Ramamurthy, Madhava Sastry, and Poornima Vasudevan—and 'liberal non-theists'—Gayatri

Iyengar and Narayana Shastry. Thomas observes that, while the 'hardcore atheists' all say that there are 'personally completely non-religious', they all have:

> … lives based on religious or cultural ethos. They practised vegetarianism, wore the sacred thread, admired classical songs in praise of Hindu gods, participated in traditional life-cycle and seasonal rituals … gave religious/traditional names to their children … had arranged marriages from their own religion and caste … visited temples … attended Church services … felt that religion and belief in God provides psychological succour to believers in their hardships so that one should not oppose it … and were critical of the claims made by Western liberal atheists that everything can be explained by science. (59-60)

According to Thomas, 'we should be wary of easy generalisation that draws neat parallels between the contemporary Western atheistic traditions—Dawkins' position being the dominant one—and other social and cultural sites'. (62/3)

> The acceptance of [Dawkins'] understanding of atheism or unbelief imposes a closure on the multiple cultural meanings assumed by these categories. Any attempt to universalise or homogenise the experiences of unbelief and atheism against the scale of Western modernity runs the risk of neglecting the enmeshing of these categories within the complex life worlds of Indian scientists. (65)

I do not doubt Thomas' data. Surely there are many 'hardcore atheists' in India, not merely among professional scientists, who do some or all of the things that Thomas mentions. However, it seems to me that similar data would vindicate the claim that many 'Western atheists' have lives based in religious and cultural ethos. The details differ. For example, there are few remnants of traditions of arranged marriages in 'the West'. But there are plenty of 'Western atheists', including many 'atheists' who are scientists, who admire classical Christian music, participate in traditional life-cycle and seasonal rituals (such as Christmas, Easter, and Halloween), give religious/traditional names (e.g. John, Peter, Mary, Rachel) to their children, visit churches, attend church services, support the maintenance of religion where it bring social goods to others, and deny that everything can be explained by science. Somewhat ironically for Thomas, even Richard Dawkins does—or has done—many of these things.

We should be wary of easy generalisations that suppose that what Thomas takes to be Dawkins' understanding of 'atheism' and unbelief accurately characterises the cultural meanings assumed by these categories in 'the West'. If Dawkins really does think that *everything* can be explained by science, then it is important to point out that there is no reliable evidence that this is a majority position among 'Western atheists'. The survey instruments used to collect international data about religion—WIN/Gallup, World Values Survey, PEW, national censuses, etc.—contain only very crudely formulated questions about 'atheists'. For example, the 2017-2020 WVS questionnaire asks people to classify themselves as one of the following: (a) a religious person; (b) not a religious person; (c) an atheist; (d) don't know. Since everyone falls into (a), (b), or (d), and since an 'atheist' could fall under either (a) or (b), it is not plausible that the WVS questionnaire gives us *any* reliable global information about 'atheists'. The kind of criticism that I have made here generalises: there just is no globally administered survey instrument that provides us with reliable data about what Thomas calls 'hardcore atheists'.

Please note that I am *not* arguing that there are no statistically significant differences between 'the atheism of Western atheists' and 'the atheism of non-Western atheists'. It is surely plausible that there are statistically significant differences between 'the atheism of Western atheists' and 'the atheism of non-Western atheists'. However, there are formidable difficulties that confront those who would like to make an accurate assessment of those differences. On the one hand, there is the elasticity of the term 'atheism'. And, on the other hand, there is the apparent lack of interest, among the agencies that currently conduct global surveys of religion, in the development of survey tools that would provide accurate data of the kind that is required.

I do not think that it is impossibly difficult to devise survey questions that would yield better information than those currently in use. Perhaps something like this.

> On a scale from 0-10, where 0 = 'certainly not', 5 = 'no idea', and 10 = 'certainly', rank the following claims: (a) *God exists*; and (b) *there is at least one god*.

No matter how we define 'atheism', we can use the results to this question to inform us about the distribution of 'atheists'. Moreover, we can include similar survey questions to give us better information about attitudes that correlate with atheism. For example:

> On a scale from 0-10, where 0 = 'certainly not', 5 = 'no idea', and 10 = 'certainly', rank the following claim: *there are no questions that science cannot answer*.

If we were to administer a survey that included these kinds of questions, then it seems to me likely that we would discover statistically significant differences between 'the atheism of Western atheists' and 'the atheism of non-Western atheists'. No doubt there are subtleties in the art of designing surveys that would need to be accommodated. No doubt, too, there is something lost when established survey instruments are significantly revised. In particular, there is value attached to historical continuity in the asking of questions. But—at least as I see it—there is no value in continuing to ask questions when it is clear that answers to those questions are evidently not delivering useful, high-quality information.

7. **Concluding Remarks**

We have skated over a lot of ground very quickly. Not everything that I have said pulls in the same direction. On the one hand, for local political purposes, there may be good reason to insist on ameliorative definitions of 'religion' and 'atheism'. On the other hand, given the vagaries of language, for certain kinds of academic purposes, the best course may well be either (1) to make stipulative definitions of 'atheism' and 'religion' that give precise content to the use of those terms, or else (2) to avoid use of the terms 'atheism' and 'religion' altogether. At the very least, it is not helpful to frame global survey questions in terms of 'atheism', when we can ask people directly about their attitudes towards the claims that God exists and that there is at least one god.[1]

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