
The Place of Nonbelief Studies in the Academic Study of Religion: Issues and Insights.

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Résumé

The academic study of the religious landscape has long been the task of theologians and religious studies scholars. However, the growing numbers of nonbelieving individuals – who are part of, and have a substantial effect on, this landscape – have mostly been overlooked by both disciplines. Consequently, the emerging field of irreligion/nonreligion studies is virtually nonexistent when it comes to faculties of Theology and Religious Studies. But is there any utility in studying nonbelief in faculties dedicated to the study of religion(s), and why? This paper aims to address the aforementioned topic, namely the study of nonreligion in an academic context. Drawing from qualitative empirical research conducted during 2016-2017 with theologians and religious studies scholars in Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands, it will challenge the common perceptions of theology as an exclusively ‘faith-related’/emic discipline and of religious studies as an exclusively ‘neutral’/etic approach to religion. Furthermore, it will illustrate the need for including the study of irreligion and nonreligion into religion-related academic disciplines and the multiple manners that exploring nonbelief can aid academics gain a more profound understanding of the current religious landscape. The topic will be presented in two parts: The first will discuss the definitions of Theology, Religious Studies and the relation between the two fields, as described by the 21 academics who were interviewed for this research. The subsequent part will elaborate on the academic study of nonbelief in relation to the above-mentioned disciplines. Drawing both from research conclusions and relevant, current issues and debates concerning (non)religion studies, it will showcase the necessity of exploring irreligion and nonbelief and will argue in favor of such research being included in faculties dedicated to the academic study of religion.

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