

## Who Counts as 'None'?

### Ambivalent, Embodied, and Situational Modes of Nonreligiosity in Contemporary South Asia

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■ **ABSTRACT:** People in South Asia who neither believe in god(s) nor engage in religious practices nevertheless often self-identify as Muslims or Hindus rather than—or in addition to—identifying as atheists. The situational and contextual dynamics generating such positionings have implications for the conceptualization of nonreligion and secular lives. Based on ethnographic research in India and Bangladesh and focusing on two individuals, we attend to embodied and more ambivalent modes of nonreligiosity. This enables us to understand nonreligion as situated social practices and beyond what is typically captured with the term 'religion.' Studying nonreligion also where it is not visible as articulated conviction or identity not only contributes to accounting for the diversity of nonreligious configurations but also offers significant complementary insights.

■ **KEYWORDS:** atheism, Bangladesh, embodiment, India, nonreligion, personhood, secularism, situatedness

Jayanta Chowdhury:<sup>1</sup> I am a secular person. Okay, you can say that much maybe. But that does not mean I am a *nāstik* (atheist).

Mascha Schulz: But you have told me that you do not believe in any god(s), right?

Jayanta Chowdhury: Well, but this is my personal (*bektigata*) view. That does not mean that I reject religion. Many people are religious, and this is fine . . . Why should I run around and tell everyone [that I do not believe in god(s) or religious dogmas]? Is there any meaning in this?

Amir Rahman: I was born a Muslim. I was raised as a Muslim. And [I am] nonpracticing today, you know. And, ah, it's as simple as that. Have I fasted? Yes, I have fasted. Was I religious for a small part of my life? Yes, under compulsion and pressure I did experiment with it. But the point is: Did it stick to me? No, it did not stick to me. But hey, I am Amir Rahman, born to Omar Rahman and Fatima Rahman, all of which are Muslims, you know. So, I am a Muslim. But the point is: Do I believe in that principle? No, I don't, you know I don't believe in that framework, it is as simple as that.

During our research in Sylhet (Bangladesh) and Delhi (India),<sup>2</sup> we often encountered people who—like Jayanta Chowdhury, a Hindu student politician in Sylhet—do not believe in god(s)



but nevertheless reject ‘atheism’, or the semi-equivalent<sup>3</sup> Bengali and Hindi term *nāstik*, as a label or identity. Others—like Amir Rahman, a Muslim businessman living in Delhi—do not believe in god(s), do not adhere to religious practices, and self-identify both as atheist *and* as Muslim or Hindu. In general, most of our interlocutors who do not consider themselves ‘very religious’ prefer to use phrases that convey their nonreligiosity with more implicit terms, identifying as ‘nonpracticing’ or as a Muslim or a Hindu ‘by birth’. Very few reject any association with the religious tradition into which they were born, or they only exchange their thoughts in atheist or rationalist groups where people commonly cultivate explicit self-identifications as atheists, rationalists, secular humanists, or freethinkers.

Within the interdisciplinary study of nonreligion—which remains dominated by disciplines like sociology, political science, and religious studies—the focus is mainly on such groups and organizations, their different forms of activism, and their spokespersons. This is partly because these forms tend to be more visible and are, accordingly, easier to approach, describe, and conceptualize. Beyond organizations, research is largely concerned with worldviews and how convictions and identities are articulated. The object of inquiry is thereby often labeled ‘nones’, which follows the logic of surveys where ticking the box ‘none’ is often the only alternative to predetermined religious beliefs, practices, and affiliations. Moreover, existing research disproportionately studies the North Atlantic World.

Noteworthy exceptions to these research focus biases can be found in the ethnographic approaches of the emerging anthropology of nonreligion.<sup>4</sup> In this article, we contribute to the further diversification of the study of nonreligion through the development of a thoroughly anthropological approach that attends to more ambivalent and at times hidden forms of nonreligion. Based on long-term research among urban middle-class persons in Delhi and Sylhet, we suggest that such an ethnographic focus is crucial because it not only enriches our understanding of the diversity of nonreligion but also enables us to view nonreligion as social practices embedded in specific contexts and social imaginations, rather than as fixed identities. Engaging with individuals who self-identify as Muslims or Hindus despite their disengagement with, indifference toward, or even disregard of beliefs and practices associated with their religious community assigned by birth, we discuss how such position(ing)s are navigated in relation to and are continuously reshaped by specific biographies and personalities, situational contexts, ideals of personhood, moralities, ideas of appropriateness, national discourses, and conceptualizations of the supposedly ‘religious’ categories. We thus analyze the phenomena of nonpractice, nonbelief, and non/identification with certain religious traditions as situated, embodied, and shifting practices.

In so doing, we ask: What does it mean to identify as a Muslim or a Hindu while also distancing oneself from these religious traditions? What role does the minority status of Jayanta Chowdhury as a Hindu in Bangladesh and Amir Rahman as a Muslim in India play? Why does Jayanta vehemently reject the ‘atheist’ label? When and how does Amir question his Muslimness and when does he accept it as a given? And what does this imply for our analytical usage of such categories and, concomitantly, the need to distinguish between different levels, such as dispositions, practices, identities, convictions, or aspirations?

In sum, this article questions the very conceptualization of ‘non-’ or ‘nones’ within the study of ‘nonreligion’. To do so, it focusses on social settings where religious belongings and processes of ethnification are hard to disentangle. While we briefly discuss further examples of religious ethnification at the end, the thrust of the article is to examine the patterns observed in our ethnographic material on the two South Asian protagonists Amir and Jayanta. This focus allows us to illustrate the substantial implications for methodological discussions and theoretical conceptualizations of diverse forms of nonreligiosity that are relevant beyond South Asia.

## The Atheist Muslim and the Nonbelieving Hindu

“Here is Amir Rahman’s contact, please say hello from me,” a friend immediately responded when she heard that Quack intended to study not the usual suspects when it comes to religion in India—the pious and the pilgrims, the *pandit* (religious scholar) and the *pīr* (spiritual guide)—but individuals who can be described as secular or nonreligious. Already during their first meeting in 2012, Amir visibly displayed both his status as a boss of some thirty employees and his nonadherence to norms associated with Islam. He was wearing a wristwatch of considerable size, the latest fashion, and extravagant sunglasses. After an office tour, Amir sat in his chair, put his feet on his desk, and started a conversation, which was disrupted by frequent phone calls and orders to ‘his people’. When he later consumed pizza with pork toppings and alcohol while making fun of Islamic beliefs and practices, this was not only a display of his relative wealth, class, and nonchalance but also a performative act of transgressing (if not even symbolically reversing) religious norms.

Amir’s mother is from an affluent and conservative Muslim family with a strong sense of Muslim identity and heritage. His father is a self-made man who grew up in a remote all-Muslim village and managed to become an influential government employee; he strongly identified as a ‘Nehruvian’ in the sense that he always supported and tried to inculcate his children with the idea(l) of a liberal and ‘secular’ India in opposition to ‘communalism’. Nehruvian nationalism tried to overcome communal divisions, especially the tensions between Muslims and Hindus that became so apparent in the violence during partition, by promoting a civilizational unity of all Indians. It is partially for this history that secularism and noncommunalism are closely associated in India and Bangladesh, often even being used synonymously. ‘Secularism’ in this sense means fighting against ‘communal’ divides between communities established along the interrelated lines of caste, religion, and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> In other instances, however, ‘secularism’ is understood instead as promoting a strict separation of religion and politics, or as holding a strongly critical attitude toward religion in South Asia.

Amir spent his childhood with three brothers in a comparatively less ‘communal’ environment, since they lived in socially diverse hamlets in Tamil Nadu designated for government employees and their families. Also, at the prestigious schools he attended before starting a risk-taking career in real estate at the age of 23, matters of caste and religion were generally subordinate to questions of class. When he was still in his twenties he declared bankruptcy several times, but he always landed back on his feet with new investment ideas and the necessary financing.

Whenever Quack met with Amir between 2012 and 2017, he presented himself as a fun-loving, patriotic Indian, but first and foremost as a successful businessman. He identified as an atheist and as a Muslim at the same time. While he described himself as an ‘atheist’ when matters such as belief in God were explicitly discussed, he did not do so without a specific context and cause. Everyone, by contrast, presumed his identity as a Muslim, not the least because of his Muslim name, despite his displays of deviance from the norm (which predisposes his Muslimness in the first place).

When asked about his simultaneous identification as atheist and Muslim, his constant flow of words turned into a strange mixture of confidence and insecurity. Although he was sure that he was both an atheist *and* a Muslim, Amir knew that this could be taken as an oxymoron. He considered himself an atheist because he does not believe in Allah and explicitly seeks to diverge from what is commonly recognized as a ‘proper’ Muslim. At the same time, born into a Muslim family and approached as a Muslim throughout his life (although possibly as a problematic and deviant one), self-identifying as such seemed inevitable for him.

While Quack found out about Amir Rahman's nonreligiosity through a contact who was aware of our interest in the theme, Schulz learned of Jayanta Chowdhury's nonbelief in an unexpected moment. Jayanta was an influential leader of the Chatro League (the student wing of the Awami League, a major political party in Bangladesh) in Sylhet. Many commented on this achievement, as he was from a family that was neither particularly wealthy nor 'political'. Schulz had often met him at Chatro League political assemblies and informal get-togethers and noticed his charismatic speeches on and commitment to promoting secularism, a theme quite common among Awami League politicians (see also Schulz 2020).

Jayanta and Schulz had the chance to talk about many issues related to Jayanta's life and politics in Sylhet as they awaited the arrival of ward councilors and senior leader for some hours. Long into the conversation, the issue of religion came up. At that point, although nobody else was in the room, Jayanta suddenly lowered his voice and briefly looked around. He became quite hesitant and asked: "So what about you . . . what do you think about religion?" Reassured that the researcher was not a very religious person, Jayanta explained that he does "not really give much significance to religion." As Schulz enquired further, Jayanta told her—still in a voice as if he was revealing a big secret—that he does not really believe in any god(s) or any kinds of rituals. Such things do not matter to him personally, he confessed. Nevertheless, he takes part "in all this" when he visits his parents' home in the village in wider Sylhet, "because people in Bangladesh give a lot of significance to religion."

Jayanta soon switched topics. His disbelief is certainly not something that he is proud of and he reveals it only situationally, such as in this one-to-one conversation with a researcher from Germany, or with certain close friends and political peers who share similar views. For Jayanta, and many of our interlocutors in Bangladesh and India, being an 'atheist' is not a morally neutral category that describes those who do not believe in god(s) or certain religious dogmas; instead, the term carries markedly negative connotations. Being identified as an atheist can easily impede someone like Jayanta from progressing further on an envisioned path to becoming a political leader. Moreover, Jayanta associates atheism with a certain kind of transgression or outspokenness and public antireligiousness that ignores or violates other people's religious sentiments. Thus, he neither feels the urge to express his nonbelief nor accepts the label 'atheist'.

Both Amir and Jayanta state that they do not believe in god(s) and do not adhere to the practices they associate with their religion. Yet, their respective moral evaluations of their own disbelief are markedly different, reflecting, as we argue in this article, different contexts and social locations. While Amir, at least at times, expressively rejects and ridicules Islamic beliefs and practices and does not mind being labeled an 'atheist', Jayanta carefully avoids being seen as antireligious and strongly objects to being associated with atheism. We could name many similar yet different cases, including people who are either more outspoken or who are rather indifferent to labels such as atheist, rationalist, or humanist. But most of them self-identify, at least in some instances, as Hindus or Muslims because they were born as such. They might see this with some unease or admit it in a way that frames it as unavoidable and an inevitable matter of fact.

This, and Amir's struggle to explain why being a Muslim and an atheist was no contradiction, are related to competing layers of what it means to be a Hindu or a Muslim in contemporary South Asia. The category of 'religion' has commonly, though certainly not unproblematically, been equated with belief and, to a lesser extent, belonging to a religious community and engaging in 'religious' practices such as rituals. Conversely, nonreligion has, as noted above, often been discussed as a problem of unbelief or nonreligious convictions and a question of community. In this article, by contrast, we investigate the position(ing)s of Jayanta and Amir in specific social contexts characterized by multi-layered embodied practices, moral orders, and social configurations by specifically focusing on how 'being' a Muslim or a Hindu, as well as

distancing oneself from certain religious traditions, matters in social interactions beyond what is typically captured with the term 'religion'.

### Trans- and Progressive Atheism

No matter whether 'a-theism' is understood as the mere absence of a (belief in) god(s) or as the denial or rejection of the existence of deities, it arguably is 'theologically' more problematic for Muslims than for Hindus. While Allah undeniably holds a central role in most, if not all, Islamic traditions,<sup>6</sup> the existence of god(s) is not a central problem for many traditions associated with Hinduism. Indeed, it is problematic to speak of a 'theo-logy' with respect to many Hindu traditions, since an array of 'atheist' or *nāstik* schools can arguably be included within the range of Hindu orthodoxies (Frazier 2013; Quack 2013).<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, our selected examples show that such differences are certainly not the only factors that shape whether and to what extent individuals identify with being an atheist or *nāstik*. They show that individual biographies and social positions, dominant local and national discourses, as well as different understandings of the term atheism—amongst other factors—have to be taken into consideration.

Although he is perceived to be Hindu, Jayanta acknowledged his nonbelief in god(s) but rejected an explicit self-identification as an atheist, just as many other interlocutors in Bangladesh did. If Schulz enquired explicitly whether they would like to be more open about their position, they often not only pointed to the difficulties in doing so, given the recent history of political polarization around these terms (see Ruud 2019; Schulz 2021), but affectively opposed such a view and articulated the desirability of "respecting the sentiments of others." This does not mean that everyone concealed their irreligiosity. Even those who were relatively open about their irreligious stance tended to reject such a label. Instead, they adopted a rather pragmatic and diplomatic approach, as they did not want to 'hurt' others or to infringe on their 'religious sentiments' by transgressing what is deemed appropriate.

Muslim Amir did not self-identify as an atheist frequently. Yet, in contrast to Jayanta, he did not hold back his derogatory views on religion in general and Islam in particular. To him, 'atheism' has progressive rather than transgressive connotations. As illustrated below, the two divergent stances reflect their social situatedness and social positions. More generally, the notions 'atheism' and *nāstik* can have both quite positive and distinctively adverse connotations in contemporary India. While the term's persistent negativity has been noted by other anthropologists (Binder 2020), many examples of self-declared atheists can also be found in India throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>8</sup>

Jayanta's silence contrasts with Amir's comparatively unagitated use of 'atheism'. The reasons for this became clear in Jayanta's interactions with the ward councilor Ashfak Ghazi later in the evening, which touched on the theme of atheism again, albeit in a way that revealed quite different tensions. A friend of the councilor, who had been introduced as a businessman and mullah, started a conversation with Schulz about the 'atheist bloggers' who had been murdered in recent years. The mullah asserted that Western media had a misperception about this as, in fact, "there are no *nāstiks* (atheists) in Bangladesh." He was echoing a position that Schulz had often overheard in tea-stall discussions and on the street. Jayanta, who had only a few hours earlier said that he does not believe in any god(s) or religious rituals, seemed unmoved and revealed no sense of disagreement. Because nobody was saying anything, Schulz asked the councilor's friend how he could know that there are no atheists in Bangladesh when clearly, in the political climate at that time, people who might otherwise publicly proclaim themselves as an atheist could be reluctant to do so, as they were under threat. This logic did not impress him; he explained that

there were, of course, some people in Bangladesh who talk about atheism, but they only do so to get asylum in places like Sweden or Germany, or are otherwise influenced by “the outside” (*bidēs theke*). No proper Bangladeshi person, he emphasized, could be a *nāstik*.

Jayanta did not contest this view. Thus, Schulz asked the councilor for his opinion. He first emphasized that he was—like most people in Bangladesh—a practicing Muslim. He then ventured to confirm his friend’s perspective: “People can, of course, take these things more or less seriously. But, a person without *dharma*, what kind of person would that be?” At this point, Jayanta made some comments in agreement and suggested that “these things are different in Bangladesh than they are in Germany.”

This situation reveals that the term ‘*nāstik*’ can hold strongly negative connotations and evinces physically perceptible anxieties of being identified as such in certain contexts. Furthermore, while the notion of *dharma* is often translated as ‘religion’, it should not be reduced to an individual belief or conviction here. Some scholars have translated it instead as ‘moral order’—Islam representing one such order—which (among other things) distinguishes humans from animals. In such a view, the councilor would be voicing a not uncommon notion that no one is without *dharma*, as no one is without morality, as that would be hardly human (see Devine and White 2013; Pool 2016: 15–18; cf. Schulz 2021). Even though we cannot elaborate adequately on the complexities of the concept of *dharma*, its interrelated term *jāti*, and the problems of the translatability of concepts like ‘religion’ here, we show in the following section that they shape social interactions and are thus crucial to understanding the different meanings of being a Hindu or Muslim or atheist.

## Embodied Differences and Nonreligious Positioning

Scholars following the ethnosociological approach (e.g., Marriott 1968; Marriott and Inden 1977) have analyzed being a Muslim or a Hindu as a question of ‘substantial difference’—that is, significant but also quite literal material-substantial differences—related to the emic categories of *jāti* and *dharma* in South Asia. Accordingly, it has been argued that *jāti* constitutes a category of seemingly natural differences such as gender, caste, religious group, or ethnicity, with different codes of conducts, *dharma*, applying to these different groups.

While we have discussed the problems of the theoretical presumptions and implications of such approaches elsewhere (Copeman and Quack 2019; Schulz 2021; see also Berger 2012), we contend that understanding how *jāti* and *dharma* tend to shape, if not even preconfigure, social interactions is crucial for the analysis of nonreligiosity in South Asia. The respective interactions result in the recurrent production of Muslims and Hindus as substantially different groups. In the following, we highlight two crucial aspects of this: first, the pervasiveness, inevitability, and taken-for-grantedness (*doxa*) of *jāti* and *dharma*; and second, how respective differences are upheld through countless everyday practices. We thereby illustrate how even people who are, like Jayanta and Amir, nonbelieving, nonpracticing, or nonidentifying are persistently and inescapably ‘interpellated’ (Althusser 1971) as Muslim or Hindu (or a member of another community).

Amir experienced the doxastic pervasiveness of his Muslimness forcefully in two relationships he had with Hindu girls who broke up with him when the issue of marriage came up. Apparently, one did so because her family used death threats to prevent her from marrying a Muslim. Though the reasons for the breakup came as no surprise to Amir, he still found it “plainly weird.” The same ambivalence that is at stake here makes it difficult for him to explain the supposed oxymoron of being an ‘atheist Muslim’. As long as religion (and atheism) is reduced

to questions of belief, the family's stance seems 'weird', as he is not a believer. Yet, being Muslim can be seen as an inevitable fact for Amir. As he explained: Being Muslim is "part of my forced identity, you know, not something I chose." Thus, although Amir rejects being a Muslim on one level by explicitly deriding religious ideas or engaging in the performative transgression of religious norms, he is unable to question the pervasiveness of such categories on another level. The logic of *dharma* and *jāti*, therefore, continues to preconfigure certain social dynamics by enabling and precluding how he can relate to and question his Muslimness.

In more general terms: You can be a nonpracticing or nonbelieving Hindu or Muslim, but you are inevitably a Hindu or a Muslim, nevertheless. Nonidentifying as a Hindu or a Muslim is not simply understood as unusual or as a stigma; it can be seen as a transgressive and socially problematic act, because it thwarts the normative and naturalized order of apparently given communities. This explains why identifying as a Muslim or a Hindu who is 'nonpracticing' or 'nonbelieving' is less problematic for many. And, if 'atheism' is understood as questioning this matter of fact, this also explains why the very existence of atheists was questioned during Jayanta's interaction with the councilor's friend.

Furthermore, while one attains *jāti* membership via birth and family background, such affiliations retain their persistent significance and self-evidence because the differences are enacted constantly through various habituated practices that go beyond specific religious convictions. Obvious examples of practices through which people are interpellated as 'Hindus' and 'Muslims' include marriage (e.g., Binder 2020: 196–207), food taboos (e.g., Binder 2020: 166–195), and names (e.g., Copeman 2015). The interactional complications of such enacted practices and the complicated relationship between embodiments and personal convictions are well illustrated in another episode that appeared at the end of the meeting between Schulz, Jayanta Chowdhury, and Councilor Ashfak Ghazi during a meal they shared, which the councilor's wife had prepared.

As the different pots were arranged on the table, the councilor discreetly instructed his wife to "put this pot over here." When Muslims and Hindus eat together in South Asia, efforts are made not to offend the other's religious sentiments. While pork is hardly available in most of Bangladesh, beef is perceived to be the most delicious and prestigious kind of meat among Muslims. Thus, if it is economically feasible, beef is served at all major or minor special occasions, such as when hosting guests. The councilor had instructed his wife to place the pot as far away from Jayanta as possible so that he, a Hindu, would not have to look at or smell beef. This is a common, habituated procedure that is widely observable but hardly ever explicitly discussed. The hint, however, must have slipped his wife's mind. Eager to be a good host, she encouraged Jayanta to take some beef. In an outburst of anger, Councilor Ashfak Ghazi interfered: "Jayanta-*dā*, is he eating beef, or what?" As her husband used the suffix '*dā*' and his name, 'Jayanta', the councilor's wife quickly realized that he was a Hindu. She was clearly embarrassed by the situation and immediately rushed to clarify how bad she felt about her offer. Everyone else seemed to be visibly uneasy and tried hard to overcome this very awkward moment.

The strong reaction underscores the salience of food consumption rules. Offering beef was seen as a significant form of disrespect. This intense uneasiness seems ironic, given that Jayanta is a Hindu who does not believe in god(s), religious rituals, and, indeed, is not strictly against eating beef—although he certainly does not promote it. For good reasons, however, he did not intervene in this situation, thus making his convictions imperceptible in the interaction and preventing being perceived as irreligious, which might thereby lower his chances of becoming a successful politician. Crucially, the difference between Muslims and Hindus is not only enacted through food taboos derived from religious ideas and prescriptions, but also through more 'mundane' practices like forms of address. That through names and forms of addresses (such

as the suffix ‘dā’) an individual becomes (signified as) a Muslim or a Hindu is one of the most illustrative examples of the interrelation between ideologies, social institutions, embodiment, and what Louis Althusser captures with the term ‘interpellation’ (1971).

Such observations have significant implications at the conceptual and methodological level. The situation above illustrates how habituated and dispositional dynamics shape interactions and influence when non/religiosity may (or may not) become visible. Many practices go without saying because they ‘merely’ enact ‘what is always done’ and express what is deemed appropriate. Hence, such situations are unlikely to be articulated in interviews. Overlooking such positionings, however, contributes to the bias of viewing nonreligion mostly in terms of creedal and explicit forms, separate from concrete social interactions. Consequently, forms of nonreligiosity that are similar to Jayanta’s have, to date, remained mostly invisible in academic debates.

Therefore, in this article, we explore how nonreligion can be analyzed as a situated social practice. In recent years, ethnographic approaches that highlight the material and the aesthetic as significant for nonreligiosity have increased (e.g., Binder 2019; Copeman and Quack 2017; Engelke 2015). Here we are not so much interested in the material or embodied manifestation of nonreligious convictions; instead, we highlight how nonreligious positioning unfolds in a concrete situation in which embodiment plays a significant role at multiple levels, and significantly not only concerning what is commonly captured with a focus on ‘religion’ or social imaginations around ‘the secular’. Even in cases where people intentionally enact certain convictions, such as Amir’s ostentatious pork eating, we need to analyze such practices not only at a cognitive and discursive level but as performative acts that have wider social implications and reflect specific social contexts, moral orders, affective dispositions, and interactive contexts. The next section further elaborates on this by outlining how Amir and Jayanta derived their respective stances toward their own nonpractice and disbelief in interrelation with their biographies, political contexts, circulating social imaginations, nationalist discourses, and minority status.

### **Life Trajectories, Secular Imaginations, and Non/Identification**

As discussed above, Amir Rahman identified as an adventurous and successful Indian businessman. How he talked about religion is related to issues of social distinction and the trope of being a progressive, self-made Indian man. His desire to promote critical perspectives on religion reflects his particular background and contrasts with other, arguably Hindu-dominated, modes of nonreligiosity, such as expressive forms of rationalism that attempt to eradicate ‘superstition’ or activist forms that target caste or gender issues (Binder 2020; Quack 2012). The situated particularities of his nonreligiosity become especially visible in a story he told in 2013 about how he got stuck in his car in a crowd of Muslims leaving Friday prayers. Instead of giving way to him, one participant told him to stop honking. This outraged Amir and, according to him, was only possible because the man felt “really strong” due to “that little skullcap.” Amir suggested that otherwise “this guy is a nobody” and would “try to behave in the best possible manner.” For Amir, the Muslim prayer cap was crucial because it “aligned him to a larger mass. And that gives him the strength, you know, of another identity. Otherwise, he does not have an identity.” Amir concluded his story with the argument that the lower classes are so “bloody entrenched in their religious identity” because “they have nothing else.” Simultaneously, he contrasted this sharply with his own position: “I’m someone who has an identity, I am a businessman, I run a company, I employ thirty people, and so on and so forth. So, there is a certain identity.”

Here and in other instances, Amir distances himself from “those Muslims” not only because he criticizes religious ideas, convictions, and practices but also as a matter of social distinction.



Moreover, his juxtaposition between a secular and achieved status versus a communal identity based on religious belonging that divides rather than unites Indians is also related to his family background, through which he came, like his father, to value the virtue of being a 'self-made man', and is part of how he imagines a modern and secular life in urban India.

Yet, Amir and his father are situated within larger discursive patterns that contrast allegedly backward and dogmatic forms of religiosity with an ideal of a secular India that is liberal, non-communal, progressive, and provides opportunities for all. Amir's characterization of other Muslims as less educated, stupid, rural, dogmatically religious masses wearing skullcaps to gain an identity corresponds to wider stereotypical and deprecatory depictions of Muslims in contemporary India. Reproducing them allowed Amir to claim secular and progressive Indianness in a context where Muslimness is imbued with notions of constituting the backward and 'threatening Other' in India (see Eckert 2012). Notably, he seemed to redirect the blame for communalism on religious Muslims themselves and thereby mirrored the anti-Muslim arguments prevalent among Hindu chauvinist groups (*Hindutva*). Simultaneously, his "immense amount of love for this country," reflecting his family history of state-facilitated upward mobility, painted an overly optimistic picture of the situation of Muslims (and other minorities) in India even before their further increased marginalization during the Hindu nationalist BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government led by Prime Minister Modi. He claimed in a conversation in 2013, for instance, that "at the grassroots level" there was "absolutely no difference" between Muslims and Hindus in India. Although identifying as a Muslim by birth, his expressive rejection of symbols of Muslim piety allowed him to reject everything he viewed as problematic about both Muslims and communalism. This facilitated his claim of full 'Indianness' despite being a Muslim. Moreover, his social position as a successful businessman in a metropole literally afforded him the opportunity to spend most of his time with like-minded people in situations and spaces where questions of class and style often override the logics of *dharma* and *jāti*. It is important to add that the situation for Muslims has further deteriorated in recent years. This is best exemplified by the highly controversial and divisive Citizenship (Amendment) Act in 2019 that introduced a close association between religious affiliation and citizenship in India, making it more difficult for Muslim migrants to become citizens in India.

In contrast to Jayanta, Amir did not couple his understanding of atheism and secularism with the need for mutual respect. He held that arguments against overt criticism of religion(s) are problematic because they privilege certain forms of religious reasoning and sentiments. Accordingly, he displayed his deviance at times in unapologetic ways. Jayanta's stance toward his own nonreligiosity, and religion more generally, also reflected imaginations of and aspirations for a secular nation, although arguably in the inverse. Born into a peasant family with moderate economic means, he joined the 'secular' political party, the Awami League, after being exposed to the violence against ethnic and religious minorities, including Hindus, that surrounded the 2001 Election. His commitment to secularism is thus prominently linked to his vision of a more inclusive society, one that ensures equal rights for everyone, including religious minorities and women. Additionally, Jayanta's positioning is related to an awareness of popular discourses that accuse the Awami League of being an 'atheist party' and thereby seek to defame and delegitimize it, especially during election campaigns. Thus, in Bangladesh, an 'open' affirmation of one's own irreligiosity may be problematic and even highly risky for politicians (see also Ruud 2019; Schulz 2020).

While Jayanta is deeply aware of the implications that identifying as an atheist may have, it would be wrong to reduce his position to strategic reasoning. Instead, it is embedded in a deep moral conviction that it is wrong to be anti-religious, which posits any expressive and confrontational form of nonreligiosity as being problematic. In contrast to our other interloc-

utors in Bangladesh and India, he did not think of atheism as being progressive but rather as a potential moral threat. Although he did not believe in god(s), Jayanta considered this not as a stance to advocate but as a fact of life. He also does not associate disbelief or nonreligiosity with being secular. Like others in Sylhet, he tends to carefully distinguish being ‘secular’ from being ‘anti-religious’ or being an ‘atheist’, and seeks to dissociate himself from the latter.

Arguably, it is indeed Jayanta’s secular aspiration that makes him reject explicitly articulated irreligiosity and people who ‘run around and tell everyone’. With his understanding of the secular, Jayanta advocates for a mode of non/religiosity that allows for plurality in terms of religious belonging, practices, and lifestyles, which can be described as noncoercive, nonaggressive, or not being *ugratā* (fierce, violent, extreme, fundamentalist). The respective understanding of secularism as moderation and rejection of what is perceived as ‘excessive’ resonates clearly with the forms of subtle criticism of Tablighi-Jamaat followers’ supposedly “excessive religious practices” that anthropologists have encountered in rural Bangladesh (Ashraf and Camellia 2008; Devine and White 2013). For Jayanta, being ‘secular’ does not mean privileging nonpractice or nonbelief, but stipulates moderation equally for those who identify with nonreligious perspectives. Although Jayanta considers this secularism, similar to hegemonic national(ist) discourses on Bangladesh as a secular nation—as specifically ‘Bengali’—interlocutors in India regularly evoked similar notions (see also Bhargava 2002). He does not see ‘religion’ as such as problematic, although his commitment to secularism is linked with his fight against certain forms of religiosity, namely those he perceives as harmful, dangerous, and incompatible with ideals of equality. Promoting such a version of secularism is crucial for Jayanta to impede the spread of communalism, affective reactions, conflict, and hatred. For him, by contrast, the terms ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’ are imbued with the quality of being transgressive and excessive. His stance thereby equally reflects his biographical experience as a Hindu minority, his position as a successful Chatro League leader requiring a certain impression management, and circulating hegemonic normative notions about what it means to be secular, atheist, or nonpracticing, which are linked to national discourses, the country’s history, as well as moral orders and ideals about appropriate social interactions.

This section has highlighted that a person’s disposition to conceal or expressively display his or her own disbelief or criticize certain religious symbols is interlinked with a person’s social position, social imaginations, and contested notions of secularism. This analysis further illustrated how partial (dis-)identification with being a Muslim or a Hindu unfolds in contexts where these categories are constructed as being in problematic tension with the secular state and nationhood. The outlined dynamics seem to be particularly relevant for Amir and Jayanta because of their ‘religious’ minority status as a Muslim in India and a Hindu in Bangladesh, respectively, while they simultaneously illustrate how complex dynamics that encourage certain forms of nonreligiosity while impeding others are shaped by many factors and are not necessarily primarily or exclusively related to people’s attitudes toward ‘religion’ as such (see also Schuh et al. 2020: 9–12; Schulz 2021).

Although the concept of *jāti* and some aspects discussed in this article are particular to South Asia, the interrelation between ethnification and ‘religious’ (dis)identification is not. Instead, our observations resonate strongly with dynamics that have been documented, for instance, for Jewish communities or Muslims in Europe. The ‘racification’ of religious belonging is particularly visible in Esra Özyürek’s study of white, ‘ethnically’ German converts to Islam. She shows that an “ethnicized definition of Islam” results in strong sentiments against German Muslims, as their existence blurs the postulated boundaries between Germans and Muslims (Özyürek 2009: 97). Conversely, German converts try to escape, and thereby reproduce, such racifications of Islam by seeking to strongly “distance themselves from immigrant Muslims” (Özyürek 2015: 1).

Similarly, Reza Gholami's study on the Iranian diaspora shows how what he calls the "post-modern fixation" on Islam as an "immigrant religion" that is prevalent in popular and academic discourses results in an inadequate essentialization that fails to perceive the internal diversity of migrant groups (such as accounting for the substantial numbers of Iranian Christians, Jews, and Baha'is) and obscures the significance of secular attitudes among those perceived as migrants (Gholami 2015). Given such a racialization of Muslims, it is no surprise that many nonbelievers born into Muslim families in Europe attempt to distance themselves not from religion as such but from Islam specifically, by enacting a form of secularism that is 'non-Islamious' (Gholami 2015) and by identifying as 'ex-Muslims' rather than 'atheists' (Vliek 2018). Such a convolution of religious traditions and community belonging, and their implications for the (im)possibilities of articulating nonbelief, is particularly visible in the case of ultra-Orthodox Jews (see Fader 2017).

While the ethnification of what is perceived as 'religious' categories is at times captured in popular discourses with notions of 'cultural' Muslims, Christians, or Jews, this article shows that the complex dynamics at stake in shaping the respective position(ing)s are obscured by such phrasing, as the different layers of what it means to be a Muslim, a Christian, or a Jew cannot be so easily separated. Instead, our interlocutors draw upon them situationally, and enact them in specific spatio-temporal contexts, although they continually remain infused with others. Social contestations and a minority status tend to heighten tensions around habituated practices associated with a certain group and, thus, make these dynamics more visible to the observer. This reminds us that nonreligiosity—whatever this may mean in a specific context—always constitutes a socially situated practice.

### Who Counts as a 'Non'?

While the interdisciplinary study of nonreligion provides important contributions, research tends to be biased toward the 'usual suspects' at the center of organized and possibly canonized forms of nonreligion and atheism. It thus focuses on the more vocal and rather radical persons, articulated worldviews, and explicitly claimed identities. Furthermore, it often remains limited to certain geographic regions. We propose that such biases can be overcome by studying more ambivalent forms of nonreligiosity and accounting for the situatedness of individual positionings, the importance of habituated practices, and underlying social dynamics.

In this article, we have discussed why certain people in Bangladesh and India who do not believe in or practice the religion they were born into nevertheless reject the label 'atheist' or use it in addition to identifying as a Muslim or a Hindu. During our research in South Asia, we frequently encountered notions that deemed atheism and irreligion to be something foreign to the region, notions that were reflected in such statements as the above-quoted "there are no atheists in Bangladesh" or in Indian discourses that tried to prove the indigenous nature of an 'Indian rationalism' against the accusation that this was a Western import (Quack 2012). Similarly, South Asia tends to be perceived as a place of extensive spirituality and religiosity in public discourses. This article highlights several dimensions and dynamics that make a disposition toward wholeheartedly embracing atheism as an articulated and publicly proclaimed identity less likely, though certainly not impossible, than in many other contexts. Although nonidentification with being a Muslim or a Hindu is deemed problematic, this is not necessarily true—at least not to the same extent—for nonpractice and nonbelief. People like Jayanta, however, have up to now been far less likely to come into view in the study of 'nonreligion' or 'the secular' because of how they deal with their own nonreligiosity. This raises the crucial questions of which concept of 'non-' or 'nones' actually underlies our conception of 'nonreligion'.

Accounting for the diversity of various configurations of nonbelief, nonpractice, and non-identification requires research approaches that also engage with more nuanced and less visible forms of nonreligion. This is not merely a question of representation or ‘covering them all’ but one of urgency, because such incidences offer us significant complementary insights. As this article highlights, attending to such ‘hidden forms’ and the situational and contextual dynamics of concealing and revealing nonreligiosity allows us to pay attention to interactional contexts and how nonreligion unfolds as a situated practice beyond religion.

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## ■ NOTES

1. All interlocutors’ names and identifiable information have been anonymized in this article.
2. Schulz’s research on contested secularism and nonreligion was completed in Sylhet between 2016 and 2019, while Quack’s research on nonreligious individuals in Delhi took place between 2012 and 2020.
3. For details on the notion semi-equivalent, see Schulz 2021.
4. Ethnographic research on nonreligious movements outside of the North Atlantic was conducted, e.g., by Binder (2020), Blechschmidt (2019), and Quack (2012). Nonreligious position(ing)s outside organized forms were analyzed, e.g., by Anand (2014), Gholami (2015), McBrien and Pelkmans (2008), Pelkmans (2017: 77–101), Quack (2017), and Schulz (2021).

5. This is not the place to discuss the extensive literature on the processes of ethnification in South Asia during the last two centuries, since this would require a discussion of the intricate relationship between caste and religion as well as of interrelated processes labeled politicization, culturalization, substantialization, and compartmentalization. For insightful overviews, see e.g., Reddy (2005), Natrajan (2012: 1–28), and Lee (2020).
6. This is not the place to enter debates about the status of Allah in different traditions, e.g., the complexities of the conception of God in certain Sufi traditions.
7. The term *nāstik* initially referred to non-Vedic and, therefore, heterodox schools of thought, such as Buddhist and Jain philosophies, and the *Lokāyata* (or *Cārvāka*).
8. The atheist homepage, Nirmukta, compiled YouTube videos that showcase 'great Indian atheists'. See <http://nirmukta.com/2010/11/17/tribute-to-indian-atheists-part-1-2/>, accessed 19 November 2020.

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