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# Atheism as a condition of procedural legitimacy in democratic community

El ateísmo como condición de legitimidad procedimental  
en la comunidad democrática

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**Summary:** Introduction. 1. Atheism as a structural condition of democratic legitimacy. 2. The uneven landscape of belief and nonbelief. 3. The price of nonbelief. 4. Neutrality is not enough: the procedural turn. 5. Recognizing atheism as a worldview. 6. The political stakes of recognizing atheism. 7. Atheism serves democracy when procedure replaces revelation. 8. The sectarian ceiling and the procedural alternative. Conclusion. References.

**Abstract:** Nonreligious persons —atheists, agnostics, and the unaffiliated— remain systematically marginalized within liberal democracies that profess commitment to pluralism. I show that such exclusion is not accidental but structurally embedded in pluralisms still defined by theological premises. Through a fact-sensitive, non-ideal methodology integrating political theory with social-scientific research, I document the legal asymmetries, social stigma, and symbolic erasure confronting nonbelievers, and argue that liberal neutrality is insufficient to secure genuine inclusion. In response, I develop a model of procedural pluralism treating atheism as the limiting case for democratic legitimacy. Drawing on the Rawlsian tradition of political liberalism, I show that atheism has functioned historically as a structural condition of modern secular institutions and contrast the community-indexed justificatory logic of revealed religion with the procedurally universal logic of democratic public reason. Only the latter can ground legitimate authority under conditions of deep moral and metaphysical disagreement. Recognizing atheism as a

comprehensive doctrine capable of grounding ethical life and participating in public reason is therefore a requirement of equal civic standing, and democratic authority must be post-metaphysical: legitimacy should arise from procedures of justification accessible to citizens regardless of their theological commitments.

**Keywords:** protection of religion, marginalization of atheism, procedural pluralism, democratic legitimacy, political liberalism

**Resumen:** Las personas no religiosas —ateas, agnósticas y no afiliadas— siguen estando sistemáticamente marginadas en democracias liberales que profesan un compromiso con el pluralismo. Sostengo que dicha exclusión no es accidental, sino que está estructuralmente arraigada en formas de pluralismo aún definidas por premisas teológicas. Mediante una metodología no ideal, sensible a los hechos, que integra la teoría política con la investigación en ciencias sociales, documento las asimetrías jurídicas, el estigma social y la invisibilización simbólica que enfrentan los no creyentes, y argumento que la neutralidad liberal es insuficiente para garantizar una inclusión genuina. En respuesta, desarrollo un modelo de pluralismo procedimental que trata el ateísmo como el caso límite de la legitimidad democrática. Apoyándome en la tradición rawlsiana del liberalismo político, muestro que el ateísmo ha funcionado históricamente como una condición estructural de las instituciones seculares modernas y contrapongo la lógica justificatoria, indexada a la comunidad, de la religión revelada con la lógica procedimentalmente universal de la razón pública democrática. Solo esta última puede fundamentar una autoridad legítima en condiciones de profundo desacuerdo moral y metafísico. Reconocer el ateísmo como una doctrina comprensiva capaz de fundamentar la vida ética y de participar en la razón pública es, por tanto, un requisito de igualdad cívica, y la autoridad democrática debe ser posmetafísica: la legitimidad debe surgir de procedimientos de justificación accesibles a la ciudadanía independientemente de sus compromisos teológicos.

**Palabras clave:** protección de la religión, marginación del ateísmo, pluralismo procedimental, legitimidad democrática, liberalismo político.

## Introduction

Imagine a global minority, numbering in the hundreds of millions, concentrated in the world's most powerful and prosperous nations—and systematically excluded from public dialogue, ranked as the least trustworthy group in society, and often driven to conceal their identity.<sup>1</sup> This is not unfamiliar persecution. It is a reminder that the exclusion of nonbelief belongs not to history's margins but to its recurring center: not incidental but constitutive of a pluralism still ordered by theology<sup>2</sup>—understood as the systematic articulation of divine authority and obligation, from the inner structure of faith to its institutional entanglements with state and law.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical research across psychology, political science, and sociology documents the depth and pervasiveness of social exclusion faced by nonreligious persons in contemporary societies (Cragun et al. 2012). Anti-atheist prejudice operates as identity signaling: expressing distrust toward atheists affirms one's own religious belonging and moral respectability (Lambert et al. 2025)—one reason such prejudice persists even in ostensibly pluralist societies. The moralization of religiosity generates deconversion guilt that discourages individuals from leaving their religions even as secularization advances (Bounds et al. 2025). The political consequences are substantial: openly nonreligious candidates face significant electoral penalties, particularly among religious and conservative voters (Golebiowska 2024). This stigma also intersects with race: Black atheists are often perceived by coethnics as “less Black” and less trustworthy, revealing how atheism can trigger intragroup identity denial when religious belief is tied to communal belonging (Howard et al. 2023). Together, these findings depict a global minority whose members, even in liberal democracies, face enduring social exclusion, moral suspicion, and political marginalization—even as their numbers grow.

<sup>2</sup> The marginalization of atheists and other nonbelievers is not accidental but structurally embedded in pluralisms shaped by Christian legacies. Asad (1993) argues that the secular emerges not as religion's opposite but as its historical counterpart, molded by Protestant-inflected understandings of belief, conscience, and public life, which explains why secular pluralism excludes nonreligious individuals rather than remaining neutral. Lauwers (2022) provides empirical support, showing that ostensibly secular norms and institutions in Western Europe continue to favor Christians and subtly exclude nonbelievers. Blankholm (2025) similarly finds that atheists occupy a “religion-like” minority status within secular societies, experiencing exclusion precisely because pluralism presumes a theological baseline.

<sup>3</sup> I use “atheism” to designate a spectrum of nonreligious orientations across four domains. The first is “metaphysical”: atheism (denial of divine existence), agnosticism (divine existence is unknowable), and antitheism (principled opposition to theism). The second is “epistemic”: skepticism (privileging critical inquiry and evidentiary justification) and ignosticism (theological propositions lack coherent meaning). The third is “philosophical”: humanism (ethics centered on human flourishing), naturalism (reality consists solely of natural phenomena explicable without recourse to the supernatural), and materialism (explaining phenomena through nature and science). The fourth is “political”: secularism, understood as the institutional separation of religious and governmental authority.

Nonreligious persons —atheists, agnostics, and the unaffiliated— confront a structural asymmetry that persists when democratic inclusion remains tethered to belief. Liberal neutrality reaches its limit in societies that mistake faith for a precondition of moral standing. Legitimacy must be grounded not in conviction but in procedures of fairness accessible to all. The unbeliever is democracy’s unacknowledged test case.

The rise of the “nones” —those who decline affiliation with any organized religion— signals a profound shift in belief across Western democracies yet has not yielded commensurate political or social inclusion. Secularism admits of multiple meanings: for some, a naturalistic worldview that brackets the supernatural and regards religious ontologies as epistemically unwarranted; for others, the absence of religious identification and a waning sense that sacred forces shape human affairs. The normative question is whether a liberal democratic polity committed to value pluralism can claim genuine inclusivity while withholding equal civic standing from those who reject religious faith.

My approach is fact-sensitive, non-ideal, and critical, drawing on political theory to articulate principles of justice and legitimacy while engaging social-scientific research to substantiate empirical claims about the marginalization of nonreligious persons. The argument proceeds in eight steps: (1) establishing that atheism has been foundational to modern secular institutions; (2) surveying the contemporary global landscape of belief and nonbelief; (3) documenting the persistent marginalization of atheism within liberal democracies; (4) moving beyond state neutrality toward a model of procedural fairness that actively includes nonreligious worldviews; (5) showing that such inclusion enriches political community; (6) drawing out the democratic implications of recognizing nonreligion; (7) arguing that acknowledging atheism is a necessary condition for mature democracy, grounding legitimacy in procedural fairness rather than sectarian revelation; and (8) contrasting the justificatory logic of revealed religion with that of democratic public reason, arguing that only the latter can ground legitimate authority in a pluralistic society.

The argument draws on and extends the Rawlsian tradition of political liberalism (justifying political principles without appeal to comprehensive metaphysical doctrines), maintaining that its inadequate account of nonreligious worldviews makes a more robust procedural pluralism necessary.

My approach foregrounds atheism as normatively decisive, which requires distinguishing it from the broader, internally diverse category of nonreligion. Many who lack formal religious affiliation reject the atheist label, perceiving it as rhetorically combative or socially

stigmatized, preferring softer or more indeterminate descriptors (Lee 2015; Cotter 2015; Manning 2015). Survey research corroborates this: only a minority of the religiously unaffiliated explicitly identify as atheists, with many describing themselves as agnostic, “nothing in particular,” or spiritual but not religious (Pew Research Center 2019). Though nones tend to be younger, they share no unified worldview. What unites them is less a creed than an epistemic disposition privileging personal experience, critical reflection, and moral autonomy over inherited authority or revealed doctrine.

Nonetheless, I place analytic emphasis on atheism for conceptual rather than demographic reasons. Atheism represents the limiting case of nonreligion:<sup>4</sup> it most clearly brackets appeals to transcendent authority and thus most sharply illuminates the normative structure of public justification in pluralistic democracies. If democratic legitimacy requires that coercive laws be defensible in terms accessible to citizens who do not affirm revealed doctrine, the atheist standpoint provides a stringent test of procedural fairness. It clarifies what legitimacy demands under conditions of deep moral and metaphysical disagreement, while remaining attentive to the broader diversity of nonreligious life.

## 1. Atheism as a structural condition of democratic legitimacy

But the historical point is subordinate to the normative one. A political order that cannot justify itself to those who deny theological premises fails its own procedural standard. The question is whether democratic legitimacy remains intelligible in a religiously plural and increasingly nonreligious society.

Atheism is no alien intrusion into pluralism but one of its structural conditions: recognition that coexistence must be negotiated, not decreed. By rejecting claims to necessary or divinely grounded truth, atheism exposes the contingency of all moral authority, clearing the conceptual ground for a procedural politics where legitimacy rests on the fairness of

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<sup>4</sup> The “outer boundary” thesis does not privilege secularism as a metaphysical position. It identifies the atheist citizen—one who rejects transcendent warrant while accepting democratic reciprocity—as the limiting case that public justification must survive. This is procedural, not metaphysical: Rawlsian legitimacy requires reasons free and equal citizens may reasonably endorse (Rawls 1993); Habermasian legitimacy requires discursive acceptability across difference (Habermas 1996). A norm that cannot be justified without appeal to revelation fails both tests. Religious contributions to public discourse are not excluded, but their justificatory force must be translatable into generally accessible reasons.

deliberation among irreducibly diverse convictions (Gregg 2002).<sup>5</sup> These developments did not require universal atheism, but they did require that public institutions operate independently of theological necessity.

The decisive historical shift was not from religion to atheism but from revelation to justification. Political authority increasingly required reasons accessible to persons who did not share confessional premises. Once legitimacy was no longer grounded in divine command, it depended instead on consent, reciprocity, and procedural fairness. The architecture of liberal democracy thus assumed—whether explicitly or implicitly—the presence of citizens who would not affirm religious foundations. The claim that atheism is a recent or merely oppositional phenomenon obscures its structural role: as institutions came to rely on public justification, empirical inquiry, and civic equality, nonbelief was not merely tolerated but conceptually presupposed.

Modern science, human rights discourse, constitutionalism, and public education emerged within frameworks that progressively detached legitimacy from theological warrant.<sup>6</sup> The modern language of dignity and liberty rests not on divine conferment but on capacities attributed to persons as such,<sup>7</sup> presupposing applicability across

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<sup>5</sup> Proceduralism is of a piece with atheistic and secular-humanist thought that was central to the Enlightenment critique of revealed religion, legitimizing methodological naturalism and the independence of scientific authority. Materialists including Spinoza (1677), Diderot and d'Alembert (1751–1772), and d'Holbach (1770) displaced theological explanation with rational and empirical accounts, laying the groundwork for modern methods that stress verification and falsifiability over doctrinal conformity. Secular academies such as the Royal Society and the Académie des Sciences embodied these commitments and fostered the rise of modern science (Israel 2001; Gaukroger 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Debate persists over whether modern science secularized through gradual transformation of theological categories or decisive rupture with revelation. The continuity thesis emphasizes early modern science's entanglement with religious culture (Shapin 1996; Harrison 2015), arguing that Protestant theology cultivated empirical habits later secularized. Israel (2001) and Gaukroger (2006) counter that scientific autonomy required methodological naturalism—the categorical exclusion of supernatural explanation—and thus the rejection of theological authority as an epistemic veto. The gradualist evidence is real: Boyle understood experimentation as pious devotion, Bacon framed inquiry in the theological language of dominion over creation. But that Protestant thought encouraged empirical habits does not mean it could have authorized the exclusion of supernatural explanation. As the Galileo (1957) affair (1616–1633) illustrates, revelation continued to wield doctrinal veto power. Scientific independence required not accommodation but rejection of that authority.

<sup>7</sup> Atheism has also contributed to the development of human rights by relocating their normative grounding from divine authority to human capacities. Enlightenment thought, most explicitly in Kant (1784), articulates dignity as grounded in rational autonomy rather than theological status, thereby enabling a universalistic framework

confessions and to those without religious commitment, and rendering nonbelief not an anomaly within democratic modernity but one of its enabling conditions. Secular legal systems and public education similarly reflect the institutionalization of authority grounded in rational deliberation rather than ecclesiastical decree: justice becomes a human achievement sustained through public reasoning; education aims at critical autonomy rather than doctrinal conformity.<sup>8</sup> Early modern political thought detached sovereignty from divine right, grounding authority in consent and public reason.<sup>9</sup> Public education increasingly aimed at cultivating autonomy, civic equality, and scientific literacy rather than doctrinal submission.<sup>10</sup>

The broader cultural consequence was the expansion of permissible dissent. Once clerical authority lost its monopoly over truth claims, discursive space widened to include critique, skepticism, and explicit

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applicable across confessions and to the nonreligious. This shift is institutionally codified in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which treats human dignity as inherent while remaining agnostic about its metaphysical basis. Building on this trajectory, I reconstruct human rights as reflexive, socially generated norms, thereby re-legitimizing them under conditions of deep pluralism as self-authored, without recourse to shared metaphysical or theological foundations (Gregg 2016).

<sup>8</sup> By challenging religiously grounded authority and emphasizing reason, consent, and equality, Enlightenment thinkers laid the groundwork for modern legal systems in which justice rests on secular deliberation rather than theological precept. Locke (1690) grounded legitimate power in consent rather than divine sanction; Montesquieu (1748) argued that separation of powers guards against tyranny justified by religion; Voltaire (1763) denounced clerical domination of law and championed freedom of thought and speech; Rousseau (1762a) reconceived legitimacy through the social contract, privileging popular sovereignty over divine-right kingship; Hume (1758) grounded ethical judgment in empirical reasoning and human sentiment rather than theological moralism; Beccaria (1764) called for a secular and humane criminal justice system; Paine (1794) argued for civil liberties founded on reason rather than revelation. Together they redefined justice as a human achievement, anchored in rational deliberation, civic equality, and moral autonomy.

<sup>9</sup> The Enlightenment enduringly reoriented political legitimacy from revelation to reason. Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Kant, and Paine each advanced a vision of public authority emancipated from ecclesiastical control, replacing the rule of faith with procedural justification—offering not only a moral alternative to metaphysics but a political architecture capable of sustaining pluralism without metaphysical authority.

<sup>10</sup> The modern ideal of secular public education—cultivating civic virtue, critical thinking, and scientific literacy rather than religious indoctrination—draws on Locke (1693), who prioritized rational judgment over doctrinal submission; Rousseau (1762b), who emphasized civic responsibility and moral autonomy over religious obedience; Diderot (1751–1772), who promoted secular knowledge as the foundation of Enlightenment; Voltaire (1763), who denounced clerical control over schooling; and Kant (1803), who advocated education toward autonomous moral reasoning independent of ecclesiastical tutelage.

nonbelief,<sup>11</sup> normalized through secular print culture and public discourse under shared procedural constraints. The task is not to rehearse Enlightenment secularization but to clarify the conditions under which democratic legitimacy remains intelligible within a religiously plural and increasingly nonreligious society.

## 2. The uneven landscape of belief and nonbelief

Secularism denotes both a philosophical orientation and a political commitment to separating church and state, distinct from secularization, the social process through which religion loses public authority. Neither has unfolded uniformly: some societies experience sustained religious decline, others resurgent fundamentalisms. Yet despite the global growth of nonbelief,<sup>12</sup> secularism—and atheism in particular—remains socially and politically marginalized, a pattern historically continuous from antiquity—when Socrates was prosecuted for impiety and Protagoras and Anaxagoras censured for denying traditional gods<sup>13</sup>—through the Medieval and Modern Inquisitions<sup>14</sup> into modern stigma and discrimination.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> From Enlightenment pamphlets to contemporary media, atheist and secular voices have expanded the boundaries of permissible debate. Voltaire (1763), Diderot (1751–1772), d’Holbach (1770), Bayle (1697), and Wollstonecraft (1792) challenged censorship and clerical authority, forging the intellectual preconditions for secular democratic discourse grounded in reasoned dissent.

<sup>12</sup> Close to “a quarter of the US population are atheists” and “roughly 7% of the world self-identifying as atheist and over 16% as nonreligious” (Huft and Fields 2024: 281).

<sup>13</sup> In classical antiquity, disbelief was a civic transgression rather than a private matter of conscience. Religion and polity were mutually constitutive: to question the gods was to threaten the symbolic order sustaining the city’s moral and political life. In fifth— and fourth-century BCE Greece, Socrates was condemned for *asebeia*—impiety as subversion of civic piety—because his philosophical inquiry subjected divine authority to rational scrutiny; Protagoras and Anaxagoras faced similar accusations for advancing naturalistic explanations of cosmic order. In Rome, refusal to honor the state pantheon was treated as political sedition, piety functioning as the grammar of civic allegiance. Paradoxically, early Christians were themselves branded “atheists” for rejecting the Roman gods—underscoring that the charge referred not to metaphysical denial but to political deviance. The genealogy running from *asebeia* to heresy tracks the slow emergence of conscience as distinct from civic faith, anticipating the secular principle that epistemic autonomy is integral to political liberty.

<sup>14</sup> Beginning with the Medieval Inquisition (ca. 1184) in France and Italy, the institution evolved through the Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834), which extended ecclesiastical and royal authority across Spain and its American colonies; the Portuguese Inquisition (1536–1821), enforcing orthodoxy in Portugal and its overseas territories; and the Roman Inquisition (from 1542), which institutionalized doctrinal oversight across Catholic Europe.

<sup>15</sup> American and European polling consistently identifies atheists among the least-trusted groups in matters of morality and public leadership. Several U.S. state

The persistent prejudice equating disbelief with moral deficiency lacks empirical foundation. Secular worldviews sustain robust moral commitments grounded in reason, empathy, and shared civic norms. Zuckerman (2020) shows that highly secular societies such as Denmark and Sweden rank among the world's healthiest, safest, and most equitable.<sup>16</sup> Inglehart (2021, ix) likewise observes that Nordic countries, once shaped by Protestantism, now combine declining religiosity with universal health coverage, generous welfare provision, and an ethos of social solidarity.

At the aggregate level, secularization remains uneven. Data from the European Values Study and World Values Survey (1981–2020) indicate that the proportion of secular-oriented individuals doubled globally to 25.9% and tripled in Europe to 30.2% (Balazka 2020): significant growth, but regionally concentrated.

Structural factors help explain this distribution.

Norris and Inglehart (2011, 108, 147–148) argue that rising education, economic development, and welfare provision generate “existential security”, reducing reliance on religion. Insecurity heightens religious salience while secure conditions attenuate it. Lower-income populations in Europe and the United States are almost twice as religious as higher-income groups, while societies marked by persistent poverty or entrenched Islamic traditions exhibit comparatively stable religiosity.

These structural dynamics do not lead to demographic convergence. Wealthier, more secular societies tend toward lower fertility rates while poorer, more religious populations expand more rapidly. Pew Research Center's (2015, 5 y 9) projections suggest that although the religiously unaffiliated are increasing in absolute number, they will constitute a declining global share by 2050. The “unaffiliated” category is also internally heterogeneous, and reliable

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constitutions (Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas) still contain unenforceable but symbolically harmful clauses barring nonbelievers from office. From the Bible Belt to South Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, identifying as atheist can cost employment, marriage prospects, and social standing. Beyond these social penalties: apostasy and blasphemy laws in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan carry imprisonment, corporal punishment, or death; state constitutions in Malaysia and Indonesia disadvantage atheists in education, marriage, and citizenship; blasphemy statutes in Egypt, Indonesia, and Bangladesh are routinely used to target secular bloggers and humanists; and in Pakistan, India, and parts of Nigeria, accusations of blasphemy have provoked mob violence.

<sup>16</sup> And performing strongly on measures including quality of life, gender equality, low corruption, homicide, and incarceration.

data on atheists and agnostics remain limited (Pew Research Center 2015, 9, 19, 81 and 233). Secularization is not a universal trajectory but a geographically variable and demographically complex one.<sup>17</sup>

The contrast between Europe and the United States illustrates this variability. Europe represents the most sustained experience of religious decline, shaped by prosperity, education, and generational replacement (Brown 2001). Yet secularization theory has evolved from deterministic decline narratives toward context-sensitive accounts emphasizing institutional differentiation and qualitative transformation, complicated by immigration-driven religious diversification (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Davie 2023). Europe is a distinctive trajectory, not a universal template.<sup>18</sup>

The United States long appeared exceptional: a highly religious advanced industrial democracy whose constitutional separation of church and state sustains a competitive religious marketplace.<sup>19</sup> That exceptionalism is diminishing. The share of religiously unaffiliated Americans rose from 16% in 2007 to 29% by 2023–24, driven largely by religious switching (Pew Research Center 2025: 20, 88, 103), and though growth has plateaued since 2019 at roughly 28–29% (Pew Research Center 2025: 379), its diffusion across demographic groups suggests structural change rather than episodic shift. When religiosity is measured by belief rather than affiliation, generational decline renders the United States closer to Europe than once assumed (Voas and Chaves 2016).

Taken together, these patterns resist linear interpretation. Secularization is not an inevitable global endpoint but a contingent reconfiguration of belief, belonging, and institutional trust. Nonbelief strengthens atheist identification and weakens confidence in religious institutions, yet this association attenuates in more secular societies

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<sup>17</sup> Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 5 and 22) argue that cultural traditions—whether shaped by Protestantism, Confucianism, or communism—leave lasting imprints on a society’s worldview even as direct religious influence wanes, setting trajectories that continue to shape subsequent development.

<sup>18</sup> For one comparative analysis of current regional patterns, see Forster (2025) on relevant differences between Europe and Africa.

<sup>19</sup> In the Norris-Inglehart framework, American religious exceptionalism tracks its welfare exceptionalism: elevated existential insecurity relative to Europe. The U.S. combines high religiosity with high inequality and limited social provision: it ranks near the top of OECD countries on the Gini coefficient and reports the highest levels of prayer, while social spending as a share of GDP ranks near the bottom. In 2022, 37.9 million Americans lived in poverty (Shrider and Creamer 2023); in 2023, 26 million lacked health insurance (Keisler-Starkey and Bunch 2024).

(Kasselstrand 2019). The relationship among secularization (macro-level change), secularity (cultural condition), and irreligion (individual orientation) is dynamic rather than mechanistic.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The price of nonbelief

These empirical patterns describe only the external geography of belief. Beneath the demographic asymmetries lies a deeper structural question: how are nonbelievers positioned within the moral and political orders of their societies? The persistence of secular minorities exposes not only variations in faith but enduring inequalities of recognition: hierarchies of moral authority within frameworks that claim to uphold pluralism. Even where secularism thrives, atheism remains socially suspect and politically under-protected. What sustains these inequalities is not only social prejudice but a deeper inheritance: the persistence of theological reasoning within ostensibly secular frameworks of governance. Every faith-tradition, however universal its aspirations, depends on premises of revelation and authority particular to its own community of belief. Translated into law or politics, this produces exclusion not by accident but by design. No faith escapes its own sectarianism. The continued marginalization of atheism reflects a sectarian logic that modern political institutions have inherited, a legacy that still determines who is granted moral standing.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Warf (2025) documents significant regional variation alongside shared trajectories toward secularization. Europe is the most secularized region, with Sweden, the Czech Republic, and France reporting atheism rates of up to 85%, 55%, and 22% respectively. In the United States, the religiously unaffiliated grew from 16% of adults in 2007 to 29% in 2024, though only 5% identify explicitly as atheist. Australia (20%) and New Zealand (12.9%) show comparable levels. East Asia presents more complex patterns: roughly 19% of Japanese adults identify as atheist despite nearly half being irreligious, while in South Korea atheists constitute a majority (54.9%). Latin America shows a striking shift from 4% irreligious in 1996 to 16% in 2020, with higher concentrations in Uruguay (17.2%) and Chile ( $\approx 17\%$ ). These contrasts suggest secularization is shaped by both historical legacies — Enlightenment secularism, Confucian rationalism— and contemporary factors including modernization, education, and declining institutional religious authority.

<sup>21</sup> Discrimination likely varies across the nonreligious spectrum, with atheists attracting distinctive moral suspicion. In the United States, atheists rank among the least trusted minorities, frequently excluded from visions of the “ideal citizen” and regarded as deficient in shared moral commitments (Edgell et al. 2006) —perceived as threatening to social trust less through doctrinal disagreement than through their association with the rejection of theistic moral accountability (Edgell et al. 2016). Agnostics and the “spiritual but not religious” tend to encounter less stigma, their

The democratic ideal of pluralism presupposes that diverse worldviews can coexist under conditions of procedural fairness. In practice, however, the boundaries of pluralism are unevenly drawn, and atheism—despite its prevalence and philosophical coherence—is frequently excluded. Exclusion operates through five interrelated mechanisms across legal, institutional, and cultural domains.

- a) *Legal asymmetry*. Many jurisdictions provide explicit protection to religious identities under anti-discrimination and hate-speech law while omitting or ambiguously covering atheism and other nonreligious convictions. Even where legal systems expressly include nonreligious belief within protected categories, institutional application treats religion as the paradigmatic case, producing a structural asymmetry in which religion is recognized as a primary bearer of conscience claims while nonbelief is addressed derivatively. This pattern appears across multiple systems (McAdam 2018; Humanists International 2024; Pew Research Center 2024). International instruments—Article 18 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and Article 9 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*—formally protect freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, generally interpreted to encompass nonbelief, yet implementation frequently prioritizes the exercise of religion over freedom from religion. Where these rights conflict, institutional practice tends to favor established theistic norms, with consequences ranging from symbolic marginalization to social sanction or violence against those who openly reject religion.<sup>22</sup>

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positions read as epistemically open or culturally familiar rather than normatively oppositional, retaining symbolic proximity to religious language and notions of transcendence. This gradient suggests that public reactions are shaped not simply by absence of belief but by perceived rejection of religion's moral foundations. Future research disaggregating "the nonreligious" into distinct subgroups—and examining variation across institutional settings, regional cultures, and cohort effects—might determine whether atheists remain more stigmatized than other nonreligious persons.

<sup>22</sup> Comparative reporting and doctrinal analysis document this pattern across multiple legal systems. Humanists International (2024) and Pew Research Center (2024) identify jurisdictions where nonreligious persons face discrimination, blasphemy enforcement, or social hostility. Legal scholarship traces statutory and judicial asymmetries: incitement protections frequently enumerate religious groups while omitting nonreligious convictions (Danchin 2010; Carpenter 2024); state deference to established faiths constrains secular advocacy (Chen 2013; Stahnke 1999); and parental-rights doctrines sometimes permit religious inculcation with limited regard for a child's developing autonomy (Lee 2017). In the United States, recent Supreme Court

- b) *Evidence of Bias*. Bias appears across several domains: established faiths enjoy deference in proselytism policy that secular advocacy does not (McAdam 2018: 2); hate-speech provisions against “religious hatred” protect religious persons but not those targeted by religion; and parental rights to impose religious upbringing frequently override a child’s developing autonomy.
- c) *Symbolic Erasure*. Atheism is systematically absent from public narratives: interfaith initiatives and civic pluralism programs rarely include atheist voices, while educational curricula and public ceremonies center religious heritage as the cultural norm, casting atheism as deficiency rather than a positive moral or philosophical orientation.
- d) *Social stigma and concealment*. Legal and symbolic marginalization reinforce profound social stigma. In the United States, atheists remain the least accepted minority group, ranking below Muslims, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants (Edgell et al. 2006), with cultural linkages between religiosity, trustworthiness, and civic virtue positioning atheists as moral outsiders. Such stigma fosters concealment: while surveys indicate only 3–11% of Americans identify as atheists, indirect methods suggest a true prevalence of roughly 26%, with one-third concealing their disbelief even anonymously (Gervais and Najle 2018).<sup>23</sup>
- e) *Policy blind spots*. Pluralism frameworks —multifaith initiatives, diversity programs, workplace accommodation policies— define inclusion narrowly through inter-religious dialogue, systematically omitting secular perspectives. Workplace

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decisions expanding public religious expression and funding (Espinoza v. Montana and Kennedy v. Bremerton) illustrate judicial accommodation of religious exercise (US Supreme Court 2020 and 2022). These patterns demonstrate uneven application of conscience protections between religion and non-religion.

<sup>23</sup> Nonbelief in the United States entails continuous identity negotiation within moral hierarchies that equate religiosity with civic virtue. Atheists employ stigma-management strategies similar to those used by other concealable stigmatized groups: concealment and selective disclosure remain common adaptive responses to social identity threat (Mackey et al. 2021), particularly in socially conservative or rural Southern regions (Abbott and Santiago 2023). As with sexual minorities and persons with mental illness, concealment among atheists is associated with diminished psychological well-being, while disclosure correlates with authenticity and self-integration (Yeatts et al. 2022). Survey data reveal patterned variation: women, Republicans, and those raised religious are more likely to conceal their atheism, while participation in affirming atheist communities mitigates stigmatization effects (Frost et al. 2023).

accommodation policies are similarly drafted for explicitly “religious” needs while disregarding equivalent secular ethical commitments.

#### 4. Neutrality is not enough: the procedural turn

These legal and social asymmetries point to the need for a procedural conception of pluralism that treats atheism and other nonreligious worldviews as equally legitimate participants in public deliberation. The presumption of secular neutrality does little to correct structural bias, frequently masking implicit Christian norms and rendering atheism invisible and legally precarious. Moving beyond this asymmetry requires reexamining the normative architecture of pluralism itself.

A genuinely procedural account would extend the deliberative commitments of post-Rawlsian political theory. Rawls (1993) inaugurated the project of justifying principles of justice without metaphysical truth claims, but his reliance on “reasonable comprehensive doctrines” has been criticized for reproducing liberal-theistic assumptions about moral reasonableness. Habermas (2008) advances this critique by emphasizing communicative rationality as a shared medium through which both religious and nonreligious worldviews can articulate moral claims. Kymlicka (2000) grounds recognition in equal respect for minority cultures; by parity of reasoning, nonreligious orientations that function as comprehensive moral doctrines merit the same standing.

Yet procedural pluralism cannot rest on formal inclusion alone; it must reflexively examine who counts as a legitimate interlocutor. Benhabib (1996) insists that ideals of reciprocity and justification continually test these boundaries; Mouffe (2000) argues that democratic legitimacy arises not from metaphysical neutrality but from fair, institutionalized contestation among divergent worldviews; Taylor (1992) shows that formal neutrality often conceals cultural hierarchies that marginalize nonreligious moral vocabularies. The positive normative core of procedural pluralism lies not in abstract neutrality but in designing deliberative institutions that ensure equal participation among all comprehensive outlooks capable of moral reasoning, religious or otherwise.

In practice, this requires recognizing atheism as a valid mode of moral and civic agency: including nonreligious representation in intercultural councils, revising anti-discrimination statutes to cover

nonbelief explicitly, interpreting freedom of conscience to guarantee the right to reject belief without social or legal stigma, and framing atheism in educational and civic institutions not as a deficit but as a legitimate worldview capable of grounding ethical life.

Procedural fairness is achievable only when nonreligious perspectives are fully acknowledged as capable of contributing to public deliberation without translation into theological terms. Until then, pluralism remains structurally tilted toward belief, its promise of democratic inclusion unfulfilled.

## 5. Recognizing atheism as a worldview

Can political communities move beyond mere tolerance toward “deep equality” (Beaman 2017), where secular and religious worldviews enjoy equal legitimacy? Despite its intellectual lineage, atheism remains politically marginalized. Prevailing models of pluralism extend recognition to religious diversity but treat nonbelief as an absence rather than a substantive worldview. This asymmetry reflects deeper cultural norms that equate moral seriousness with theistic belief.

Liberal and post-secular frameworks alike —Rawls’s (1993) public reason,<sup>24</sup> Habermas’s (2006) postmetaphysical “translation proviso,”<sup>25</sup> Taylor’s (2007) politics of recognition<sup>26</sup>— ultimately reaffirm the epistemic primacy of the religious voice. Each assumes that moral depth flows naturally from faith-based sources while nonbelief appears derivative or deficient. The result is a pluralism that accommodates differences “among religions” but struggles to accommodate difference “from religion itself”.

Moving beyond this impasse requires recognizing nonbelief as a fully public mode of belonging: a worldview capable of grounding ethical and civic life on its own terms, without translation into theological idioms. Education, law, and public deliberation could then be reimagined to render nonreligious moral vocabularies publicly

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<sup>24</sup> A pluralistic democracy requires that political decisions be justified with reasons accessible to all reasonable citizens, permitting religious arguments in private discourse while insisting they be “translated” into secular terms in public deliberation.

<sup>25</sup> Religious citizens may engage in public discourse provided their arguments can be translated into secular, widely accessible terms.

<sup>26</sup> Liberal democracies should acknowledge cultural and religious identities and the epistemic and moral value of diverse perspectives.

intelligible and able to shape norms and policies directly. This post-theological pluralism would institutionalize conditions for civic conversation among interlocutors equally at home in a democratic public sphere.

By “social recognition” in a post-theological pluralism, I mean cultural acceptance—inclusion in public narratives, educational curricula, and civic institutions—as well as legal recognition: explicit protection in anti-discrimination law, inclusion in religious freedom frameworks, and equal standing in conscience decisions. The two are intertwined: legal recognition both reflects and reinforces social recognition.

## 6. The political stakes of recognizing atheism

On the basis of this procedural turn, consider the political stakes of extending social recognition to nonreligion across three dimensions:

- a) Recognition would test whether democratic pluralism can sustain disagreement over the very sources of moral obligation. The exclusion of atheism is a structural contradiction: a polity grounded in equal standing cannot coherently withhold recognition from those with nonreligious moral commitments.
- b) Recognition would expose the procedural heart of democracy: its commitment not to shared metaphysical truths but to the fairness of deliberation among incommensurable worldviews.
- c) Recognition would demonstrate that acknowledging atheism is not a concession to secularism but a realization of pluralism itself, affirming equal standing for all morally engaged worldviews. The state does not arbitrate metaphysical truth; it safeguards conditions for diverse citizens to coexist without domination. Freedom of conscience must protect not only the right to believe but the right not to believe, and to express that stance publicly without exclusion.

## 7. Atheism serves democracy when procedure replaces revelation

The inclusion of atheism compels reconsideration of what grounds legitimacy in a world where no moral authority can claim necessity. If morality does not require theism, its foundations need not be

transcendental. Evolutionary ethics and primatology suggest that moral sentiments arise from cooperation, reciprocity, and social interdependence rather than divine command (de Waal 2006, 2013). On this view, atheism can draw on naturalistic accounts of morality without appealing to transcendence.<sup>27</sup> The philosophical consequence is not relativism but institutional reorientation: legitimacy must shift from metaphysical foundations to justificatory procedures.

At stake is not the replacement of belief with nonbelief but the transformation of the public sphere from a stage for competing certainties into a forum for disciplined disagreement, free of subordination to any single interpretive authority.

This shift also clarifies why recognition matters. For Honneth (1996), recognition is a precondition of individual self-realization; denial constitutes social injury. Taylor (1992) similarly argues that misrecognition distorts identity and relegates persons to inferior civic status. Treating atheism not as a legitimate worldview but as deviance or moral deficiency symbolically subordinates its adherents. Analytically, atheism is better understood as a family of positions united by the absence of theistic belief than as a single positive doctrine, though for many it functions as a relatively comprehensive orientation toward meaning, ethics, and existence.<sup>28</sup>

Democratic legitimacy requires not merely the absence of persecution but public acknowledgment that nonbelief is a valid participant in collective self-rule —not an endorsement of atheism but a grant of normative standing within shared institutions of justification. Where theological premises are treated as presumptively authoritative, citizens who reject them bear asymmetrical justificatory burdens. Atheism exposes this asymmetry and thereby clarifies a structural truth:

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<sup>27</sup> See de Waal (2006 and 2013) on the evolutionary origins of morality in primates; Kitcher (2014) on ethics as a human achievement emerging from social cooperation; and Tomasello (2018) on shared intentionality and moral normativity as products of our species' natural evolution.

<sup>28</sup> A further distinction: weak (or negative) atheism denotes mere absence of belief in God, while strong (or positive) atheism affirms that no God exists. The former is a minimal epistemic posture; the latter advances a substantive thesis about reality, more clearly approximating a comprehensive worldview. Even so, this characterization remains empirical rather than stipulative. Examining the actual beliefs of nearly 1000 nonreligious participants across 10 countries using open-ended questions, van Mulukom et al. (2023) found that the most commonly expressed beliefs centered on science, humanism, critical skepticism, natural laws, equality, kindness, environmentalism, left-wing politics, and individualism —clustering into three broad worldviews: scientific, humanist, and nature-focused.

democratic legitimacy presupposes that no comprehensive doctrine, religious or secular, may claim priority in advance of public reasoning.

Deliberative democratic theory sharpens this point. Habermas (1996) argues that legitimate norms must be acceptable to all affected under conditions of undistorted communication. Although religious contributions are admissible in informal spheres, their authority in binding decision contexts depends on translation into generally accessible reasons. Atheism functions as a standing reminder of that translational requirement, representing those for whom appeals to revelation cannot serve as justificatory currency. Incorporating atheistic standpoints is thus part of sustaining the reciprocity conditions under which democratic will-formation remains legitimate: procedural democracy acknowledges atheism as a condition of its own possibility.

## 8. The sectarian ceiling and the procedural alternative

To summarize:

- a) *Contingency implies plurality.* No moral framework possesses inherent civic authority; incompatible worldviews are a permanent structural feature of moral life.
- b) *Plurality requires procedures.* Because no single worldview can claim epistemic privilege and foundational authority, shared norms must be established by *how* we deliberate together, not by *what* we believe to be ultimately true.
- c) *Recognition secures equal standing.* Fairness demands that all comprehensive doctrines capable of participating in reasoning—including atheistic ones—be treated as legitimate contributors to public justification.
- d) *Procedural fairness substitutes for necessity.* In the absence of necessary truths or uncontested foundations, legitimacy must rest on inclusive and reciprocal processes that prevent domination by tradition, majoritarian belief, or metaphysical privilege (Gregg 2003).

A procedural conception of legitimacy provides a vantage point for comparing theological and secular forms of universalism. The issue is not whether theology can articulate moral truths or contribute to public discourse. The issue is justificatory structure: under what conditions can claims to universal authority be regarded as binding in a pluralistic democracy (Gregg 1999)?

Theology in its revealed mode grounds normative authority in sources recognized as divinely disclosed —sacred texts, prophetic revelation, ecclesial tradition— interpretable through reason and subject to internal reform, yet ultimately dependent on prior recognition of revelation as binding. Their justificatory force is conditional on membership in, and assent to, a community of belief that acknowledges those sources as authoritative. Aquinas holds that some truths exceed human reason and are made known by divine revelation;<sup>29</sup> al-Ghazālī treats revelation as the criterion of reason;<sup>30</sup> Śāṅkara (1890) affirms the universality of Brahman only through Vedic authority.<sup>31</sup> In this structural sense, theological universalism is community-indexed: its authority is mediated through faith in particular revelations.

Many theological traditions nonetheless embrace fallibilism, pluralism, or public reason. Natural law traditions argue that certain moral truths are accessible to unaided reason; liberal Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic thinkers have defended democratic institutions and overlapping consensus. My point is not to deny these contributions but to note that when theology relies on revelation as the final criterion of truth, its authority remains internal to those who recognize that revelation.<sup>32</sup> Once translated into reasons accessible

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<sup>29</sup> “It was necessary for human salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides the philosophical sciences built up by human reason. For truth about God such as reason could discover would be known only by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors” (Aquinas 1888, I, q. 1, a. 1, ca. 1270).

<sup>30</sup> *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers”), al-Ghazali (1058–1111) systematically critiques Islamic philosophers —notably Al-Fārābī and Avicenna— targeting doctrines he views as incompatible with Islamic belief, including the pre-ternity of the world and the limitation of God’s knowledge of particulars, and affirming the primacy of divine revelation over philosophical reasoning.

<sup>31</sup> Advaita Vedānta, a classical school of Hindu philosophy systematized by Adi Śāṅkara (ca. 8th century CE), teaches that ultimate reality (Brahman) and the innermost self (Ātman) are identical: Brahman alone is real, the world (Māyā) is illusory, and the individual self is inseparable from the absolute.

<sup>32</sup> Whether theological reasoning can transcend its own particularity remains sharply contested. Liberal theorists including Rawls (1997) and Habermas (2006) regard this particularity as disqualifying: because theological claims are grounded in revelation and authority, they lack the universality required by public reason. From within theology, Gustafson (1983) identifies a parallel risk in the “sectarian temptation”: retreat from external critique that reduces theology to the self-description of a faith community. Yet defenders of tradition-constituted rationality (MacIntyre 1990; Milbank 1990; Cavanaugh 2009) invert this concern: theology’s embeddedness in revelation is not an epistemic defect but the condition of its intelligibility, and translating theological reasoning into secular terms effaces the very sources of meaning theology seeks to

independently of faith, the justificatory force derives not from revelation but from shared rational standards. Theology may contribute to public reason only insofar as it brackets its revelatory grounds.<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, science pursues universal validity through procedures open to any rational agent irrespective of prior metaphysical commitments —intersubjective testability through observation, replication, and revisability. Human rights discourse similarly seeks normative universality through reciprocal justification and contestation across traditions. Both are historically contingent and politically contested, yet their methodological commitments do not presuppose assent to a sacred source: science presupposes that empirical inquiry yields truths accessible to all rational beings; human rights presuppose equal moral standing recognizable through reason rather than revelation (Gregg 2012).

The distinction is not between faith and reason as psychological attitudes, nor between religious and secular persons as moral agents, but between two justificatory logics. In revealed theology, authority descends from a transcendent source recognized within a community of faith as binding; in democratic procedure, authority emerges from reciprocal justification among legally equal citizens. Even the most inclusive theology retains authoritative sources not subject to democratic revision. Democracy, by contrast, treats all claims—including moral and metaphysical ones—as contestable within ongoing deliberation.

This structural difference has political implications. Where public authority is justified by appeal to divine command or sacred text, citizens who do not recognize that source are excluded from full justificatory standing. This exclusion is epistemic because the justificatory currency is unavailable to those outside the interpretive

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preserve. Discussions of religious exclusivism in analytic philosophy (Plantinga 2000; Grube 2024) reinforce this point: any theology arising from a revealed horizon of truth inevitably entails boundaries between believer and unbeliever. Theological discourse remains irreducibly situated, its coherence dependent on the distinctions of inside and outside that liberal political philosophy seeks to transcend.

<sup>33</sup> Revelation is epistemically dependent on faith: claims such as *God intends X* or *Scripture commands Y* are compelling only to those who already accept the revealer as authoritative. It is also non-reproducible: because revelation emerges within specific historical, linguistic, and theological frameworks, those outside these traditions lack the interpretive context to access it as truth. Unlike discourse grounded in logical coherence, empirical support, or mutual intelligibility, revelation validates itself within faith independently of standards any rational agent can recognize. It is thus epistemically asymmetric, binding insiders through shared belief while lacking the discursive force to compel assent from those outside the faith.

community. The presence of citizens who reject theological premises makes visible the conditions under which authority can be shared: atheism demonstrates that no appeal to revelation can function as a sufficient ground of public legitimacy in a pluralistic order. Democratic authority must be negotiated within human discourse rather than derived from transcendent sanction.

To describe theology as sectarian is not to accuse it of intolerance or moral deficiency but to note that its authoritative sources are community-bound: binding for those who affirm them but not universally accessible as justificatory grounds. Procedural democracy requires that binding norms be justified in terms open to all who are subject to them. While theology may enrich moral reflection, motivate civic virtue, and contribute to public reasoning, insofar as its ultimate authority rests on revelation it cannot serve as a basis of democratic legitimacy. Procedural pluralism—not metaphysical unanimity—is the only framework within which diverse citizens, religious and nonreligious alike, can regard themselves as co-authors of the laws that bind them.

## Conclusion

The demand for atheism's recognition in democratic life is well framed within the architecture of political liberalism. On a Rawlsian account, a legitimate constitutional regime rests not on metaphysical truth but on principles justifiable to citizens regarded as free and equal despite their diverse reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Atheism is one such doctrine. It is not identical with political secularism, nor reducible to methodological naturalism, nor exhausted by agnosticism's suspension of judgment, but a substantive comprehensive view affirming the non-existence of God and seeking to ground normativity, meaning, and obligation without appeal to otherworldly transcendence. If liberal neutrality prohibits the state from affirming any comprehensive doctrine as authoritative, then privileging theistic worldviews—symbolically, institutionally, or legally—violates the reciprocity condition embedded in public reason.

Contemporary philosophy of religion reinforces this structural parity. Atheism is not mere negation but typically rests on articulated arguments: evidential critiques of theism, probabilistic reasoning about divine hiddenness, naturalistic accounts of religious belief, and moral arguments concerning gratuitous suffering. Whether these arguments ultimately succeed is not decisive politically. What matters

is that atheism participates in the shared practices of reason-giving and evidential assessment that structure modern epistemic life. To exclude it from public recognition while protecting religious conviction constitutes civic inequality incompatible with liberal fairness.

The deeper point is structural. Coercive laws must be defensible in terms that other reasonable citizens could in principle accept. The presence of citizens who reject theism renders theological premises unavailable as shared civic currency. Atheism does not threaten democratic legitimacy but clarifies its conditions by insisting that moral and political claims be articulated in terms accessible across comprehensive divides.

A parallel insight emerges from Habermasian discourse ethics. Legitimate norms depend on acceptability within processes of undistorted communication among affected participants. Although religious citizens may introduce faith-based reasons in informal public spheres, such reasons must ultimately be rendered into generally accessible language within formal decision-making contexts. Atheism intensifies this justificatory demand. By declining appeals to revelation or divine command, it embodies the standpoint of those who cannot regard theological premises as binding, ensuring that justificatory burdens are not distributed unevenly.

Atheism also contributes substantively to moral reflection. By detaching obligation from divine command, it foregrounds secular accounts of moral objectivity—constructivist, contractualist, consequentialist, and virtue-theoretic—that locate normativity in practical reason, human flourishing, or reciprocal justification. It encourages genealogical scrutiny of inherited moral concepts and situates ethical development within processes of social learning. Many atheistic frameworks defend intersubjective validity or moral realism, and the claim that morality conceptually requires theism is neither necessary nor uncontested.

Its contestability is itself a fact of reasonable pluralism.

Recognition of atheism follows as a requirement of equal civic standing. Freedom of conscience cannot coherently distinguish between protection for belief in God and protection for principled nonbelief. Such recognition entails not merely formal toleration but institutional inclusion: representation of nonreligious citizens within consultative bodies; anti-discrimination protections explicitly covering nonbelief; educational curricula presenting nonreligious doctrines alongside religious traditions; and interpretations of conscience that protect refusal to believe as securely as belief itself. The aim is not to

establish atheism as civic orthodoxy but to secure parity within the constitutional grammar of conscience.

The broader implication is that democratic authority is necessarily post-metaphysical. The coexistence of theism and atheism within a shared political order renders appeals to ultimate foundations politically incomplete. Legitimacy must instead arise from procedures of justification that neither presuppose nor exclude contested comprehensive doctrines.

A familiar objection holds that such procedural pluralism cannot sustain civic solidarity or reduces moral claims to mere negotiation. But procedural justification need not be normatively empty; it can be structured by substantive commitments to equality and reciprocity while remaining open to revision. The alternative—grounding public authority in disputed metaphysical truths—is unavailable in societies marked by enduring disagreement. The question is not whether democratic procedures embody values but whether those values can be justified without presupposing agreement on ultimate foundations.

The implications extend beyond atheism. Any comprehensive doctrine capable of participating in public reason and reciprocal justification warrants recognition in democratic deliberation—including minority religious traditions marginalized within historically dominant frameworks. The demand is structural: a commitment to procedural pluralism that resists both theological privilege and secular dogmatism.

Atheism's distinctly civic significance lies in contesting theological monopolies on moral justification, compelling democratic institutions to anchor authority in reciprocity and justificatory restraint. It functions not as democracy's adversary but as one of the conditions under which democratic legitimacy remains coherent under pluralism.

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# Atheism as a condition of procedural legitimacy in democratic community

El ateísmo como condición de legitimidad procedimental  
en la comunidad democrática

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**Summary:** Introduction. 1. Atheism as a structural condition of democratic legitimacy. 2. The uneven landscape of belief and nonbelief. 3. The price of nonbelief. 4. Neutrality is not enough: the procedural turn. 5. Recognizing atheism as a worldview. 6. The political stakes of recognizing atheism. 7. Atheism serves democracy when procedure replaces revelation. 8. The sectarian ceiling and the procedural alternative. Conclusion. References.

**Abstract:** Nonreligious persons —atheists, agnostics, and the unaffiliated— remain systematically marginalized within liberal democracies that profess commitment to pluralism. I show that such exclusion is not accidental but structurally embedded in pluralisms still defined by theological premises. Through a fact-sensitive, non-ideal methodology integrating political theory with social-scientific research, I document the legal asymmetries, social stigma, and symbolic erasure confronting nonbelievers, and argue that liberal neutrality is insufficient to secure genuine inclusion. In response, I develop a model of procedural pluralism treating atheism as the limiting case for democratic legitimacy. Drawing on the Rawlsian tradition of political liberalism, I show that atheism has functioned historically as a structural condition of modern secular institutions and contrast the community-indexed justificatory logic of revealed religion with the procedurally universal logic of democratic public reason. Only the latter can ground legitimate authority under conditions of deep moral and metaphysical disagreement. Recognizing atheism as a

comprehensive doctrine capable of grounding ethical life and participating in public reason is therefore a requirement of equal civic standing, and democratic authority must be post-metaphysical: legitimacy should arise from procedures of justification accessible to citizens regardless of their theological commitments.

**Keywords:** protection of religion, marginalization of atheism, procedural pluralism, democratic legitimacy, political liberalism

**Resumen:** Las personas no religiosas —ateas, agnósticas y no afiliadas— siguen estando sistemáticamente marginadas en democracias liberales que profesan un compromiso con el pluralismo. Sostengo que dicha exclusión no es accidental, sino que está estructuralmente arraigada en formas de pluralismo aún definidas por premisas teológicas. Mediante una metodología no ideal, sensible a los hechos, que integra la teoría política con la investigación en ciencias sociales, documento las asimetrías jurídicas, el estigma social y la invisibilización simbólica que enfrentan los no creyentes, y argumento que la neutralidad liberal es insuficiente para garantizar una inclusión genuina. En respuesta, desarrollo un modelo de pluralismo procedimental que trata el ateísmo como el caso límite de la legitimidad democrática. Apoyándome en la tradición rawlsiana del liberalismo político, muestro que el ateísmo ha funcionado históricamente como una condición estructural de las instituciones seculares modernas y contrapongo la lógica justificatoria, indexada a la comunidad, de la religión revelada con la lógica procedimentalmente universal de la razón pública democrática. Solo esta última puede fundamentar una autoridad legítima en condiciones de profundo desacuerdo moral y metafísico. Reconocer el ateísmo como una doctrina comprensiva capaz de fundamentar la vida ética y de participar en la razón pública es, por tanto, un requisito de igualdad cívica, y la autoridad democrática debe ser posmetafísica: la legitimidad debe surgir de procedimientos de justificación accesibles a la ciudadanía independientemente de sus compromisos teológicos.

**Palabras clave:** protección de la religión, marginación del ateísmo, pluralismo procedimental, legitimidad democrática, liberalismo político.

## Introduction

Imagine a global minority, numbering in the hundreds of millions, concentrated in the world's most powerful and prosperous nations—and systematically excluded from public dialogue, ranked as the least trustworthy group in society, and often driven to conceal their identity.<sup>1</sup> This is not unfamiliar persecution. It is a reminder that the exclusion of nonbelief belongs not to history's margins but to its recurring center: not incidental but constitutive of a pluralism still ordered by theology<sup>2</sup>—understood as the systematic articulation of divine authority and obligation, from the inner structure of faith to its institutional entanglements with state and law.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Empirical research across psychology, political science, and sociology documents the depth and pervasiveness of social exclusion faced by nonreligious persons in contemporary societies (Cragun et al. 2012). Anti-atheist prejudice operates as identity signaling: expressing distrust toward atheists affirms one's own religious belonging and moral respectability (Lambert et al. 2025)—one reason such prejudice persists even in ostensibly pluralist societies. The moralization of religiosity generates deconversion guilt that discourages individuals from leaving their religions even as secularization advances (Bounds et al. 2025). The political consequences are substantial: openly nonreligious candidates face significant electoral penalties, particularly among religious and conservative voters (Golebiowska 2024). This stigma also intersects with race: Black atheists are often perceived by coethnics as “less Black” and less trustworthy, revealing how atheism can trigger intragroup identity denial when religious belief is tied to communal belonging (Howard et al. 2023). Together, these findings depict a global minority whose members, even in liberal democracies, face enduring social exclusion, moral suspicion, and political marginalization—even as their numbers grow.

<sup>2</sup> The marginalization of atheists and other nonbelievers is not accidental but structurally embedded in pluralisms shaped by Christian legacies. Asad (1993) argues that the secular emerges not as religion's opposite but as its historical counterpart, molded by Protestant-inflected understandings of belief, conscience, and public life, which explains why secular pluralism excludes nonreligious individuals rather than remaining neutral. Lauwers (2022) provides empirical support, showing that ostensibly secular norms and institutions in Western Europe continue to favor Christians and subtly exclude nonbelievers. Blankholm (2025) similarly finds that atheists occupy a “religion-like” minority status within secular societies, experiencing exclusion precisely because pluralism presumes a theological baseline.

<sup>3</sup> I use “atheism” to designate a spectrum of nonreligious orientations across four domains. The first is “metaphysical”: atheism (denial of divine existence), agnosticism (divine existence is unknowable), and antitheism (principled opposition to theism). The second is “epistemic”: skepticism (privileging critical inquiry and evidentiary justification) and ignosticism (theological propositions lack coherent meaning). The third is “philosophical”: humanism (ethics centered on human flourishing), naturalism (reality consists solely of natural phenomena explicable without recourse to the supernatural), and materialism (explaining phenomena through nature and science). The fourth is “political”: secularism, understood as the institutional separation of religious and governmental authority.

Nonreligious persons —atheists, agnostics, and the unaffiliated—confront a structural asymmetry that persists when democratic inclusion remains tethered to belief. Liberal neutrality reaches its limit in societies that mistake faith for a precondition of moral standing. Legitimacy must be grounded not in conviction but in procedures of fairness accessible to all. The unbeliever is democracy’s unacknowledged test case.

The rise of the “nones” —those who decline affiliation with any organized religion— signals a profound shift in belief across Western democracies yet has not yielded commensurate political or social inclusion. Secularism admits of multiple meanings: for some, a naturalistic worldview that brackets the supernatural and regards religious ontologies as epistemically unwarranted; for others, the absence of religious identification and a waning sense that sacred forces shape human affairs. The normative question is whether a liberal democratic polity committed to value pluralism can claim genuine inclusivity while withholding equal civic standing from those who reject religious faith.

My approach is fact-sensitive, non-ideal, and critical, drawing on political theory to articulate principles of justice and legitimacy while engaging social-scientific research to substantiate empirical claims about the marginalization of nonreligious persons. The argument proceeds in eight steps: (1) establishing that atheism has been foundational to modern secular institutions; (2) surveying the contemporary global landscape of belief and nonbelief; (3) documenting the persistent marginalization of atheism within liberal democracies; (4) moving beyond state neutrality toward a model of procedural fairness that actively includes nonreligious worldviews; (5) showing that such inclusion enriches political community; (6) drawing out the democratic implications of recognizing nonreligion; (7) arguing that acknowledging atheism is a necessary condition for mature democracy, grounding legitimacy in procedural fairness rather than sectarian revelation; and (8) contrasting the justificatory logic of revealed religion with that of democratic public reason, arguing that only the latter can ground legitimate authority in a pluralistic society.

The argument draws on and extends the Rawlsian tradition of political liberalism (justifying political principles without appeal to comprehensive metaphysical doctrines), maintaining that its inadequate account of nonreligious worldviews makes a more robust procedural pluralism necessary.

My approach foregrounds atheism as normatively decisive, which requires distinguishing it from the broader, internally diverse category of nonreligion. Many who lack formal religious affiliation reject the atheist label, perceiving it as rhetorically combative or socially

stigmatized, preferring softer or more indeterminate descriptors (Lee 2015; Cotter 2015; Manning 2015). Survey research corroborates this: only a minority of the religiously unaffiliated explicitly identify as atheists, with many describing themselves as agnostic, “nothing in particular,” or spiritual but not religious (Pew Research Center 2019). Though nones tend to be younger, they share no unified worldview. What unites them is less a creed than an epistemic disposition privileging personal experience, critical reflection, and moral autonomy over inherited authority or revealed doctrine.

Nonetheless, I place analytic emphasis on atheism for conceptual rather than demographic reasons. Atheism represents the limiting case of nonreligion:<sup>4</sup> it most clearly brackets appeals to transcendent authority and thus most sharply illuminates the normative structure of public justification in pluralistic democracies. If democratic legitimacy requires that coercive laws be defensible in terms accessible to citizens who do not affirm revealed doctrine, the atheist standpoint provides a stringent test of procedural fairness. It clarifies what legitimacy demands under conditions of deep moral and metaphysical disagreement, while remaining attentive to the broader diversity of nonreligious life.

## 1. Atheism as a structural condition of democratic legitimacy

But the historical point is subordinate to the normative one. A political order that cannot justify itself to those who deny theological premises fails its own procedural standard. The question is whether democratic legitimacy remains intelligible in a religiously plural and increasingly nonreligious society.

Atheism is no alien intrusion into pluralism but one of its structural conditions: recognition that coexistence must be negotiated, not decreed. By rejecting claims to necessary or divinely grounded truth, atheism exposes the contingency of all moral authority, clearing the conceptual ground for a procedural politics where legitimacy rests on the fairness of

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<sup>4</sup> The “outer boundary” thesis does not privilege secularism as a metaphysical position. It identifies the atheist citizen—one who rejects transcendent warrant while accepting democratic reciprocity—as the limiting case that public justification must survive. This is procedural, not metaphysical: Rawlsian legitimacy requires reasons free and equal citizens may reasonably endorse (Rawls 1993); Habermasian legitimacy requires discursive acceptability across difference (Habermas 1996). A norm that cannot be justified without appeal to revelation fails both tests. Religious contributions to public discourse are not excluded, but their justificatory force must be translatable into generally accessible reasons.

deliberation among irreducibly diverse convictions (Gregg 2002).<sup>5</sup> These developments did not require universal atheism, but they did require that public institutions operate independently of theological necessity.

The decisive historical shift was not from religion to atheism but from revelation to justification. Political authority increasingly required reasons accessible to persons who did not share confessional premises. Once legitimacy was no longer grounded in divine command, it depended instead on consent, reciprocity, and procedural fairness. The architecture of liberal democracy thus assumed—whether explicitly or implicitly—the presence of citizens who would not affirm religious foundations. The claim that atheism is a recent or merely oppositional phenomenon obscures its structural role: as institutions came to rely on public justification, empirical inquiry, and civic equality, nonbelief was not merely tolerated but conceptually presupposed.

Modern science, human rights discourse, constitutionalism, and public education emerged within frameworks that progressively detached legitimacy from theological warrant.<sup>6</sup> The modern language of dignity and liberty rests not on divine conferment but on capacities attributed to persons as such,<sup>7</sup> presupposing applicability across

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<sup>5</sup> Proceduralism is of a piece with atheistic and secular-humanist thought that was central to the Enlightenment critique of revealed religion, legitimizing methodological naturalism and the independence of scientific authority. Materialists including Spinoza (1677), Diderot and d'Alembert (1751–1772), and d'Holbach (1770) displaced theological explanation with rational and empirical accounts, laying the groundwork for modern methods that stress verification and falsifiability over doctrinal conformity. Secular academies such as the Royal Society and the Académie des Sciences embodied these commitments and fostered the rise of modern science (Israel 2001; Gaukroger 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Debate persists over whether modern science secularized through gradual transformation of theological categories or decisive rupture with revelation. The continuity thesis emphasizes early modern science's entanglement with religious culture (Shapin 1996; Harrison 2015), arguing that Protestant theology cultivated empirical habits later secularized. Israel (2001) and Gaukroger (2006) counter that scientific autonomy required methodological naturalism—the categorical exclusion of supernatural explanation—and thus the rejection of theological authority as an epistemic veto. The gradualist evidence is real: Boyle understood experimentation as pious devotion, Bacon framed inquiry in the theological language of dominion over creation. But that Protestant thought encouraged empirical habits does not mean it could have authorized the exclusion of supernatural explanation. As the Galileo (1957) affair (1616–1633) illustrates, revelation continued to wield doctrinal veto power. Scientific independence required not accommodation but rejection of that authority.

<sup>7</sup> Atheism has also contributed to the development of human rights by relocating their normative grounding from divine authority to human capacities. Enlightenment thought, most explicitly in Kant (1784), articulates dignity as grounded in rational autonomy rather than theological status, thereby enabling a universalistic framework

confessions and to those without religious commitment, and rendering nonbelief not an anomaly within democratic modernity but one of its enabling conditions. Secular legal systems and public education similarly reflect the institutionalization of authority grounded in rational deliberation rather than ecclesiastical decree: justice becomes a human achievement sustained through public reasoning; education aims at critical autonomy rather than doctrinal conformity.<sup>8</sup> Early modern political thought detached sovereignty from divine right, grounding authority in consent and public reason.<sup>9</sup> Public education increasingly aimed at cultivating autonomy, civic equality, and scientific literacy rather than doctrinal submission.<sup>10</sup>

The broader cultural consequence was the expansion of permissible dissent. Once clerical authority lost its monopoly over truth claims, discursive space widened to include critique, skepticism, and explicit

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applicable across confessions and to the nonreligious. This shift is institutionally codified in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which treats human dignity as inherent while remaining agnostic about its metaphysical basis. Building on this trajectory, I reconstruct human rights as reflexive, socially generated norms, thereby re-legitimizing them under conditions of deep pluralism as self-authored, without recourse to shared metaphysical or theological foundations (Gregg 2016).

<sup>8</sup> By challenging religiously grounded authority and emphasizing reason, consent, and equality, Enlightenment thinkers laid the groundwork for modern legal systems in which justice rests on secular deliberation rather than theological precept. Locke (1690) grounded legitimate power in consent rather than divine sanction; Montesquieu (1748) argued that separation of powers guards against tyranny justified by religion; Voltaire (1763) denounced clerical domination of law and championed freedom of thought and speech; Rousseau (1762a) reconceived legitimacy through the social contract, privileging popular sovereignty over divine-right kingship; Hume (1758) grounded ethical judgment in empirical reasoning and human sentiment rather than theological moralism; Beccaria (1764) called for a secular and humane criminal justice system; Paine (1794) argued for civil liberties founded on reason rather than revelation. Together they redefined justice as a human achievement, anchored in rational deliberation, civic equality, and moral autonomy.

<sup>9</sup> The Enlightenment enduringly reoriented political legitimacy from revelation to reason. Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Kant, and Paine each advanced a vision of public authority emancipated from ecclesiastical control, replacing the rule of faith with procedural justification—offering not only a moral alternative to metaphysics but a political architecture capable of sustaining pluralism without metaphysical authority.

<sup>10</sup> The modern ideal of secular public education—cultivating civic virtue, critical thinking, and scientific literacy rather than religious indoctrination—draws on Locke (1693), who prioritized rational judgment over doctrinal submission; Rousseau (1762b), who emphasized civic responsibility and moral autonomy over religious obedience; Diderot (1751–1772), who promoted secular knowledge as the foundation of Enlightenment; Voltaire (1763), who denounced clerical control over schooling; and Kant (1803), who advocated education toward autonomous moral reasoning independent of ecclesiastical tutelage.

nonbelief,<sup>11</sup> normalized through secular print culture and public discourse under shared procedural constraints. The task is not to rehearse Enlightenment secularization but to clarify the conditions under which democratic legitimacy remains intelligible within a religiously plural and increasingly nonreligious society.

## 2. The uneven landscape of belief and nonbelief

Secularism denotes both a philosophical orientation and a political commitment to separating church and state, distinct from secularization, the social process through which religion loses public authority. Neither has unfolded uniformly: some societies experience sustained religious decline, others resurgent fundamentalisms. Yet despite the global growth of nonbelief,<sup>12</sup> secularism—and atheism in particular—remains socially and politically marginalized, a pattern historically continuous from antiquity—when Socrates was prosecuted for impiety and Protagoras and Anaxagoras censured for denying traditional gods<sup>13</sup>—through the Medieval and Modern Inquisitions<sup>14</sup> into modern stigma and discrimination.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> From Enlightenment pamphlets to contemporary media, atheist and secular voices have expanded the boundaries of permissible debate. Voltaire (1763), Diderot (1751–1772), d’Holbach (1770), Bayle (1697), and Wollstonecraft (1792) challenged censorship and clerical authority, forging the intellectual preconditions for secular democratic discourse grounded in reasoned dissent.

<sup>12</sup> Close to “a quarter of the US population are atheists” and “roughly 7% of the world self-identifying as atheist and over 16% as nonreligious” (Huft and Fields 2024: 281).

<sup>13</sup> In classical antiquity, disbelief was a civic transgression rather than a private matter of conscience. Religion and polity were mutually constitutive: to question the gods was to threaten the symbolic order sustaining the city’s moral and political life. In fifth— and fourth-century BCE Greece, Socrates was condemned for *asebeia*—impiety as subversion of civic piety—because his philosophical inquiry subjected divine authority to rational scrutiny; Protagoras and Anaxagoras faced similar accusations for advancing naturalistic explanations of cosmic order. In Rome, refusal to honor the state pantheon was treated as political sedition, piety functioning as the grammar of civic allegiance. Paradoxically, early Christians were themselves branded “atheists” for rejecting the Roman gods—underscoring that the charge referred not to metaphysical denial but to political deviance. The genealogy running from *asebeia* to heresy tracks the slow emergence of conscience as distinct from civic faith, anticipating the secular principle that epistemic autonomy is integral to political liberty.

<sup>14</sup> Beginning with the Medieval Inquisition (ca. 1184) in France and Italy, the institution evolved through the Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834), which extended ecclesiastical and royal authority across Spain and its American colonies; the Portuguese Inquisition (1536–1821), enforcing orthodoxy in Portugal and its overseas territories; and the Roman Inquisition (from 1542), which institutionalized doctrinal oversight across Catholic Europe.

<sup>15</sup> American and European polling consistently identifies atheists among the least-trusted groups in matters of morality and public leadership. Several U.S. state

The persistent prejudice equating disbelief with moral deficiency lacks empirical foundation. Secular worldviews sustain robust moral commitments grounded in reason, empathy, and shared civic norms. Zuckerman (2020) shows that highly secular societies such as Denmark and Sweden rank among the world's healthiest, safest, and most equitable.<sup>16</sup> Inglehart (2021, ix) likewise observes that Nordic countries, once shaped by Protestantism, now combine declining religiosity with universal health coverage, generous welfare provision, and an ethos of social solidarity.

At the aggregate level, secularization remains uneven. Data from the European Values Study and World Values Survey (1981–2020) indicate that the proportion of secular-oriented individuals doubled globally to 25.9% and tripled in Europe to 30.2% (Balazka 2020): significant growth, but regionally concentrated.

Structural factors help explain this distribution.

Norris and Inglehart (2011, 108, 147–148) argue that rising education, economic development, and welfare provision generate “existential security”, reducing reliance on religion. Insecurity heightens religious salience while secure conditions attenuate it. Lower-income populations in Europe and the United States are almost twice as religious as higher-income groups, while societies marked by persistent poverty or entrenched Islamic traditions exhibit comparatively stable religiosity.

These structural dynamics do not lead to demographic convergence. Wealthier, more secular societies tend toward lower fertility rates while poorer, more religious populations expand more rapidly. Pew Research Center's (2015, 5 y 9) projections suggest that although the religiously unaffiliated are increasing in absolute number, they will constitute a declining global share by 2050. The “unaffiliated” category is also internally heterogeneous, and reliable

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constitutions (Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Texas) still contain unenforceable but symbolically harmful clauses barring nonbelievers from office. From the Bible Belt to South Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, identifying as atheist can cost employment, marriage prospects, and social standing. Beyond these social penalties: apostasy and blasphemy laws in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan carry imprisonment, corporal punishment, or death; state constitutions in Malaysia and Indonesia disadvantage atheists in education, marriage, and citizenship; blasphemy statutes in Egypt, Indonesia, and Bangladesh are routinely used to target secular bloggers and humanists; and in Pakistan, India, and parts of Nigeria, accusations of blasphemy have provoked mob violence.

<sup>16</sup> And performing strongly on measures including quality of life, gender equality, low corruption, homicide, and incarceration.

data on atheists and agnostics remain limited (Pew Research Center 2015, 9, 19, 81 and 233). Secularization is not a universal trajectory but a geographically variable and demographically complex one.<sup>17</sup>

The contrast between Europe and the United States illustrates this variability. Europe represents the most sustained experience of religious decline, shaped by prosperity, education, and generational replacement (Brown 2001). Yet secularization theory has evolved from deterministic decline narratives toward context-sensitive accounts emphasizing institutional differentiation and qualitative transformation, complicated by immigration-driven religious diversification (Norris and Inglehart 2011; Davie 2023). Europe is a distinctive trajectory, not a universal template.<sup>18</sup>

The United States long appeared exceptional: a highly religious advanced industrial democracy whose constitutional separation of church and state sustains a competitive religious marketplace.<sup>19</sup> That exceptionalism is diminishing. The share of religiously unaffiliated Americans rose from 16% in 2007 to 29% by 2023–24, driven largely by religious switching (Pew Research Center 2025: 20, 88, 103), and though growth has plateaued since 2019 at roughly 28–29% (Pew Research Center 2025: 379), its diffusion across demographic groups suggests structural change rather than episodic shift. When religiosity is measured by belief rather than affiliation, generational decline renders the United States closer to Europe than once assumed (Voas and Chaves 2016).

Taken together, these patterns resist linear interpretation. Secularization is not an inevitable global endpoint but a contingent reconfiguration of belief, belonging, and institutional trust. Nonbelief strengthens atheist identification and weakens confidence in religious institutions, yet this association attenuates in more secular societies

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<sup>17</sup> Inglehart and Welzel (2005, 5 and 22) argue that cultural traditions—whether shaped by Protestantism, Confucianism, or communism—leave lasting imprints on a society’s worldview even as direct religious influence wanes, setting trajectories that continue to shape subsequent development.

<sup>18</sup> For one comparative analysis of current regional patterns, see Forster (2025) on relevant differences between Europe and Africa.

<sup>19</sup> In the Norris-Inglehart framework, American religious exceptionalism tracks its welfare exceptionalism: elevated existential insecurity relative to Europe. The U.S. combines high religiosity with high inequality and limited social provision: it ranks near the top of OECD countries on the Gini coefficient and reports the highest levels of prayer, while social spending as a share of GDP ranks near the bottom. In 2022, 37.9 million Americans lived in poverty (Shrider and Creamer 2023); in 2023, 26 million lacked health insurance (Keisler-Starkey and Bunch 2024).

(Kasselstrand 2019). The relationship among secularization (macro-level change), secularity (cultural condition), and irreligion (individual orientation) is dynamic rather than mechanistic.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The price of nonbelief

These empirical patterns describe only the external geography of belief. Beneath the demographic asymmetries lies a deeper structural question: how are nonbelievers positioned within the moral and political orders of their societies? The persistence of secular minorities exposes not only variations in faith but enduring inequalities of recognition: hierarchies of moral authority within frameworks that claim to uphold pluralism. Even where secularism thrives, atheism remains socially suspect and politically under-protected. What sustains these inequalities is not only social prejudice but a deeper inheritance: the persistence of theological reasoning within ostensibly secular frameworks of governance. Every faith-tradition, however universal its aspirations, depends on premises of revelation and authority particular to its own community of belief. Translated into law or politics, this produces exclusion not by accident but by design. No faith escapes its own sectarianism. The continued marginalization of atheism reflects a sectarian logic that modern political institutions have inherited, a legacy that still determines who is granted moral standing.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Warf (2025) documents significant regional variation alongside shared trajectories toward secularization. Europe is the most secularized region, with Sweden, the Czech Republic, and France reporting atheism rates of up to 85%, 55%, and 22% respectively. In the United States, the religiously unaffiliated grew from 16% of adults in 2007 to 29% in 2024, though only 5% identify explicitly as atheist. Australia (20%) and New Zealand (12.9%) show comparable levels. East Asia presents more complex patterns: roughly 19% of Japanese adults identify as atheist despite nearly half being irreligious, while in South Korea atheists constitute a majority (54.9%). Latin America shows a striking shift from 4% irreligious in 1996 to 16% in 2020, with higher concentrations in Uruguay (17.2%) and Chile ( $\approx$ 17%). These contrasts suggest secularization is shaped by both historical legacies —Enlightenment secularism, Confucian rationalism— and contemporary factors including modernization, education, and declining institutional religious authority.

<sup>21</sup> Discrimination likely varies across the nonreligious spectrum, with atheists attracting distinctive moral suspicion. In the United States, atheists rank among the least trusted minorities, frequently excluded from visions of the “ideal citizen” and regarded as deficient in shared moral commitments (Edgell et al. 2006) —perceived as threatening to social trust less through doctrinal disagreement than through their association with the rejection of theistic moral accountability (Edgell et al. 2016). Agnostics and the “spiritual but not religious” tend to encounter less stigma, their

The democratic ideal of pluralism presupposes that diverse worldviews can coexist under conditions of procedural fairness. In practice, however, the boundaries of pluralism are unevenly drawn, and atheism—despite its prevalence and philosophical coherence—is frequently excluded. Exclusion operates through five interrelated mechanisms across legal, institutional, and cultural domains.

- a) *Legal asymmetry*. Many jurisdictions provide explicit protection to religious identities under anti-discrimination and hate-speech law while omitting or ambiguously covering atheism and other nonreligious convictions. Even where legal systems expressly include nonreligious belief within protected categories, institutional application treats religion as the paradigmatic case, producing a structural asymmetry in which religion is recognized as a primary bearer of conscience claims while nonbelief is addressed derivatively. This pattern appears across multiple systems (McAdam 2018; Humanists International 2024; Pew Research Center 2024). International instruments—Article 18 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* and Article 9 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*—formally protect freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, generally interpreted to encompass nonbelief, yet implementation frequently prioritizes the exercise of religion over freedom from religion. Where these rights conflict, institutional practice tends to favor established theistic norms, with consequences ranging from symbolic marginalization to social sanction or violence against those who openly reject religion.<sup>22</sup>

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positions read as epistemically open or culturally familiar rather than normatively oppositional, retaining symbolic proximity to religious language and notions of transcendence. This gradient suggests that public reactions are shaped not simply by absence of belief but by perceived rejection of religion's moral foundations. Future research disaggregating "the nonreligious" into distinct subgroups—and examining variation across institutional settings, regional cultures, and cohort effects—might determine whether atheists remain more stigmatized than other nonreligious persons.

<sup>22</sup> Comparative reporting and doctrinal analysis document this pattern across multiple legal systems. Humanists International (2024) and Pew Research Center (2024) identify jurisdictions where nonreligious persons face discrimination, blasphemy enforcement, or social hostility. Legal scholarship traces statutory and judicial asymmetries: incitement protections frequently enumerate religious groups while omitting nonreligious convictions (Danchin 2010; Carpenter 2024); state deference to established faiths constrains secular advocacy (Chen 2013; Stahnke 1999); and parental-rights doctrines sometimes permit religious inculcation with limited regard for a child's developing autonomy (Lee 2017). In the United States, recent Supreme Court

- b) *Evidence of Bias*. Bias appears across several domains: established faiths enjoy deference in proselytism policy that secular advocacy does not (McAdam 2018: 2); hate-speech provisions against “religious hatred” protect religious persons but not those targeted by religion; and parental rights to impose religious upbringing frequently override a child’s developing autonomy.
- c) *Symbolic Erasure*. Atheism is systematically absent from public narratives: interfaith initiatives and civic pluralism programs rarely include atheist voices, while educational curricula and public ceremonies center religious heritage as the cultural norm, casting atheism as deficiency rather than a positive moral or philosophical orientation.
- d) *Social stigma and concealment*. Legal and symbolic marginalization reinforce profound social stigma. In the United States, atheists remain the least accepted minority group, ranking below Muslims, LGBTQ+ individuals, and immigrants (Edgell et al. 2006), with cultural linkages between religiosity, trustworthiness, and civic virtue positioning atheists as moral outsiders. Such stigma fosters concealment: while surveys indicate only 3–11% of Americans identify as atheists, indirect methods suggest a true prevalence of roughly 26%, with one-third concealing their disbelief even anonymously (Gervais and Najle 2018).<sup>23</sup>
- e) *Policy blind spots*. Pluralism frameworks —multifaith initiatives, diversity programs, workplace accommodation policies— define inclusion narrowly through inter-religious dialogue, systematically omitting secular perspectives. Workplace

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decisions expanding public religious expression and funding (Espinoza v. Montana and Kennedy v. Bremerton) illustrate judicial accommodation of religious exercise (US Supreme Court 2020 and 2022). These patterns demonstrate uneven application of conscience protections between religion and non-religion.

<sup>23</sup> Nonbelief in the United States entails continuous identity negotiation within moral hierarchies that equate religiosity with civic virtue. Atheists employ stigma-management strategies similar to those used by other concealable stigmatized groups: concealment and selective disclosure remain common adaptive responses to social identity threat (Mackey et al. 2021), particularly in socially conservative or rural Southern regions (Abbott and Santiago 2023). As with sexual minorities and persons with mental illness, concealment among atheists is associated with diminished psychological well-being, while disclosure correlates with authenticity and self-integration (Yeatts et al. 2022). Survey data reveal patterned variation: women, Republicans, and those raised religious are more likely to conceal their atheism, while participation in affirming atheist communities mitigates stigmatization effects (Frost et al. 2023).

accommodation policies are similarly drafted for explicitly “religious” needs while disregarding equivalent secular ethical commitments.

#### 4. Neutrality is not enough: the procedural turn

These legal and social asymmetries point to the need for a procedural conception of pluralism that treats atheism and other nonreligious worldviews as equally legitimate participants in public deliberation. The presumption of secular neutrality does little to correct structural bias, frequently masking implicit Christian norms and rendering atheism invisible and legally precarious. Moving beyond this asymmetry requires reexamining the normative architecture of pluralism itself.

A genuinely procedural account would extend the deliberative commitments of post-Rawlsian political theory. Rawls (1993) inaugurated the project of justifying principles of justice without metaphysical truth claims, but his reliance on “reasonable comprehensive doctrines” has been criticized for reproducing liberal-theistic assumptions about moral reasonableness. Habermas (2008) advances this critique by emphasizing communicative rationality as a shared medium through which both religious and nonreligious worldviews can articulate moral claims. Kymlicka (2000) grounds recognition in equal respect for minority cultures; by parity of reasoning, nonreligious orientations that function as comprehensive moral doctrines merit the same standing.

Yet procedural pluralism cannot rest on formal inclusion alone; it must reflexively examine who counts as a legitimate interlocutor. Benhabib (1996) insists that ideals of reciprocity and justification continually test these boundaries; Mouffe (2000) argues that democratic legitimacy arises not from metaphysical neutrality but from fair, institutionalized contestation among divergent worldviews; Taylor (1992) shows that formal neutrality often conceals cultural hierarchies that marginalize nonreligious moral vocabularies. The positive normative core of procedural pluralism lies not in abstract neutrality but in designing deliberative institutions that ensure equal participation among all comprehensive outlooks capable of moral reasoning, religious or otherwise.

In practice, this requires recognizing atheism as a valid mode of moral and civic agency: including nonreligious representation in intercultural councils, revising anti-discrimination statutes to cover

nonbelief explicitly, interpreting freedom of conscience to guarantee the right to reject belief without social or legal stigma, and framing atheism in educational and civic institutions not as a deficit but as a legitimate worldview capable of grounding ethical life.

Procedural fairness is achievable only when nonreligious perspectives are fully acknowledged as capable of contributing to public deliberation without translation into theological terms. Until then, pluralism remains structurally tilted toward belief, its promise of democratic inclusion unfulfilled.

## 5. Recognizing atheism as a worldview

Can political communities move beyond mere tolerance toward “deep equality” (Beaman 2017), where secular and religious worldviews enjoy equal legitimacy? Despite its intellectual lineage, atheism remains politically marginalized. Prevailing models of pluralism extend recognition to religious diversity but treat nonbelief as an absence rather than a substantive worldview. This asymmetry reflects deeper cultural norms that equate moral seriousness with theistic belief.

Liberal and post-secular frameworks alike —Rawls’s (1993) public reason,<sup>24</sup> Habermas’s (2006) postmetaphysical “translation proviso,”<sup>25</sup> Taylor’s (2007) politics of recognition<sup>26</sup>— ultimately reaffirm the epistemic primacy of the religious voice. Each assumes that moral depth flows naturally from faith-based sources while nonbelief appears derivative or deficient. The result is a pluralism that accommodates differences “among religions” but struggles to accommodate difference “from religion itself”.

Moving beyond this impasse requires recognizing nonbelief as a fully public mode of belonging: a worldview capable of grounding ethical and civic life on its own terms, without translation into theological idioms. Education, law, and public deliberation could then be reimagined to render nonreligious moral vocabularies publicly

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<sup>24</sup> A pluralistic democracy requires that political decisions be justified with reasons accessible to all reasonable citizens, permitting religious arguments in private discourse while insisting they be “translated” into secular terms in public deliberation.

<sup>25</sup> Religious citizens may engage in public discourse provided their arguments can be translated into secular, widely accessible terms.

<sup>26</sup> Liberal democracies should acknowledge cultural and religious identities and the epistemic and moral value of diverse perspectives.

intelligible and able to shape norms and policies directly. This post-theological pluralism would institutionalize conditions for civic conversation among interlocutors equally at home in a democratic public sphere.

By “social recognition” in a post-theological pluralism, I mean cultural acceptance—inclusion in public narratives, educational curricula, and civic institutions—as well as legal recognition: explicit protection in anti-discrimination law, inclusion in religious freedom frameworks, and equal standing in conscience decisions. The two are intertwined: legal recognition both reflects and reinforces social recognition.

## 6. The political stakes of recognizing atheism

On the basis of this procedural turn, consider the political stakes of extending social recognition to nonreligion across three dimensions:

- a) Recognition would test whether democratic pluralism can sustain disagreement over the very sources of moral obligation. The exclusion of atheism is a structural contradiction: a polity grounded in equal standing cannot coherently withhold recognition from those with nonreligious moral commitments.
- b) Recognition would expose the procedural heart of democracy: its commitment not to shared metaphysical truths but to the fairness of deliberation among incommensurable worldviews.
- c) Recognition would demonstrate that acknowledging atheism is not a concession to secularism but a realization of pluralism itself, affirming equal standing for all morally engaged worldviews. The state does not arbitrate metaphysical truth; it safeguards conditions for diverse citizens to coexist without domination. Freedom of conscience must protect not only the right to believe but the right not to believe, and to express that stance publicly without exclusion.

## 7. Atheism serves democracy when procedure replaces revelation

The inclusion of atheism compels reconsideration of what grounds legitimacy in a world where no moral authority can claim necessity. If morality does not require theism, its foundations need not be

transcendental. Evolutionary ethics and primatology suggest that moral sentiments arise from cooperation, reciprocity, and social interdependence rather than divine command (de Waal 2006, 2013). On this view, atheism can draw on naturalistic accounts of morality without appealing to transcendence.<sup>27</sup> The philosophical consequence is not relativism but institutional reorientation: legitimacy must shift from metaphysical foundations to justificatory procedures.

At stake is not the replacement of belief with nonbelief but the transformation of the public sphere from a stage for competing certainties into a forum for disciplined disagreement, free of subordination to any single interpretive authority.

This shift also clarifies why recognition matters. For Honneth (1996), recognition is a precondition of individual self-realization; denial constitutes social injury. Taylor (1992) similarly argues that misrecognition distorts identity and relegates persons to inferior civic status. Treating atheism not as a legitimate worldview but as deviance or moral deficiency symbolically subordinates its adherents. Analytically, atheism is better understood as a family of positions united by the absence of theistic belief than as a single positive doctrine, though for many it functions as a relatively comprehensive orientation toward meaning, ethics, and existence.<sup>28</sup>

Democratic legitimacy requires not merely the absence of persecution but public acknowledgment that nonbelief is a valid participant in collective self-rule —not an endorsement of atheism but a grant of normative standing within shared institutions of justification. Where theological premises are treated as presumptively authoritative, citizens who reject them bear asymmetrical justificatory burdens. Atheism exposes this asymmetry and thereby clarifies a structural truth:

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<sup>27</sup> See de Waal (2006 and 2013) on the evolutionary origins of morality in primates; Kitcher (2014) on ethics as a human achievement emerging from social cooperation; and Tomasello (2018) on shared intentionality and moral normativity as products of our species' natural evolution.

<sup>28</sup> A further distinction: weak (or negative) atheism denotes mere absence of belief in God, while strong (or positive) atheism affirms that no God exists. The former is a minimal epistemic posture; the latter advances a substantive thesis about reality, more clearly approximating a comprehensive worldview. Even so, this characterization remains empirical rather than stipulative. Examining the actual beliefs of nearly 1000 nonreligious participants across 10 countries using open-ended questions, van Mulukom et al. (2023) found that the most commonly expressed beliefs centered on science, humanism, critical skepticism, natural laws, equality, kindness, environmentalism, left-wing politics, and individualism —clustering into three broad worldviews: scientific, humanist, and nature-focused.

democratic legitimacy presupposes that no comprehensive doctrine, religious or secular, may claim priority in advance of public reasoning.

Deliberative democratic theory sharpens this point. Habermas (1996) argues that legitimate norms must be acceptable to all affected under conditions of undistorted communication. Although religious contributions are admissible in informal spheres, their authority in binding decision contexts depends on translation into generally accessible reasons. Atheism functions as a standing reminder of that translational requirement, representing those for whom appeals to revelation cannot serve as justificatory currency. Incorporating atheistic standpoints is thus part of sustaining the reciprocity conditions under which democratic will-formation remains legitimate: procedural democracy acknowledges atheism as a condition of its own possibility.

## 8. The sectarian ceiling and the procedural alternative

To summarize:

- a) *Contingency implies plurality.* No moral framework possesses inherent civic authority; incompatible worldviews are a permanent structural feature of moral life.
- b) *Plurality requires procedures.* Because no single worldview can claim epistemic privilege and foundational authority, shared norms must be established by *how* we deliberate together, not by *what* we believe to be ultimately true.
- c) *Recognition secures equal standing.* Fairness demands that all comprehensive doctrines capable of participating in reasoning—including atheistic ones—be treated as legitimate contributors to public justification.
- d) *Procedural fairness substitutes for necessity.* In the absence of necessary truths or uncontested foundations, legitimacy must rest on inclusive and reciprocal processes that prevent domination by tradition, majoritarian belief, or metaphysical privilege (Gregg 2003).

A procedural conception of legitimacy provides a vantage point for comparing theological and secular forms of universalism. The issue is not whether theology can articulate moral truths or contribute to public discourse. The issue is justificatory structure: under what conditions can claims to universal authority be regarded as binding in a pluralistic democracy (Gregg 1999)?

Theology in its revealed mode grounds normative authority in sources recognized as divinely disclosed —sacred texts, prophetic revelation, ecclesial tradition— interpretable through reason and subject to internal reform, yet ultimately dependent on prior recognition of revelation as binding. Their justificatory force is conditional on membership in, and assent to, a community of belief that acknowledges those sources as authoritative. Aquinas holds that some truths exceed human reason and are made known by divine revelation;<sup>29</sup> al-Ghazālī treats revelation as the criterion of reason;<sup>30</sup> Śāṅkara (1890) affirms the universality of Brahman only through Vedic authority.<sup>31</sup> In this structural sense, theological universalism is community-indexed: its authority is mediated through faith in particular revelations.

Many theological traditions nonetheless embrace fallibilism, pluralism, or public reason. Natural law traditions argue that certain moral truths are accessible to unaided reason; liberal Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Islamic thinkers have defended democratic institutions and overlapping consensus. My point is not to deny these contributions but to note that when theology relies on revelation as the final criterion of truth, its authority remains internal to those who recognize that revelation.<sup>32</sup> Once translated into reasons accessible

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<sup>29</sup> “It was necessary for human salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides the philosophical sciences built up by human reason. For truth about God such as reason could discover would be known only by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors” (Aquinas 1888, I, q. 1, a. 1, ca. 1270).

<sup>30</sup> *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (“The Incoherence of the Philosophers”), al-Ghazali (1058–1111) systematically critiques Islamic philosophers —notably Al-Fārābī and Avicenna— targeting doctrines he views as incompatible with Islamic belief, including the pre-ternity of the world and the limitation of God’s knowledge of particulars, and affirming the primacy of divine revelation over philosophical reasoning.

<sup>31</sup> Advaita Vedānta, a classical school of Hindu philosophy systematized by Adi Śāṅkara (ca. 8th century CE), teaches that ultimate reality (Brahman) and the innermost self (Ātman) are identical: Brahman alone is real, the world (Māyā) is illusory, and the individual self is inseparable from the absolute.

<sup>32</sup> Whether theological reasoning can transcend its own particularity remains sharply contested. Liberal theorists including Rawls (1997) and Habermas (2006) regard this particularity as disqualifying: because theological claims are grounded in revelation and authority, they lack the universality required by public reason. From within theology, Gustafson (1983) identifies a parallel risk in the “sectarian temptation”: retreat from external critique that reduces theology to the self-description of a faith community. Yet defenders of tradition-constituted rationality (MacIntyre 1990; Milbank 1990; Cavanaugh 2009) invert this concern: theology’s embeddedness in revelation is not an epistemic defect but the condition of its intelligibility, and translating theological reasoning into secular terms effaces the very sources of meaning theology seeks to

independently of faith, the justificatory force derives not from revelation but from shared rational standards. Theology may contribute to public reason only insofar as it brackets its revelatory grounds.<sup>33</sup>

By contrast, science pursues universal validity through procedures open to any rational agent irrespective of prior metaphysical commitments —intersubjective testability through observation, replication, and revisability. Human rights discourse similarly seeks normative universality through reciprocal justification and contestation across traditions. Both are historically contingent and politically contested, yet their methodological commitments do not presuppose assent to a sacred source: science presupposes that empirical inquiry yields truths accessible to all rational beings; human rights presuppose equal moral standing recognizable through reason rather than revelation (Gregg 2012).

The distinction is not between faith and reason as psychological attitudes, nor between religious and secular persons as moral agents, but between two justificatory logics. In revealed theology, authority descends from a transcendent source recognized within a community of faith as binding; in democratic procedure, authority emerges from reciprocal justification among legally equal citizens. Even the most inclusive theology retains authoritative sources not subject to democratic revision. Democracy, by contrast, treats all claims—including moral and metaphysical ones—as contestable within ongoing deliberation.

This structural difference has political implications. Where public authority is justified by appeal to divine command or sacred text, citizens who do not recognize that source are excluded from full justificatory standing. This exclusion is epistemic because the justificatory currency is unavailable to those outside the interpretive

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preserve. Discussions of religious exclusivism in analytic philosophy (Plantinga 2000; Grube 2024) reinforce this point: any theology arising from a revealed horizon of truth inevitably entails boundaries between believer and unbeliever. Theological discourse remains irreducibly situated, its coherence dependent on the distinctions of inside and outside that liberal political philosophy seeks to transcend.

<sup>33</sup> Revelation is epistemically dependent on faith: claims such as *God intends X* or *Scripture commands Y* are compelling only to those who already accept the revealer as authoritative. It is also non-reproducible: because revelation emerges within specific historical, linguistic, and theological frameworks, those outside these traditions lack the interpretive context to access it as truth. Unlike discourse grounded in logical coherence, empirical support, or mutual intelligibility, revelation validates itself within faith independently of standards any rational agent can recognize. It is thus epistemically asymmetric, binding insiders through shared belief while lacking the discursive force to compel assent from those outside the faith.

community. The presence of citizens who reject theological premises makes visible the conditions under which authority can be shared: atheism demonstrates that no appeal to revelation can function as a sufficient ground of public legitimacy in a pluralistic order. Democratic authority must be negotiated within human discourse rather than derived from transcendent sanction.

To describe theology as sectarian is not to accuse it of intolerance or moral deficiency but to note that its authoritative sources are community-bound: binding for those who affirm them but not universally accessible as justificatory grounds. Procedural democracy requires that binding norms be justified in terms open to all who are subject to them. While theology may enrich moral reflection, motivate civic virtue, and contribute to public reasoning, insofar as its ultimate authority rests on revelation it cannot serve as a basis of democratic legitimacy. Procedural pluralism—not metaphysical unanimity—is the only framework within which diverse citizens, religious and nonreligious alike, can regard themselves as co-authors of the laws that bind them.

## Conclusion

The demand for atheism's recognition in democratic life is well framed within the architecture of political liberalism. On a Rawlsian account, a legitimate constitutional regime rests not on metaphysical truth but on principles justifiable to citizens regarded as free and equal despite their diverse reasonable comprehensive doctrines. Atheism is one such doctrine. It is not identical with political secularism, nor reducible to methodological naturalism, nor exhausted by agnosticism's suspension of judgment, but a substantive comprehensive view affirming the non-existence of God and seeking to ground normativity, meaning, and obligation without appeal to otherworldly transcendence. If liberal neutrality prohibits the state from affirming any comprehensive doctrine as authoritative, then privileging theistic worldviews—symbolically, institutionally, or legally—violates the reciprocity condition embedded in public reason.

Contemporary philosophy of religion reinforces this structural parity. Atheism is not mere negation but typically rests on articulated arguments: evidential critiques of theism, probabilistic reasoning about divine hiddenness, naturalistic accounts of religious belief, and moral arguments concerning gratuitous suffering. Whether these arguments ultimately succeed is not decisive politically. What matters

is that atheism participates in the shared practices of reason-giving and evidential assessment that structure modern epistemic life. To exclude it from public recognition while protecting religious conviction constitutes civic inequality incompatible with liberal fairness.

The deeper point is structural. Coercive laws must be defensible in terms that other reasonable citizens could in principle accept. The presence of citizens who reject theism renders theological premises unavailable as shared civic currency. Atheism does not threaten democratic legitimacy but clarifies its conditions by insisting that moral and political claims be articulated in terms accessible across comprehensive divides.

A parallel insight emerges from Habermasian discourse ethics. Legitimate norms depend on acceptability within processes of undistorted communication among affected participants. Although religious citizens may introduce faith-based reasons in informal public spheres, such reasons must ultimately be rendered into generally accessible language within formal decision-making contexts. Atheism intensifies this justificatory demand. By declining appeals to revelation or divine command, it embodies the standpoint of those who cannot regard theological premises as binding, ensuring that justificatory burdens are not distributed unevenly.

Atheism also contributes substantively to moral reflection. By detaching obligation from divine command, it foregrounds secular accounts of moral objectivity—constructivist, contractualist, consequentialist, and virtue-theoretic—that locate normativity in practical reason, human flourishing, or reciprocal justification. It encourages genealogical scrutiny of inherited moral concepts and situates ethical development within processes of social learning. Many atheistic frameworks defend intersubjective validity or moral realism, and the claim that morality conceptually requires theism is neither necessary nor uncontested.

Its contestability is itself a fact of reasonable pluralism.

Recognition of atheism follows as a requirement of equal civic standing. Freedom of conscience cannot coherently distinguish between protection for belief in God and protection for principled nonbelief. Such recognition entails not merely formal toleration but institutional inclusion: representation of nonreligious citizens within consultative bodies; anti-discrimination protections explicitly covering nonbelief; educational curricula presenting nonreligious doctrines alongside religious traditions; and interpretations of conscience that protect refusal to believe as securely as belief itself. The aim is not to

establish atheism as civic orthodoxy but to secure parity within the constitutional grammar of conscience.

The broader implication is that democratic authority is necessarily post-metaphysical. The coexistence of theism and atheism within a shared political order renders appeals to ultimate foundations politically incomplete. Legitimacy must instead arise from procedures of justification that neither presuppose nor exclude contested comprehensive doctrines.

A familiar objection holds that such procedural pluralism cannot sustain civic solidarity or reduces moral claims to mere negotiation. But procedural justification need not be normatively empty; it can be structured by substantive commitments to equality and reciprocity while remaining open to revision. The alternative—grounding public authority in disputed metaphysical truths—is unavailable in societies marked by enduring disagreement. The question is not whether democratic procedures embody values but whether those values can be justified without presupposing agreement on ultimate foundations.

The implications extend beyond atheism. Any comprehensive doctrine capable of participating in public reason and reciprocal justification warrants recognition in democratic deliberation—including minority religious traditions marginalized within historically dominant frameworks. The demand is structural: a commitment to procedural pluralism that resists both theological privilege and secular dogmatism.

Atheism's distinctly civic significance lies in contesting theological monopolies on moral justification, compelling democratic institutions to anchor authority in reciprocity and justificatory restraint. It functions not as democracy's adversary but as one of the conditions under which democratic legitimacy remains coherent under pluralism.

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