

# *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*

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Volume 8

2012

Article 9

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## Abstract

It has been widely observed over the last several years that atheists are not well liked in the United States. Yet there is one group in the United States with whom atheists have not been compared: "cultists." Using data from four surveys of three different populations, this article compares attitudes toward atheists with attitudes toward people who are labeled as cultists. The data indicate that people who are labeled as cultists are viewed even more negatively than are atheists. Furthermore, whereas a number of variables predict attitudes toward atheists, none of the independent variables in the present study are statistically significant predictors of attitudes toward cultists, who were universally disliked across respondents.

In recent years, antipathy toward atheists has received widespread attention in the media (Davich 2010; Martyn 2009; Paulos 2006). In one widely cited study, Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) assert that atheists are the most disliked minority in the United States. They also note that Americans are less likely to vote for atheists than for members of any religious group for political office, including Muslims and Mormons, and are also less likely to vote for atheists than for members of other minority groups, such as gays/lesbians and African Americans. However, Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann's conclusion was limited by the groups their investigation considered, so their conclusion might be premature. Before it can be asserted confidently that atheists are the most disliked minority group in the United States, attitudes toward other groups that are arguably disliked must be examined.

In this article, we critically examine Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann's assertion by comparing attitudes toward atheists with attitudes toward another group of people who have been demonized in past decades: those labeled "cultists," that is, members of cults (Richardson 1993b). Previous research has not made this comparison, perhaps because atheists often identify as atheists (Bullivant 2008) whereas virtually no one identifies as a cultist (Barker 1986). Admittedly, this means that any comparison between atheists and cultists will not be a perfectly straightforward one. Nonetheless, we contend that comparing attitudes toward these groups can be sociologically illuminating and ought to be done to increase social scientists' understanding of the nature of prejudice driven by religious differences.

"Atheist" is a label that is applied to people who do not believe in any higher power or god (Bullivant 2008). There have been efforts in recent years to encourage atheists to "come out"—in a manner akin to the coming out of gays and lesbians—with the aim of increasing the public's familiarity and comfort with atheists (Silverman 2012). This effort is likely rooted in the social-psychological understanding of prejudice that was laid out in the mid-20th century when Gordon Allport (1954) theorized that contact with minority groups is one of the best ways to reduce prejudice toward members of the groups. In short, "atheist" is a label that has been reappropriated to some extent to be a badge of honor rather than a pejorative epithet (Bremmer 2006; Duke 2005), much like what occurred with the term *gay*.

The label "cultist" is not used in the same fashion. The term *cult* entered the English language as a technical term to distinguish among different types of religions (Richardson 1993b). Cults were understood to be theologically heterodox religions that usually had a charismatic founder and were contrasted with other religious organizational types, such as sects, churches, and denominations. However, the term was coopted by the anticult movement in the 1980s, and the meaning associated with it changed from the technical one used by social

scientists to a pejorative one. Richardson (1993b: 351) notes that the new definition is “a catch-all to refer to any new and unusual groups which had engendered animosity among some interest groups in the society.”

To our knowledge and that of other experts in the field, there is no religious group whose members consider themselves cultists (Barker 1986; Wright 1987, 2011). Although there are many religions that outsiders labeled as cults, the adherents of these religions do not consider the label appropriate. In fact, in every wave of the American Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin and Keysar 2008; Kosmin and Lachman 1994; Kosmin, Mayer, and Keysar 2001) as well as the Pew Religion Landscape Survey (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2008), totaling close to 250,000 respondents, not a single person has self-identified as a “cultist.”

Previous research suggests that the primary reason for this lack of self-identification with the label “cultist” is the negative connotation of the term *cult*. Olson (2006), for instance, clearly showed that there is a great deal of antipathy toward cults. The respondents to the survey that he analyzed held much more negative attitudes toward people joining “cults” than they did toward people joining “new religious movements” or “new Christian churches.” This is an important finding precisely because no specific religion was mentioned in the survey. The implication of Olson’s study and of others in this line of research (e.g., Pfeifer 1992; Richardson 1993b; van Driel and Richardson 1988; Woody 2009) is that the characteristics of a religion are less important in determining how people will evaluate that religion than are the labels applied to the religion. Such an implication is not surprising, given earlier sociological research on labeling. For example, Scheff (1963) found that among both professionals and laypeople, there was little agreement as to how to classify people as “mentally ill” but that labeling a person as “mentally ill” has a strong effect on how that person was perceived.

If someone, such as a member of the anticult movement (ACM), is able to successfully label a religion a cult, a process that involves a concerted effort of claims-making (Wright 2011), then that person can more easily turn public opinion against the members of the religion. Wright has shown labeling to be the primary strategy of ACM groups, particularly with regard to members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in Texas before the 2008 raid (Wright 2011) and members of the Branch Davidian religious group before the raid on their compound in Waco, Texas, in 1993 (Wright and Fagen 2011). In short, although many scholars have carefully thought through the way in which they use the words *cult* and *cultist* (e.g., Bainbridge 1997; Robbins and Zablocki 2001; Stark and Bainbridge 1985), it appears that many nonscholars use the words as pejorative labels in an effort to demean members of a religion that they dislike

(Bromley and Hadden 1993; Cragun and Phillips 2012; Richardson 1993b).<sup>1</sup> There are no clear rules for determining which religions are cults or who qualifies as a cultist. (For a discussion of this problem, see Barker 1986.)

A typical use of the word *cult* occurred during the 2012 Republican presidential primaries. Robert Jeffress is a conservative, Southern Baptist pastor and the head of the church where Texas governor Rick Perry attended worship services. Perry was at the time a candidate for the Republican nomination for President. In introducing Governor Perry at a speaking engagement, Pastor Jeffress said that Mormonism was not a Christian religion, but a cult; this was a thinly veiled effort to demean the Republican front-runner, Mitt Romney, who is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly called the Mormon Church). When pressed about why he considered Mormonism to be a cult, Pastor Jeffress argued that it was a theological cult and was different from his particular interpretation of Christianity (Oppel and Eckholm 2011). In other words, his identification of Mormonism as a cult did not draw on the definition that ACM activists have used most often: a socially isolated group that uses mind control or brainwashing to restrict the activities, beliefs, and behaviors of its members, often for the personal benefit of those who are running the group (West and Langone 1986). Given that the Mormon Church does not isolate its members, is not known to engage in mind control practices (in fact, several social scientists have debunked the concept of brainwashing by religious groups; see, e.g., Barker 1984; Richardson 1993a), and is not known for attempting to manipulate members for the benefit of those at the top of the organization, Pastor Jeffress had to resort to a different claim—that the Mormon Church holds nonevangelical Protestant views—to justify his use of the word *cult* to describe a religion that includes close to 1.4 percent of the U.S. population (Cragun and Phillips 2012; Phillips et al. 2011).

Pastor Jeffress was engaging in the same type of claims-making as that in which ACM activists engage: He was attempting to associate the word *cult* with the Mormon Church in the minds of the public in an effort to denigrate the religion. His aim was not difficult to discern, given his membership in a religion that competes with Mormonism in the religious marketplace and his obvious interest in having a member of his congregation elected to the highest position in the U.S. government (Cragun and Nielsen 2009).

In short, the term *atheist*, which many people who do not believe in God have embraced and reappropriated, can be contrasted with another term—*cultist*—

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<sup>1</sup> There is something of an exception to this usage when the term is used to describe objects or media that have cultlike followings, such as “cult movies” or “cult classics.” Yet even in that usage, the implication is that the object of admiration is desired by a subset of people who behave in a cultlike manner, meaning that they are obsessive about the object of admiration and act in odd or bizarre ways.

which today is generally used to demean members of a religion that one dislikes. This contrast raises a question: Whom do people dislike more, atheists or cultists? We hypothesize that people who are labeled as cultists will be viewed more negatively for two reasons. First, mainly because of ACM activism (Wright 2011) and the use of the label “cult” in the media (van Driel and Richardson 1988), people tend to use the term *cultist* either to describe members of religions that engage in disturbing or bizarre behaviors (Barker 1986) or to describe religious leaders or followers whom they personally dislike (Bromley and Hadden 1993; Cragun and Phillips 2012; Richardson 1993b). The second reason that we expect people labeled as cultists to be viewed more negatively than atheists is that although there is a general distrust of atheists (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011), certain groups—younger people, the less religious, and Democrats, for example—are considerably more likely to be accepting of atheists than are other groups (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011; Jones and Cox 2011; Swan and Heesacker 2012). At the other end of the spectrum are some groups—such as religious conservatives and fundamentalists—that are substantially less likely to be accepting of atheists (Galen et al. 2011; Swan and Heesacker 2012). By contrast, no groups are sympathetic to cultists; virtually everyone dislikes them, including people whom many others would consider to be cultists (though these individuals of course do not consider themselves to be in a cult). Therefore the first hypothesis for our study is the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Overall, survey respondents will hold more negative attitudes toward people who are labeled as cultists than toward atheists.

In addition to testing this straightforward hypothesis, we examine the factors that are associated with how positively or negatively people view each of these groups. There are specific groups of people who are more or less likely to accept atheists but no clear groups of people—other than those specifically involved in the ACM—who are more or less likely to accept cultists. Therefore the second hypothesis for this study is the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Respondents’ personal characteristics will not be statistically significantly associated with their attitudes toward people who are labeled as cultists, whereas several personal characteristics of respondents will be statistically significantly associated with their attitudes toward atheists.

## DATA

The primary limitation of our project is that it does not use nationally representative data. In an effort to compensate for that limitation, we analyze data from four separate surveys of three populations at two points in time. This approach does

not overcome the limitations that result from not having nationally representative data, but if all four populations hold similar views, that would be considerably more suggestive of Americans' overall opinions than would a single survey.

Two of the surveys were done at the University of Tampa, a midsized, urban private university that has close to 6,500 students. The primary purpose of the surveys was to investigate the influence that a campus chapel constructed in 2010 had on student religiosity (Russel, Holz, and Cragun 2010). However, the survey also included questions about prejudice toward various groups. Lists of all full-time students (undergraduate and graduate) were obtained from the registrar. Those lists were sorted alphabetically by the last name of the student. Each student was then assigned a number from 1 to 4, which indicated the order in which the students would be e-mailed an invitation to participate in the survey. The target sample size for both surveys was 400 students. Students were e-mailed an initial invitation and were sent one follow-up invitation about two weeks later if they had neither taken the survey nor opted out. E-mails were sent until the target sample size was reached, but the survey remained available for several more weeks in case additional students decided to take the survey. Students who participated in the survey were entered into a drawing for gift cards. The first survey (UT-2009) was done in 2009 and had 473 responses (response rate: 14.5 percent); the second (UT-2011) was done two years later and had 557 responses (response rate: 19.4 percent).

The third survey (EC-2009) was done in 2009 at Eckerd College, a small private college less than forty miles from the University of Tampa. This survey was conducted as part of the project examining the influence of the new chapel on students at the University of Tampa. The students at Eckerd College were surveyed to function as a control group; Eckerd College already had a chapel, while the University of Tampa was constructing a chapel. The survey methods were very similar, but because of the smaller student body at Eckerd College, the target sample size was 250 responses. Another wave of data was collected in 2011 for the larger project, but we use only the 2009 wave here because questions about prejudice were not included in the 2011 survey. The final sample size in the Eckerd College Survey was 297 (response rate: 52 percent).

Those first three surveys were designed to be representative, random samples of the student populations. The final survey (UT F&F-2011) employed different methods and targeted a nonstudent population. Students in the first author's Introduction to Sociology class were required to recruit ten to fifteen nonstudents to participate in an online survey. (We consider them "friends and family," or "F&F.") The data were then analyzed in class as part of a class project. The final sample size was 419 participants. Given the methods employed, it is impossible to calculate a response rate. Before data collection, approval for all four studies was obtained from the IRB at the University of Tampa.

Descriptive statistics for the four studies are presented in Table 1. The table illustrates that there are some differences in the populations under investigation; most notably, the nonstudent population is substantially older, more religious, more male, and more likely to be married. The differences among the three student surveys are small.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

	<b>UT-2009</b> <b>% or mean</b> <b>(SD)</b>	<b>UT-2011</b> <b>% or mean</b> <b>(SD)</b>	<b>EC-2009</b> <b>% or mean</b> <b>(SD)</b>	<b>UT F&amp;F-2011</b> <b>% or mean</b> <b>(SD)</b>
<i>N</i>	473	557	297	419
Age (mean)	21.3 (2.9)	21.1 (2.9)	21.0 (1.4)	41.8 (16.3)
(Non)religiosity scale (mean)	3.1 (0.9)	3.0 (0.9)	3.2 (0.8)	2.8 (0.8)
Sex				
Male	29.4	28.9	36.1	38.7
Female	70.6	71.1	61.7	61.3
Other/no answer			2.2	
Race/ethnicity				
Non-Hispanic white	74.7	73.8	85.6	84.2
Non-Hispanic black	5.6	5.9	2.5	1.0
Hispanic	8.7	12.9	2.2	10.5
Asian	2.4	2.5	0.7	0.5
Other/no answer	8.6	3.8	9.0	3.8
Marital status				
Single	52.0	55.7	52.3	25.1
Married	4.6	2.6	—	50.2
Dating	30.2	30.6	29.3	6.0
Cohabiting	10.1	7.3	12.8	5.8
Other/no answer	3.1	3.8	5.6	12.9
SES				
Poor	2.3	2.0	2.5	—
Working class	19.2	21.5	17.6	—
Middle class	67.0	64.8	65.8	—
Rich	5.7	4.6	9.7	—
Don't know/no answer	3.2	7.1	4.3	—

(continued)



	<b>UT-2009</b> % or mean (SD)	<b>UT-2011</b> % or mean (SD)	<b>EC-2009</b> % or mean (SD)	<b>UT F&amp;F-2011</b> % or mean (SD)
<b>Religion</b>				
Catholic	31.7	33.0	20.2	52.7
None	30.4	25.0	30.3	13.4
Protestant	25.4	31.9	14.5	23.0
Jewish	4.4	3.5	6.7	9.3
Other/no answer	8.1	6.6	28.3	1.6
<b>Political views</b>				
Democrat	34.3	—	37.8	32.9
Republican	22.2	—	11.9	32.2
Independent	41.5	—	27.3	32.7
Other/no answer	2.0	—	23.0	2.2
<b>Year in school</b>				
Freshman	22.0	25.6	21.5	—
Sophomore	23.7	22.1	24.2	—
Junior	28.5	25.2	21.9	—
Senior	22.8	26.5	25.9	—
Other/no answer	3.0	0.5	6.4	—
<b>(Father/self) educational attainment</b>				
No high school diploma	2.7	—	2.2	2.4
High school diploma, no college	20.1	—	10.1	16.7
Some college	19.7	—	23.5	22.4
Associate's degree	7.6	—	2.9	7.9
Bachelor's degree	24.3	—	26.4	31.0
Master's degree	12.9	—	17.0	13.8
PhD/Professional degree	8.6	—	16.6	3.3
Other/no answer	4.0	—	1.4	2.4

SD = standard deviation.

Note: The dashes indicate that data are not available or not applicable.

## *METHODS*

The majority of the questions in the student surveys measured the effects of the chapel on the students. However, a variety of demographic questions also were included. Participants in all four surveys were asked their biological sex (male or female), their year of birth (which was recoded to reflect their age at the time of the survey), their race/ethnicity (white, black, Hispanic, Asian, or other), their nationality and state of residence (data on these two variables are not presented in Table 1), and their marital or relationship status (single—never married, married, dating, cohabiting, or other). The student surveys asked about socioeconomic status (SES) and provided descriptions for four possibilities: poor (few resources or little wealth), working class (more resources than the poor but still few), middle class (substantial but not abundant, resources), and rich (abundant resources and wealth). Respondents chose their SES. The student surveys also asked for respondents' year in school (freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior). Three of the surveys (all except for UT-2011) included questions about participants' political views, allowing them to indicate whether they were Democrats, Republicans, or independents. The nonstudent survey asked participants for their highest level of education ("no high school diploma" through "PhD/professional degree," shown in Table 1); the student surveys asked for the respondents' parents' highest level of education (same response options, not shown in Table 1).

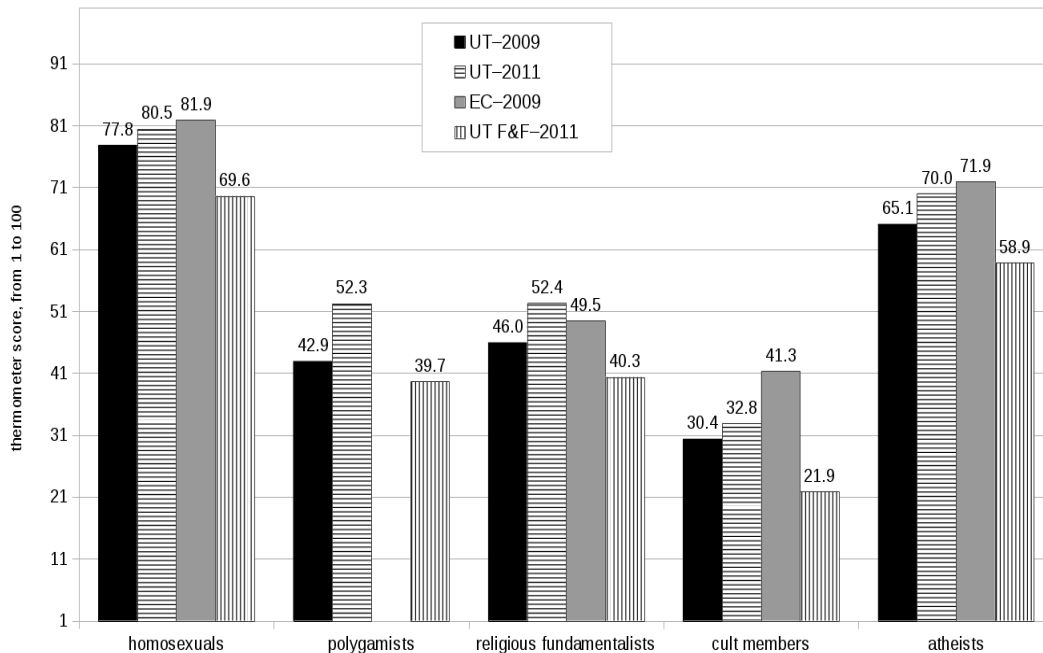
Religious affiliation was included in all four surveys (the choices are shown in Table 1). Also included was a scale measure of (non)religion (the Nonreligious–Nonspiritual Scale; see Hammer and Cragun 2011). The measure, which is the average of the seventeen items that make up the scale, ranges from 1 to 5. Higher values on this measure indicate lower levels of religiosity and spirituality.

Finally, the dependent variables in this analysis all derive from one broad question that asked participants to evaluate a variety of categories of people. The question employed a thermometer-scale technique that is often used in evaluating prejudicial attitudes toward groups (Alwin 1997; Wilcox, Sigelman, and Cook 1989). This survey item stated, "On a scale of 1 to 100, where 1 indicates you feel really cold towards people in that group and 100 indicates you feel really warm towards people in that group, indicate how warm or cold you feel toward each of the following groups." Participants were then presented with a large list of groups that included Muslims, Christians, Jews, Mormons, atheists, religious fundamentalists, cult members, Hispanics and Latinos, whites, blacks, Asians, polygamists, and homosexuals, among other groups. The focus of this article is on attitudes toward atheists and cultists, though we report a few of the other thermometer scores for illustrative purposes.

## RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the mean thermometer scores for attitudes toward five groups in each of the four surveys. We include three groups in addition to atheists and cultists: homosexuals, polygamists, and religious fundamentalists. They are included for two reasons. First, atheists are often compared to homosexuals, and attitudes toward homosexuals have been widely examined (Hammer et al. 2012; Jordan and Deluty 1998; Lewis et al. 2002). Therefore homosexuals are included to serve as a comparison with the other groups. At the far right of the figure are the average scores for atheists from each of the surveys. Atheists receive lower scores than homosexuals, and the difference in scores between atheists and homosexuals is statistically significant in each population. (For example, in UT-2009,  $t = 9.26$  and  $p < 0.001$ .)

**Figure 1: Mean Thermometer Scores for Attitudes Toward Homosexuals, Polygamists, Religious Fundamentalists, Cult Members, and Atheists**



Second, we include polygamists and religious fundamentalists in the analysis because these are groups whose members are often labeled as cultists by members of the ACM (Wright 2011). Polygamists are a better-defined group than are fundamentalists because polygamists are distinguished by a specific practice, but using the term *fundamentalists* still provides more information than simply calling

someone a cultist, because the word *fundamentalists* illuminates the nature of the beliefs of a religious group. Thus polygamists and religious fundamentalists are more tangible groups than are cultists because they are relatively specific groups of people, whereas cultists are a highly amorphous group. In Figure 1, note that polygamists and religious fundamentalists are both rated more highly than are cultists and that the differences are statistically significant in every population. (For example, in EC-2009, a comparison of attitudes toward religious fundamentalists with attitudes toward cultists yields  $t = 4.56$  and  $p < 0.001$ .) Additional evidence of the relationship between how people view cultists and how they view polygamists and religious fundamentalists can be observed in the moderately high correlation coefficients between their thermometer scores. In the UT-2011 data, the correlation coefficient between cultists and religious fundamentalists is  $r = 0.573$  ( $p < 0.001$ ); the correlation coefficient between polygamists and cultists is  $r = 0.486$  ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Finally, in every population, respondents rated cultists the lowest of all of the groups they were asked to evaluate. Mean scores for cultists range from 21.86 in the UT F&F-2011 survey to 41.3 in the EC-2009 survey. The difference in thermometer scores between atheists and cultists is statistically significant in every population (e.g., for UT-2011,  $t = 24.87$  and  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus the results support hypothesis 1: Overall, survey respondents hold more negative attitudes toward cultists than toward atheists.

Multiple regression can help to distinguish which personal characteristics of survey respondents predict dislike of the groups in question. Table 2 presents the results of five regression analyses for the UT-2009 study, with the thermometer scores for each of the five groups in Figure 1 regressed on the independent variables enumerated earlier (i.e., age, the Nonreligious–Nonspiritual Scale, sex, race, marital status, SES, religion, political party identification, year in college, mother’s and father’s educational attainment, and country of origin). We used dummy variables to recode the demographic variables that are nominal: sex (female = 1), race (white = 1), marital status (single, not dating = 1), religion (three variables: Catholic = 1, Protestant = 1, none = 1; the comparison group is all other religions), and country of origin (from the United States = 1). Although the measures of SES, political party identification, and mother’s and father’s education are technically ordinal, we entered them into the regression as “interval-like” variables: from low to high SES, from liberal to conservative political views, and from no high school diploma to a PhD or professional degree.

**Table 2: Thermometer Attitudinal Measures for the UT-2009 Study Regressed on Various Predictor Variables ( $N = 473$ )**

	Homosexuals		Polygamists		Religious Fundamentalists		Cult Members		Atheists	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Age	0.52	0.68	0.13	0.74	-0.36	0.72	-0.30	0.68	-0.55	0.64
(Non)religion scale	3.37	2.22	0.74	2.93	-4.50	2.94	-3.01	2.73	9.54***	2.54
Female	10.04**	3.68	-8.27^	4.82	10.81*	4.79	0.46	4.52	6.62	4.23
White	6.61	4.36	10.73**	5.67	12.02*	5.64	8.34	5.29	2.26	4.95
Single, not dating	4.59	3.25	11.29	4.25	4.31	4.25	4.37	3.96	5.55	3.72
SES	0.48	2.88	-0.53	3.73	-2.99	3.69	-6.82^	3.46	-3.04	3.27
Catholic	-11.60^	5.98	-1.87	7.95	7.08	7.71	-8.39	7.21	-7.67	6.95
Protestant	-4.07	6.29	2.12	8.25	9.98	8.15	-2.70	7.59	-6.85	7.29
None	-8.53	6.25	-4.12	8.40	-6.16	8.07	-9.00	7.65	-2.18	7.33
Political views	-4.68***	0.82	-3.12**	1.05	-1.44	1.06	-1.55	0.99	-1.97*	0.94
Year in college	-1.13	1.72	0.59	2.18	0.37	2.15	0.45	2.01	0.10	1.90
Father's Education	2.29*	1.00	3.69**	1.32	0.19	1.31	1.33	1.22	2.78*	1.15
Mother's Education	-2.74*	1.08	-1.39	1.43	-1.43	1.41	-2.04	1.33	-1.16	1.25
From the U.S.	15.70	6.41	-5.06	8.24	1.18	8.11	-2.37	7.66	14.89*	7.23
Constant	53.72**	20.01	38.12	24.15	62.71**	23.85	71.34**	22.43	38.20^	21.13
$R^2$		0.23		0.11		0.14		0.06		0.21

SE = standard error.

^  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

In the first column of numbers in Table 2, the dependent variable is the thermometer scores for attitudes toward homosexuals. Four variables are significant predictors of attitudes toward homosexuals: Women hold more positive attitudes toward homosexuals than do men ( $b = 10.04$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Students who lean Republican hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than do students who lean Democrat ( $b = -4.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Students with fathers who have higher educational attainment hold more positive attitudes toward homosexuals ( $b = 2.29$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), though students with mothers who have higher educational attainment, other things being equal, hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuals ( $b = -2.74$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). The variation in attitudes toward homosexuals that the model explains is modest ( $R^2 = 0.225$ ).

The second set of columns repeats the regression with attitudes toward polygamists as the dependent variable. Three variables were significantly related to attitudes toward polygamists: Being more politically conservative significantly predicts less positive attitudes toward polygamists ( $b = -3.12, p < 0.01$ ), whites hold significantly more positive attitudes toward polygamists than do nonwhites ( $b = 10.73, p < 0.01$ ), and students with fathers who have higher educational attainment hold significantly more positive attitudes toward polygamists ( $b = 3.69, p < 0.01$ ). The variables in the model explain a small amount of the variation in attitudes toward polygamists ( $R^2 = 0.113$ ). The next set of columns presents the results for religious fundamentalists. Just two variables are significant predictors for religious fundamentalists: Women hold more positive attitudes than do men ( $b = 10.81, p < 0.05$ ), and whites hold more positive attitudes than do nonwhites ( $b = 12.02, p < 0.05$ ). As is the case with attitudes toward polygamists, a small amount of the variation in attitudes toward religious fundamentalists is explained by these variables ( $R^2 = 0.137$ ).

For the two groups of primary interest, we find something interesting: No variables were significantly associated with attitudes toward cultists at  $p < 0.05$ . (One variable, SES, was significant at  $p < 0.10$ .) Furthermore, the amount of variation explained is the lowest of the five groups ( $R^2 = 0.055$ ). In contrast, four variables significantly predict attitudes toward atheists: Higher scores on the Nonreligious–Nonspiritual Scale are associated with more positive attitudes ( $b = 9.54, p < 0.001$ ), as is father's higher educational attainment ( $b = 2.78, p < 0.05$ ). In addition, students from the United States hold more positive attitudes toward atheists than do students from outside the United States ( $b = 14.89, p < 0.01$ ). Finally, an increase in political conservatism is significantly associated with more negative attitudes toward atheists ( $b = -1.97, p < 0.05$ ). A modest amount of the variation in attitudes toward atheists is explained by the variables in the model ( $R^2 = 0.212$ ). Therefore the results support hypothesis 2: Respondents' personal characteristics are not statistically significantly associated with their attitudes toward cultists, whereas several personal characteristics of respondents are statistically significantly associated with their attitudes toward atheists.

## *DISCUSSION*

We hypothesized at the beginning of this article that survey respondents overall would hold more negative attitudes toward people labeled as cultists than they would toward atheists, and we did so on the basis of two factors. First, the word *cult* has been coopted by ACM activists and the media to describe any religious group that is believed to engage in bizarre behavior; therefore this label serves almost exclusively as a pejorative one (Barker 1986). Second, there are several groups of Americans who are more accepting of atheists than is the "average"

American (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011; Jones and Cox 2011; Swan and Heesacker 2012). The present analysis supports our first hypothesis with data from four separate surveys of three distinct populations. In all four surveys, respondents rated cultists more negatively than they rated atheists. Therefore we can answer the question of whom survey respondents dislike more: They dislike cultists more.

However, as we noted early in this article, some people label the members of other groups as cultists, but no people consider themselves to be cultists. Figure 1, which shows how attitudes toward cultists differ from attitudes toward more easily defined groups of individuals (including polygamists and religious fundamentalists), reveals less overall prejudice toward the members of more easily defined groups than toward cultists. This may also support the assertion that labeling someone a cultist can be an effort to associate him or her with all the bizarre and strange things that have occurred in known cults (Bromley and Hadden 1993; Cragun and Phillips 2012; Richardson 1993b).

We also hypothesized that there would be specific groups of people who hold significantly more positive or negative attitudes toward atheists and that no group would hold significantly more positive or negative attitudes toward cultists. The regression analysis supported this hypothesis. Whereas there are clear predictors of prejudice toward atheists—being more religious, having a less educated father, leaning Republican, and not being from the United States—there were no significant predictors of prejudice toward cultists in our data. Furthermore, the variables in the model explain very little of the variance in attitudes toward cultists, which suggests that “cultists” tend to be disliked by everyone, not just by specific groups.

Our data suggest that previous studies’ assertions that atheists are the most disliked group in the United States were premature, given the relatively small number of comparison groups they examined. Our data reveal that cultists are more disliked than atheists. However, atheists are still among the most hated groups in the United States who actually identify with their label. Furthermore, atheists remain disliked despite efforts to improve attitudes toward them (e.g., Richard Dawkins’ “The OUT Campaign”<sup>2</sup>). There is also a practical consequence for atheists: Because they self-identify with a denigrated label, they can be expected to be aware of the antipathy that many people hold toward them. People who belong to alleged cults, by contrast, are likely to feel such antipathy only when they are publicly labeled as cultists. In addition, the present study provides yet more evidence of the power of labeling. Even though atheists are an identifiable group whereas cultists are not, both *atheist* and *cultist* are terms that no doubt have considerable power as labels.

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.outcampaign.org](http://www.outcampaign.org).

### LIMITATIONS

The primary limitation of our study is that the survey data are not representative of Americans. Three of our four samples were of college students (UT-2009, UT-2011, and EC-2009). The fourth sample is of friends and relatives of college students (UT F&F-2011). Although this fourth group is more representative of the U.S. population, because of its higher average age and other characteristics, the actual sampling frame is unknown. Our results must be interpreted in light of these limitations. However, our study does do something that few other studies do: It examines results across varied populations. The fact that we found similar results in four surveys of three populations suggests that our findings are not likely to be due to chance or a specific population. Furthermore, it is not unreasonable to anticipate that similar differences in attitudes exist among the larger U.S. population, although that claim requires verification with a nationally representative sample of Americans.

Another possible limitation of our study concerns respondents' basis for evaluating the various target groups. It is possible that our respondents were thinking of individual people when they were evaluating "atheists" but were thinking about institutions or notorious groups when they were evaluating "members of cults" (i.e., cultists). In other words, people might have been thinking of Richard Dawkins when evaluating atheists and thinking about the Peoples Temple, the Manson Family, or the Unification Church when evaluating members of cults. We tried to avoid this problem by specifically using the phrase "members of cults" as the target in our thermometer scales. However, if people were thinking about cults rather than cultists when evaluating this group, that does not undermine our findings but adds another layer of support to them. If respondents were thinking about institutional cults, this suggests that the efforts of the ACM to turn the term *cult* into a pejorative have also succeeded in turning *cultist* and *members of cults* into pejoratives as well.

Closely related to the limitation just mentioned is the fact that, as was noted earlier, our comparison of atheists and cultists is a comparison of a relatively tangible group of people (atheists) with a highly amorphous group (cultists). Despite this additional limitation, this article sheds light on how people view atheists and how they view members of groups that they believe to be cults.

### CONCLUSION

In spite of the limitations of our study, we believe that it provides important insights into prejudice in the United States today. It is true that atheists are not widely liked and are liked less than most other marginalized groups of people. However, there is at least one group—people who are labeled as cultists—who are



liked even less than atheists, although it appears that no one self-identifies as a cultist. A number of variables predicted attitudes toward atheists, whereas no variables were statistically significant predictors of attitudes toward those labeled as cultists.

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