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May 24, 2012: What Is the Right Term for Nonmembers of Organized Religion?

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Title: What Is the Right Term for Nonmembers of Organized Religion?

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5/24/2012—Rachel Ozanne has written an interesting response in Religion Dispatches today entitled “Heretics” or “Atheists”? that responds to an earlier piece in RD by Kate Blanchard, Coming Out as a Heretic. And, although strangely not mentioned, Ozanne is also responding to Ross Douthat’s new book, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics. It seems that as the phenomenon of nonmembership in organized religion has grown, especially among the young, so that the “nones” have become a significant group in America (12%? 15%? More? Less?) the question has begun to be raised, “who are we?” Or, in Douthat’s case, “Who Are They”. The issue comes up in law, too. There, the question is often about religious exemptions from generally applicable laws. That is the fight going on right now concerning the requirement of coverage of contraception by employers that a number of Catholic institutions are challenging in court. In that instance, the question is whether a religious exemption should be granted. But when such exemptions are granted, the issue becomes, who is covered by them? Who gets to claim that they have “religious” objections to vaccination for their children? Pennsylvania has come up with a conscience claim on that front to open up vaccination objections to the nonformally religious. Others have suggested that maybe the Free Exercise of Religion Clause in the Constitution should be understood as a free exercise of conscience clause to change the debate over “religious liberty” that is going on right now. Partly, this discussion of terms concerns the closeness of people to the historical religious traditions. I wrote Hallowed Secularism, rejecting the term atheist, because I felt that nonbelief could still reside in the neighborhood of the religious tradition, even the monotheistic tradition. Others adopt the term atheist clearly to break with that tradition. Partly, the debate over terms—it is not really a debate—concerns the nature of reality. Some nonmembers of the organized religions are still supernaturalists in a rather traditional sense. Surveys show that some of the nones believe in heaven or angels or have communicated with the dead. But among the non-supernaturalists—those who can say “this world/reality is all there is,” there is still a debate about what that means. Or, as I put it, This world is all there is, but there is more to this world than meets the eye. Now, that position fits some naturalist religions. It contests materialism of a reductive kind. And it does not sound atheistic, even though it breaks with the personal, supernatural God.