

# Genus Unbelief, Species Atheism: The Case for and Against Unbelief as a Master Concept for Non-Religion

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**Abstract:** *Recent initiatives by Stein, Flynn, Conrad, and others have promoted ‘unbelief’ as a replacement, an ‘umbrella term,’ for concepts like atheism, secularism, and irreligion. In this essay I show that unbelief as it is currently construed cannot serve this function: it is simultaneously too broad (embracing not only irreligion but heterodox religious belief) and too narrow (focusing on religious belief to the exclusion of other types of belief), and it commits a taxonomic error of equating unbelief with categories above and below its level. However, I also argue that, once reformed and disciplined, unbelief is a valuable and essential tool, and I provide some resources and models for a future Unbelief Studies in the Credition Research Project and the literature on agnotology, as well as ethnographical material questioning the cross-cultural applicability of belief and unbelief. Finally, I charge Unbelief Studies with the mission not only to analyze belief but to criticize and ultimately banish it as a bad mental and linguistic habit that perpetuates mistakes and leaves individuals vulnerable to further faults while eroding social trust and facticity itself.*

**Keywords:** Atheism, Belief, Credition, Religion, Unbelief

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There has recently been a campaign for the term “unbelief” as not only an analytical category but *the* analytical category for the study of “the decline of religion.”<sup>1</sup> Like Nickolas Conrad, who most recently advocated the term, Tom Flynn’s 2007 *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* finds “atheism” too “rigid” and “political” to suffice, and both take inspiration from Gordon Stein’s previous incarnation of *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, which posited, thus,

In the English language about the closest synonym for *unbelief*, as it is being used here, is heterodoxy. That word, in turn, can be said to mean

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad, “An Argument for Unbelief,” 7.

‘not holding orthodox beliefs or traditional opinions’— on religious matters, in our context....This is the history of heresy, blasphemy, rejection of belief, atheism, agnosticism, humanism, and rationalism. In many respects, it is also the history of the intellectual progress of the human race.<sup>2</sup>

All three, and presumably other proponents of the term, promote it as inclusive and flexible—an umbrella term, Conrad calls it—and as untainted by atheist activism and identity politics. Whether the subjects of study are atheists or agnostics, humanists or deists, or apparently heretics and innovators, Flynn opines, “They’re all unbelievers.”<sup>3</sup>

There certainly is a lot of terminological confusion and disagreement in the field of secularism and non-religion, and we should welcome all—well, almost all—attempts to clarify and settle the differences and disputes. However, in this article I will position myself against unbelief as it is formulated by the scholars above; that is, unbelief is not a substitute for research on atheism, most assuredly not an equivalent for atheism or even for irreligion, and emphatically not a synonym for heterodoxy. I will, nevertheless, defend the virtue of unbelief as an analytical tool properly conceived, establishing some prolegomena to any future Unbelief Studies. Along the way I will argue that atheism is a type, a subcategory, of unbelief that still merits examination in its own right; that unbelief is not limited to religion; and that unbelief is the correct stance to take in response to all belief, belief being a bankrupt and bankrupting habit of mind to be distrusted if not discarded altogether.

### **The Case Against Unbelief**

The problem with unbelief as construed by Stein, Flynn, and Conrad rests in the very quality that establishes its value for them, namely, its broadness; added to this are the implications that they impute to atheism, which perhaps describe how some atheists understand it, and themselves, but are not inherent in the concept itself. To take the former objection first, Conrad asserts that unbelief “exists on a spectrum” that covers the extensive ground of “the supernatural or intangible beliefs in things like progress, or unverifiable phenomena (spirituality, aliens, ghosts, spirits, ancestors, etc.).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stein, *The Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, xv.

<sup>3</sup> Flynn, *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad, “An Argument for Unbelief,” 2.

neologism without the tortured history of atheism, secularism, or indeed unbelief, which is hardly as pristine as Conrad and Flynn suppose.<sup>57</sup> The term was *discredism*, from the same root *credere* as in Angel's credition; the prefix *dis-*, as opposed to *un-*, has the advantage of connoting action—to part with, to separate from, to exclude or expel. Discredism suggests not just the passive or indifferent absence of belief but an active, purposeful, and principled *dismissal* and *discarding* of belief, a *disapproval* of the entire business of believing and a decisive *dismantling* of the power of belief.

Discredism might serve better as the umbrella term that Conrad, Flynn, and Stein seek, since it is mercifully free of historical baggage and emphasizes the *cred-* root that features in many belief-related words. Sadly, it still suffers as a derivative term, like *unbelief*, *atheism*, and *irreligion*, but so far no one has imagined a non-derivative option. Either way, a fully-realized project of unbelief/discredism puts atheism, secularism, irreligion, and other such terms in their proper place without invalidating any of them; recognizes its own place in the grand scheme of ideas (not limited to religious unbelief or certainly to Christian unbelief but not including heterodox religious belief which remains belief); and, insofar as individual practitioners choose, contributes to clarity of human thought by stressing the perils of belief in any guise.

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<sup>57</sup> Eller, *Atheism Advanced*.

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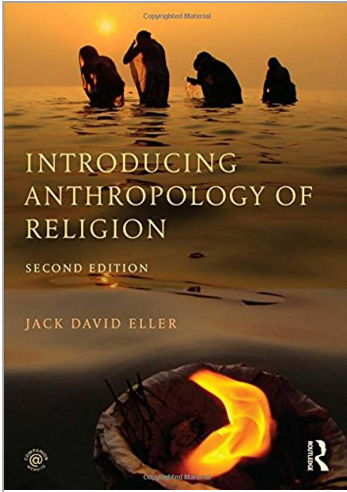
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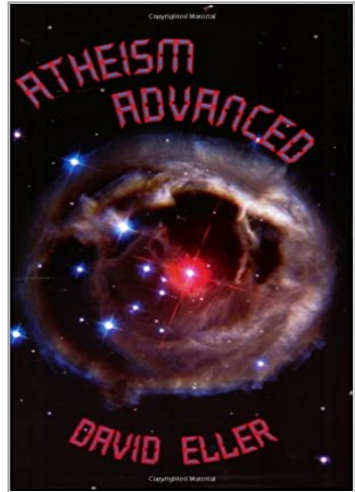
[Jack David Eller](#) holds a PhD in anthropology and has conducted fieldwork on religion and religious change among Australian Aboriginals. His other areas of interest include ethnic/religious violence, and atheism/secularism, and he is the author of a number of books on cultural anthropology, anthropology of religion, psychological anthropology, and atheism/secularism.

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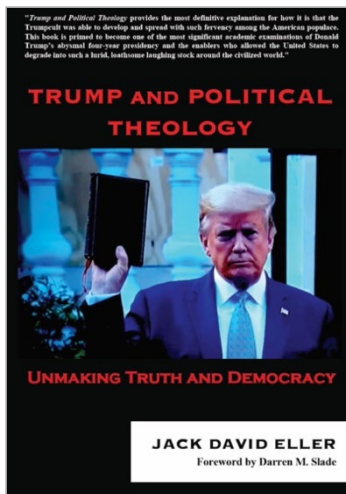
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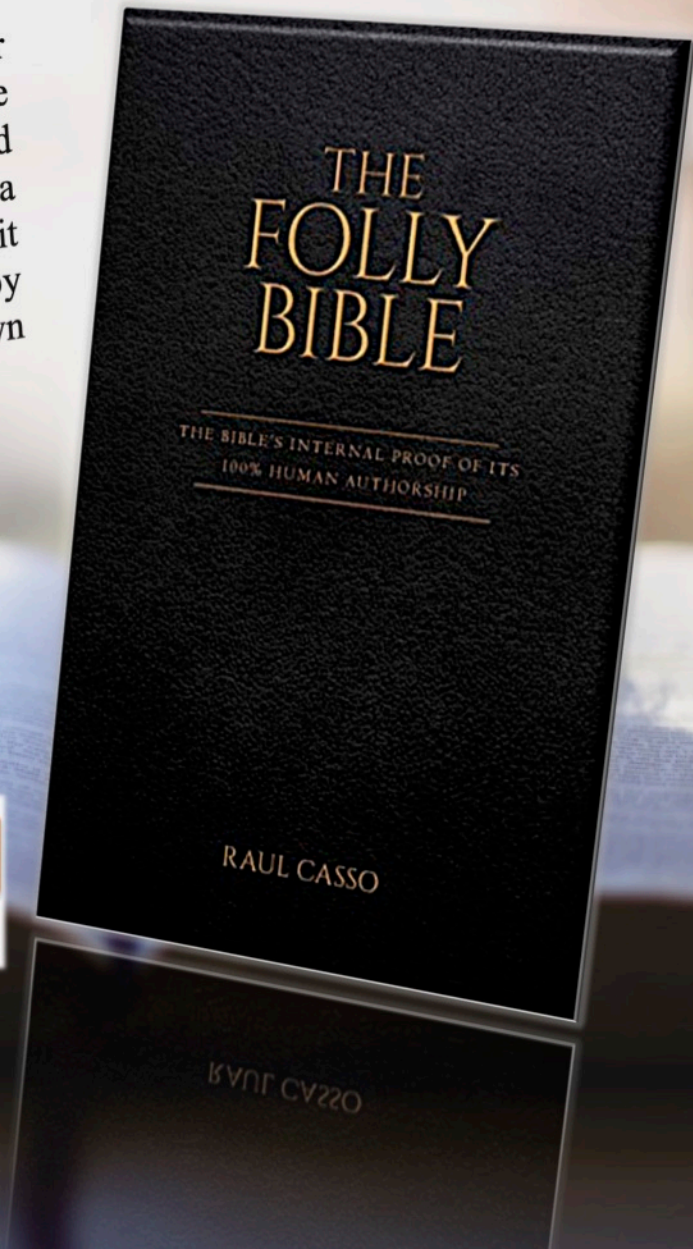


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