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# Secular Studies and Biography

*Introducing the Field to an Old/New Perspective*

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## Abstract

In the last decades, the biographical approach has seen a resurgence in scholarship in the humanities, not least in the discipline of history. Recently, there has been an upsurge as well in historical scholarship on atheism, secularism, and humanism. However, these two trends or fields have thus far not been consciously brought into conversation with one another. This special issue is an attempt to do this. In this introduction, we present the articles included in the special issue and discuss what we think can be gained from applying biographical perspectives in secular studies, specifically those having a historical approach. Biography can focus on de-conversion or the process of losing faith. Biography can effectively show a larger story of a secularist zeitgeist or movement. Biography may be used to show entanglements of secularism with other topics and connect with other research fields. The study of biography as a historical genre may be used to analyse the historical rhetoric and self-understanding of secularism.

## Keywords

biography – secular studies – history – atheism – freethought

## 1 Introduction: Biography Coming in from the Cold

For a considerable period of time, biography has been viewed with profound suspicion by historians and even more by social scientists. For the great innovators in 20th-century historiography and, notably, for the scholars gravitating around the *Annales ESC* periodical, classical biography was too embedded in an obsolete historiography of great men and even greater events—one of the worst tokens of an *'histoire bataille'* and thus the opposite of the *'histoire problème'* they fostered. Still, these fundamental reservations did not prevent biographies from being published and widely read. Not all professional historians were followers of the *Annales ESC* approach *per se*—in fact, far from it—and many did not shun the biographical genre at all. Quite often, however, biographers were not operating within academia and its particular arcana. Eventually, this (partial) separation of spheres weighed considerably on any university historian with ambitions who would have considered opting for a biographical approach. Would the historian still be taken seriously after such a 'misstep' and not be viewed as some kind of journalist who had deceptively crept into the faculty?<sup>1</sup> Within sociology too, biographies were the object of devastating criticism, with the most notorious criticism coming from Pierre Bourdieu's 1986 article against timid attempts to use a biographical perspective within the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> The highly apodictic nature of at least some of these 'condemnations without appeal' is somewhat puzzling. Do they contain some self-staging? Is there perhaps an academic marketing strategy to be observed?<sup>3</sup> Can a touch of resentment be observed against the bestselling authors reaching much larger audiences (and making larger profits ...) than the towering men of the *grand écoles*?

In reality, things were less clear-cut. Major innovators such as Lucien Febvre did not write old-school biographies, but problem-based biographical perspectives were not absent from their work; on the contrary, one of Febvre's masterpiece monographs was a book on Martin Luther that deliberately differed significantly from the earlier biographies of the German paragon of the Reformation but nevertheless prefigured new ways of approaching individual trajec-

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- 1 Angelika Schaser, "Emil Ludwig's Fingerzeig auf die Biographien in der Geschichtswissenschaft," *Anekdote—Biographie—Kanon. Zur Geschichtsschreibung in den schönen Künsten*, ed. Melanie Unseld & Christian Zimmerman (Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 2013), pp. 176–193.
  - 2 Pierre Bourdieu, "L'illusion biographique," *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* 62–63 (1986): 69–72.
  - 3 As e.g. elaborated upon in Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, *Le phénomène 'Nouvelle histoire.' Stratégie et idéologie des nouveaux historiens* (Paris: Economica, 1983).

tories in history.<sup>4</sup> Younger vanguard historians—especially those who had been central to the important *microstoria* tendency in Italy—reacted to Bourdieu’s ‘condemnation without appeal’ of the genre and, however critical they might be of the old ways, pleaded the advantages of a lucid reappraisal. In a striking detail, this was done on the pages of *Annales ESC*, no less.<sup>5</sup> In 1996, one of the best-known names of that school, the medievalist Jacques Le Goff, published a voluminous biography of Saint Louis in the prestigious *Bibliothèque des Histoi-res* of Gallimard, with an introduction on how to deal with the genre in new ways. That small chapter became an instant classic on reflecting upon writing history through the lens of one person’s trajectory.<sup>6</sup> Biography became a tool in other parts of the historical community as well; in particular, gender historians advanced it in the project of including women within the male-dominated history writing, thereby contributing to theoretical discussions of the use of biography. One could say that these were clear indications that the biography had somehow been rehabilitated within historiography. Recently, the notion of a ‘biographical turn’ has even been advanced.<sup>7</sup>

Why did we add the nuance ‘somehow’ to the new acceptance of biography writing within the realm of academic history? It is true that a reflexive approach to biography writing has been fostered and has received institutional anchoring in places where this effort has been systematically supported—notably by Hans Renders’ Biography Institute at the University of Groningen. In close connection with this centre, Brill even launched a Biography Studies series as a platform for theoretical and methodological contributions on this topic. However, does this newfound academic focus imply that most biography writing today has been transformed in its basic way of approaching an individual life? The old literary models and teleological biases often remain present under the pens of authors who seem to be unaware that these reflexive currents exist. The ‘fear of theory’ has not disappeared in studies of lives in history.<sup>8</sup>

4 Marc Lienhard, “Présence d’un maître-livre de l’historiographie française. Un destin: Martin Luther, de Lucien Febvre,” *Revue d’Histoire et de Philosophies Religieuses* 77, no. 4 (1997): 407–429.

5 Giovanni Levi, “Les usages de la biographie,” *Annales ESC* 44, no. 6 (1989): 1325–1336.

6 Jacques Le Goff, *Saint Louis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 13–27.

7 Hans Renders, Binne de Haan & Jonne Harmsma, ed. *The Biographical Turn. Lives in History* (London: Routledge, 2017); or, for a more grandiosely formulated, even ‘golden age of biography’, see Birgitte Possing, *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017), p. 22. Two further overviews connecting to this ‘biographical turn’, with a focus on historiography, are Barbara Caine, *Biography and History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and Daniel R. Meister, “The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography,” *History Compass* 16 (2018).

8 Jeffrey Tyssens, “Have They Caught the Cambridge Structuralist Yet?” *Biography Writing and*

With the current issue, *Secular Studies* is attempting to move beyond the ‘business-as-usual’ approach demonstrating the usefulness of the biographical approach in tackling the secular experience. Deliberately opting for biography as a common perspective within the frame of its thematic field is not something a team can do without at least a common reflection on the whys and hows of the shared project. Biographies of secularists, freemasons, rationalists and freethinkers have surely been written in the recent and not-so-recent past, but more reflexive approaches have rather been the exception than the rule.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, there is a challenge here. Taking up this challenge can even be viewed as a necessity, as the field of secular studies too often opts to research organisational units and large datasets in which the individual is obscured from view.

## 2 Today’s Historiography of Atheism and Secularism

This special issue of *Secular Studies* primarily ties into a wave of recent empirical works on the history of people who consciously turned away from belief in deities and traditional religions. This is a complex global phenomenon, and there have been many names for such actors in the last 150 years or so: freethinkers, secularists, rationalists, materialists, atheists and secular humanists, sometimes grouped together as ‘non-believers’, or—not least in sociological research—as the ‘non-religious’ or ‘nones’.<sup>10</sup> In this narrow sense, historical studies of secularists have existed for a long time, but an upsurge has occurred in the last decade, possibly as a result of the early 21st century discussion about the ‘return of religion’ and the ‘post-secular’, as well as the movement of New Atheism, which seems to have triggered an interest in providing deeper and more complex historical understandings of atheism and secularism.<sup>11</sup> Today, the history of atheism, secularism and humanism—particularly with the cre-

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the Fear of Theory”, in *Fear of Theory. Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, ed. Hans Renders & David Veltman (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 40–54 (Biography Studies, 2).

9 One of these exceptions was a thematic issue on freemasons with a reflection-inviting introduction: Jeffrey Tyssens, “Fraternity and Biography,” *Journal for Research into Freemasonry and Fraternalism* 6, no. 1 (2017): 5–20.

10 See e.g. Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

11 Anton Jansson, “Review Essay: The History of Atheism, Secularism, and Humanism: Recent Works and Future Directions,” *History of Intellectual Culture* 2 (2023). For a longer history, see Nathan G. Alexander, “Histories of Atheism: Key Questions and Disputes,” in *The Cambridge History of Atheism*, ed. Michael Ruse and Stephen Bullivant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

ation of the International Society for Historians of Atheism, Secularism and Humanism (ISHASH) research network—is taking shape more than ever before as a coherent international field of research.

This research has taken different paths and has had different centres of gravity. There have been ground-breaking studies of specific movements and organisations, primarily in national contexts but also those trying to pinpoint the transnational characteristics of secularist organisations. Scholars have covered both the creation and the growth of organisations during the ‘golden age of freethought’ of the late 19th century,<sup>12</sup> the interwar period<sup>13</sup> and, to some extent, the post-war phenomenon of organised secular humanism.<sup>14</sup> Not least when it comes to the interwar years, noted works have been published on the relationship between secularism and politics—especially socialism and communism<sup>15</sup> but also the relation between the non-religious and the state more generally.<sup>16</sup> The entanglement of secularism and the like with science is another topic that has been covered, as science has been important for the self-understanding of non-believers in modernity.<sup>17</sup> The history of atheism, secularism and humanism has also found synergies with other research fields

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- 12 Todd H. Weir, *Secularism and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Germany: The Rise of the Fourth Confession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Carolin Kosuch, ed., *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2020); Jeffrey Tyssens and Petri Mirala, “Transnational Seculars: Belgium as an International Forum for Freethinkers and Freemasons in the Belle Époque,” *Revue belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 90, no. 4 (2012): 1353–1372; Laura Schwartz, *Infidel Feminism: Secularism, Religion and Women’s Emancipation, England 1830–1914* (Manchester: University Press, 2013).
- 13 Johannes Gleixner, “Socialist Secularism between Nation, State, and the Transnational Movement: The International of Proletarian Freethinkers in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789–1920s*, ed. Carolin Kosuch (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2020); Elliot Hanowski, *Towards a Godless Dominion: Unbelief in Interwar Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023).
- 14 Callum G. Brown, David Nash, and Charlie Lynch, *The Humanist Movement in Modern Britain: A History of Ethicists, Rationalists and Humanists* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023); Niels De Nutte and Bert Gasenbeek, ed., *Looking Back to Look Forward: Organised Humanism in the World: Belgium, Great Britain, the Netherlands and the United States of America, 1945–2005*, (Brussel: VUB Press, 2019).
- 15 Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2018); Todd H. Weir, *Red Secularism: Socialism and Secularist Culture in Germany 1890 to 1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).
- 16 Jeffrey Tyssens, Niels De Nutte & Stefan Schröder (eds.), *The Non-Religious and the State. Seculars Crafting Their Lives in Different Frameworks from the Age of Revolution to the Present Day* (Berlin-Boston: de Gruyter-Oldenbourg, 2025).
- 17 Stephen P. Weldon, *The Scientific Spirit of American Humanism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020); Claus Spenninger, *Stoff für Konflikt: Fortschrittsdenken und*

and/or topical themes within historiography in general. These include work connecting the history of secularism, atheism, etc. dealing with the history of race and/or empire,<sup>18</sup> the history of emotions<sup>19</sup> and media history.<sup>20</sup> The lively activity in this research field was made clearly visible by the *Cambridge History of Atheism* in 2021, which highlighted many of the topics and trends mentioned above, along with other themes. However, it is notable that this important two-volume publication lacks a dedicated discussion of biography or life writing.<sup>21</sup>

### 3 Existing Biographies of Secularists, Atheists, and Freethinkers

Does this last observation imply that there are no biographies of secularists and non-believers? Not exactly. First of all, actors within the freethinkers' movement itself or their direct descendants wrote extensive biographies of their forebears, doubtless for reasons related to legacy building and self-assurance. An interesting example is the two-volume biography Hypathia Bradlaugh Bonner wrote in collaboration with John Mackinnon Robertson about her father, the British secularist leader Charles Bradlaugh.<sup>22</sup> But endeavours of this kind did not come from within academia. Biographies with more genuine historical ambitions and other monographs analysing the trajectories of secularist individuals were to come later. In the following paragraphs, we briefly exam-

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*Religionskritik im naturwissenschaftlichen Materialismus des 19. Jahrhunderts, 1847–1881* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021).

- 18 Christopher Cameron, *Black Freethinkers: A History of African American Secularism* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2019); Nathan G. Alexander, *Race in a Godless World: Atheism, Race, and Civilization, 1850–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Patrick J. Corbeil, *Empire and Progress in the Victorian Secularist Movement: Imagining a Secular World* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022).
- 19 Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (London: William Collins, 2019). The history of emotions is one of many fields discussed in Carolin Kosuch, *Die Abschaffung des Todes : Säkularistische Ewigkeiten vom 18. bis ins 21. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2024).
- 20 Clare Stainthorp, "Periodical Form and Chatterton's Commune, the Atheistic Communitistic Scorcher (1884–1895) "The Most Unique Production of the—Nineteenth Century," *Media History* 30, no. 2 (2024); Clare Stainthorp, "Dialogic Forms in Freethought Periodicals: Free Discussion and Open Debate," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 55, no. 3 (2022).
- 21 Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, ed., *The Cambridge History of Atheism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). A few individuals have chapters dedicated to them (e.g. Marx, Mill, Russell), but the chapters mainly deal with their philosophy rather than their life.
- 22 Hypathia Bradlaugh Bonner & John M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh. A Record of His Life and Work* (London: Fisher Unwin, 1894), 2 volumes.

ine some of these publications from various national settings to illustrate the biographical writing on secularists that exists to date.

In addition to his daughter's biography, Bradlaugh was at the heart of a work that, while not a classical biography, was nevertheless an analysis of the secularist's most important *tranche de vie*: that is, Arnstein's analysis of the famous Bradlaugh case, which fits quite well into the current expectations of a problem-based biography.<sup>23</sup> In France, major actors within the sphere of the French *Libre Pensée* movement, such as Paul Bert, have been the object of extensive monographs.<sup>24</sup> The same goes for upper-level politicians who have played a central role in the construction of French *laïcité*, such as Jules Ferry<sup>25</sup>, Aristide Briand<sup>26</sup> and Ferdinand Buisson.<sup>27</sup> In Belgium, biographies have been written about prominent freethinkers who mainly operated in Brussels but usually had an international standing as well, including Charles Potvin, Eugène Hins and Georges Lorand.<sup>28</sup> The most prominent freethinkers and atheists in Scandinavian intellectual history, such as Georg Brandes, Arnulf Øverland and Ingemar Hedenius, have also been the subject of individual biographies, although these were primarily fitted into their respective national historiographies.<sup>29</sup>

A somewhat shorter book, in comparison with the typically very long biographies, has been published on a leading American freethinker of the 19th century, Robert Ingersoll.<sup>30</sup> Biographies have also played a role in the re-evaluation

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- 23 Walter L. Arnstein, *The Bradlaugh Case. A Study in Late Victorian Opinion and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965). The other paragon of British secularism, Georg Jacob Holyoake, was the object of a biography some years ago: Ray Argyle, *Inventing Secularism. The Radical Life of Georg Jacob Holyoake* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2021).
- 24 Stéphane Kotovtchikhine, *Paul Bert et l'Instruction publique* (Dijon: Edition Universitaires de Dijon, 2000).
- 25 The main architect of France's secular school system has been the object of many publications. Here, we only quote the most extensive, traditional monograph in a well-known biography series: Jean-Michel Gaillard, *Jules Ferry* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).
- 26 Briand has been covered just as often, notably in the series mentioned above. See Gérard Unger, *Aristide Briand: le ferme conciliateur* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).
- 27 Patrick Cabanel, *Ferdinand Buisson. Père de l'école laïque* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2016).
- 28 Marc Mayné, *Eugène Hins. Une grande figure de la Première Internationale en Belgique* (Brussels: Académie Royale de Belgique, 1994); Christoph De Spiegeleer, *Een blauwe progressist. Charles Potvin (1818–1902) en het liberaal-sociale denken van zijn generatie* (Ghent/Brussels: Liberaal Archief/ASP, 2011); Nathan Lauwers, *Georges Lorand (1860–1918). Een transnationale progressieve liberaal* (Ghent/Brussels: Liberaal Archief/ASP, 2018).
- 29 Jørgen Knudsen, *GB: En Georg Brandes-biografi* (København: Gyldendal, 2008); Willy Dahl, *Arnulf Øverland: En biografi* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1989); Svante Nordin, *Ingemar Hedenius: En filosof och hans tid* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2004).
- 30 Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic. Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

of the importance of American women freethinkers, such as Helen Hamilton Gardener (Alice Chenoweth).<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, freethinkers appear within small family biographies as well, such as in a study of the Italian Nathan family.<sup>32</sup> In Germany, always an important contributor to secular studies, several books have been dedicated to Ernst Haeckel, Jacob Moleschott and Wilhelm Ostwald, respectively.<sup>33</sup> Freethought also has a place in a family biography of the Büchners.<sup>34</sup> While less attention has been paid to individual women freethinkers, such works do exist, including the biography of Ida Altmann-Bronn.<sup>35</sup> Biographical accounts are not limited to the European-American sphere. For instance, extensive attention has been given to the trajectory of the Indian humanist M.N. Roy.<sup>36</sup> Biographical monographs on Latin America's secularists have been written as well, with the Uruguayan political leader José Batlle y Ordoñez as one example.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, while there has been no massive production of biographies dealing with secularists, there is a not inconsiderable flow of such works. The examples quoted above are somewhat scattered in specific national historiographies,

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- 31 Kimberly A. Hamlin, *Free Thinker: Sex, Suffrage, and the Extraordinary Life of Helen Hamilton Gardener* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020). More marginal American infidels are treated biographically in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
- 32 The book gives insight mainly into the career of a famous freemason mayor of Rome but also into the role of his mother. Anna Maria Isastia, *Storia di una famiglia del Risorgimento. Sarina, Giuseppe, Ernesto Nathan* (Torino: Unipop Editore, 2010).
- 33 Mario di Gregorio, *From Here to Eternity. Ernst Haeckel and Scientific Faith* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004); Rainer Willmann, *Ernst Haeckel. Zoologe, Künstler, Philosoph and Freidenker* (Stuttgart: Hirzel, 2022); Laura Meneghello, *Jacob Moleschott. A Transnational Biography. Science, Politics, and Popularization in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017); Andraea Braune, *Fortschritt als Ideologie: Wilhelm Ostwald und der Monismus* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2009).
- 34 Heiner Boehncke, Hans Sarkowicz & Peter Brunner, *Die Büchners oder der Wunsch, die Welt zu verändern* (Frankfurt: Societätsdruckerei, 2008).
- 35 Gisela Losseff-Tillmanns, *Ida Altmann-Bronn 1862–1935 Lebensgeschichte einer sozialdemokratischen freidenkerischen Gewerkschafterin—eine Spurensuche* (Baden Baden: Nomos/Sigma, 2015).
- 36 V.B. Karnik, *M.N. Roy. Political Biography* (Bombay: Nav Jagriti Samaj, 1978); Sibnarayan Ray, "Introduction", in *Selected Works of M.N. Roy. Volume 1: 1917–1922*, ed. Sibnarayan Ray (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 9–64.
- 37 Milton I. Vanger, *José Batlle y Ordoñez of Uruguay: The Creator of His Times, 1902–1907* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963); Milton I. Vanger, *The Model Country: José Batlle y Ordoñez of Uruguay, 1907–1915* (Hanover: University of New England Press, 1980); Milton I. Vanger, *Uruguay's José Batlle y Ordoñez. The Determined Visionary 1916–1917* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2010).



however, and freethought, secularism or humanism frequently constitute just one part of a larger narrative that does not align with secular-studies-focused research objectives. Still, all this comes as no surprise. Many of the individuals who have proved to be central to secularist movements were not *only* militant freethinkers; they were also educationalists, republicans, patriots, feminists, anti-colonialists, writers, and social reformers. Furthermore, this particular output of biographies of secularists, atheists etc. can be compared with the production of many other fields of study. Not all of the former's authors are academics *per se*. Quite a few are journalists or popular writers, which was and is so often the case in the biographical genre. Regardless of the national context, biographies tend to be predominantly commercial products for large audiences.<sup>38</sup> Theoretical reflectiveness and methodological innovation are not likely to emerge in such a setting. As one of the authors of this introduction wrote elsewhere, 'theory does not sell'.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4 The Problem-Based Biographical Article as a Tool for Historical Secular Studies

Nevertheless, it is noticeable that scholarly reconstructions of freethinkers' lives have gradually become more prominent. An interesting indicator of the changing ways of writing biographies and constructing one's object of scientific investigation is the observation that the 'big names' no longer monopolise attention. Nowadays, biographical approaches tend to have an open eye for the rank and file—for the 'small fry'.<sup>40</sup> There is still some reason to object that all of this biographical production regarding secularists only constitutes a development in bits and pieces and not yet a self-conscious, coherent project. However, have other topical fields—even considerably larger fields than secular studies—really been doing that much better? Not necessarily.<sup>41</sup> That said,

38 François Dosse, *Le pari biographique. Ecrire une vie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), pp. 17–43.

39 Tyssens, "Have They Caught the Cambridge Structuralist Yet?" p. 50.

40 E.g. Callum Brown's oral history of 'becoming atheist', which collects life stories from the recent past: Callum G. Brown, *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017). Similar biographical interview projects have been conducted with the students of the Practical Humanism programme at Vrije Universiteit Brussel by Jeffrey Tyssens and Niels De Nutte in collaboration with the CAVA centre for secular archives in Brussels.

41 Interestingly, biography specialists Hamilton and Renders remark that religion—unlike what might be expected—is a poor parent in many biographies. See Nigel Hamilton & Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography* (Amsterdam: AUP, 2018), pp. 164–165.

even if there is something of a corpus of biographical works on more-or-less prominent freethinkers and secularists that could inspire anyone who wants to narrate and analyse such life trajectories, it remains a challenge to do so by means of a relatively focused discussion, perhaps including a set of shared questions, methodologies and theoretical considerations. Commencing such an endeavour within the field of secular studies at large is the goal of this special issue.

There is a tendency in the genre of biography towards the extensive monograph—to provide, if not a classic cradle-to-grave narrative, at least as much as possible of the life of the biographical object. The article format might seem less suitable for biography, being limited in its dimensions and often steered by a narrow and delimited aim. However, we believe that the restricted scope of an article could just as well be an advantage when it comes to biographical endeavours. The biographical turn is intimately connected to the elaboration of a small canon of reflexive texts denouncing literary models and their teleological tendencies; it tries to foster—albeit not entirely successfully thus far—a new praxis of biography writing: a problem-steered and reflexive approach.

In an essential chapter of his 1991 *Raisonnement sociologique/Sociologic Reasoning*, French sociologist Jean-Claude Passeron warned about the ‘influence of a literary model that is simply waiting for it [the biography] to relapse into literature’. The ‘biographical utopia’, in which everything has become relevant, must be countered by a ‘work of reconstruction’. Or, stated more elaborately,

... once a biographical method is brought into operation, which is something very different from the art of literary narrative or suggestion, which only reason by synecdoche—in other words, once there is reasoned choice of the rules of analysis that allow both the identification of ‘pertinent features’ of a description and the application of a protocol of data processing derived from hypotheses relating to biographical succession, structure or memory—everything in a sample of biographies is good to analyse.<sup>42</sup>

At least, the more synthesised, more readily problem-oriented format an article is supposed to take invites the scholar to escape from the ‘prison’ of biography—to avoid being swallowed by the biographical behemoth, as one of this

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42 All quotation come from the essential chapter “The Script and the Corpus. Biographies, Flows, Itineraries, Trajectories” in Jean-Claude Passeron, *Sociological Reasoning: A Non-Popperian Space of Argumentation* (Oxford: Bardwell Press, 2013), pp. 317–339.

introduction's authors has described it.<sup>43</sup> In his endless quest for the very last detail, Sartre's extensive biography of Flaubert (the classical example Passeron and many others quote as a temptation to avoid) was indeed never finalised, even after far more than 2000 dense pages. An article obviously does not allow for this kind of digression and necessarily imposes its particular discipline upon the author. It is precisely at this level that a set of questions and problems essential to the broad field of secular studies can be advanced—or even restated, for that matter. In this way, by focusing analytically on one individual, one could surely point at sharper ways of coming to terms with the transformation of 'existential cultures', as Lois Lee would qualify them.<sup>44</sup>

## 5 Introduction to the Articles in this Special Issue

Thus, it is our conviction that biographical research, in its more problem-oriented form, has much to offer to the history of secularism and atheism; moreover, as has been pointed out, this thematic issue of *Secular Studies* is an explorative attempt to provide good examples of how this could be done. The issue includes seven empirical articles that interpret and use biography in different ways. Here, we introduce them in terms of how the studies have been conducted and what types of biography they offer. We then connect some aspects of these articles with a brief discussion on what can become visible thanks to the biographical method employed.

The majority of the articles in this issue focus on one specific individual. A few of those have the particular aim of discussing individual belief, doubt or atheism—or, in other words, self-understanding and identity in relation to the overarching theme of secularism. In her article on the German-Jewish philosopher and writer Fritz Mauthner (1849–1923), Carolin Kosuch argues that atheism is a core element of Mauthner's self-narrative. Here, a complex and sometimes ambivalent picture emerges of a self-balancing among confession, nationality, and intellectual and religious interests. Jeffrey Tyssens tells the story of the impecunious French villager Jean-Marie Déguignet (1834–1905), who was famous (albeit belatedly) for having penned a comprehensive autobiography—a most unusual accomplishment for a person of his class and background at the time. Déguignet broke with Breton Catholicism and developed a ferocious atheism, and Tyssens uses his life as a correction to the inher-

43 Tyssens, "Have They Caught the Cambridge Structuralist Yet?", p. 54.

44 Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-Religious. Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: University Press, 2015), pp. 159–184.

ent bias in the research on the history of atheism of focusing on urban intellectuals, by showing that there were highly complex and sometimes very original atheist cultures among the rural poor as well.

Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre diverges somewhat from this theme of atheism, as she writes about the Belgian Catholic intellectual, Marie Denis (1920–2006). While Denis retained her individual faith, her constant negotiation among Catholic feminism, the patriarchal structure of the Church and political engagement illustrates how to experience and negotiate faith in a period of religious transformation—that is, a society increasingly marked by secularisation. Vanderpelen-Diagre points out that biography is useful to historicise the experiences of religion and secularism. As something of a group biography, rather than a biography of one single person, David Veltman's article also centres on 20th-century negotiations of religious and secular identity. Jan Walravens (1920–1965), Pierre-Louis Flouquet (1900–1967) and Henri Pichette (1924–2000) were three Belgian art critics who moved to or from a Christian faith. All three writers were acquainted with the Catholic painter Felix de Boeck (1898–1995), and their relations with him were instrumental in the changing of their worldviews and religious orientation.

Biography is applied somewhat differently in the two articles on 20th-century Swedes, delving not so much into personal religious belief but into the outer actions of certain individuals in relation to secularism and secularisation. Anton Jansson studies the journalist and left-wing activist Einar Adamson (1894–1953), who was active in both Gothenburg and transnational circles. Jansson advances the concept of 'entangled atheism', noting how Adamson's atheist activity can only be understood, first, from a transnational perspective and, second, in relation to other engagements and issues, such as Esperanto and communism. Göran Larsson covers another part of Swedish society: the academic establishment of Uppsala. More specifically, he focuses on Geo Widengren (1907–1996), an internationally renowned orientalist and professor of the history of religions. Departing from discussions of microhistory, Larsson positions Widengren in relation to the ongoing secularisation of academic and intellectual life, describing how, in contrast to his predecessors, Widengren insisted that the history of religion should be entirely 'non-confessional'.

Finally, Clare Stainthorp's text stands out in this group of articles in that her essay is not primarily a biographical study as such; instead, she analyses the usage of biography in the historical secularist movement. To do so, she maps and analyses J.M. Wheeler's (1850–1998) *A Biographical Dictionary of Freethinkers of All Ages and Nations* from 1889. Stainthorp argues that the collective biography was an ideal form for the growing secularist movement, as it allowed the movement's members to conceptualise their own history in

an open way. Thus, understanding the affordances of this biographical form enables us to better understand the history of secularism.

## 6 A Discussion of Perspectives

All in all, then, the articles in this special issue tie into and provide new perspectives on many issues and related fields, giving a broad picture of the history of secularism or secular studies. As shown in the articles by Kosuch, Tyssens, Vanderpelen-Diagre and Veltman, the biographical perspective is indispensable in reaching an understanding of how negotiations between religious faith and non-religious identity were played out, experienced and expressed. Questions of personal belief—especially the turning away from individual religious faith—are certainly central to the history of atheism and secularism and, as biography as a method and form brings one as close as possible to the individual, it certainly befits this task. This issue shows that there is no need to limit the choice of a biography to ‘big names’ or to lesser-known people who deserve some kind of make-up for unjust oblivion. As David Novarr, one of the early systematic theoreticians of biography, wrote: ‘Every life, however prosaic, differs in its details; every interesting life has a new plot if the biographer is perceptive enough to find it.’ The biographer’s biggest challenge, to quote Novarr again, is to overcome ‘the limitations of his own vision and insight’.<sup>45</sup> What, then, could be the reflexive approach, in which theory leads towards methodological choices that make a trajectory ‘speak’? Hans Renders’ notion of ‘turning points’ as a means ‘to focus on the nature of agency and change in the life-course of an individual’<sup>46</sup> can be of use here, especially in coming to terms with concrete instances of secularisation or de-secularisation. As we have already suggested, this notion can lead to biographies becoming a ‘corrective’ to a ‘standard total view’ of a historical subject, large or small—a project fostered by Nigel Hamilton in his essay on this topic.<sup>47</sup>

Individuals do not need to be members of a larger movement or organisational structure to be non-believers; yet, as mentioned earlier, the historiography of atheism and secularism is often a story of broad movements and organisations. This special issue is no exception and shows how biography can contribute to the mapping out of this activity. Clare Stainthorp’s essay goes furthest into the ‘golden age of freethought’ of the late 19th century, and her

45 Quoted in Nigel Hamilton & Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography*, p. 184.

46 Nigel Hamilton & Hans Renders, *The ABC of Modern Biography*, p. 181.

47 Nigel Hamilton, ‘Biography as corrective’, *The Biographical Turn*, pp. 15–30.

discussions of biographical form give a new perspective on that era. In Anton Jansson's article, we see how an international working-class movement, bent on formal organisation, plays out locally, which can be more easily seen through the lens of a single trajectory.

Many articles in this issue use the lens of an individual to shed light on a larger story. Birgitte Possing discusses this approach in terms of 'prism biographies', where the individual in focus becomes a 'lever for analysis' of something else—or, at least, something more. Furthermore, as Possing puts it, biography can 'manifest a zeitgeist and thereby tell stories about something larger than the individual'.<sup>48</sup> Of the many articles in this issue with elements of this approach, Göran Larsson's article on Geo Widengren may be the clearest exemplar. Larsson alternates the viewpoint between the micro and macro level, letting the story of Widengren connect to the larger story of the secularisation of scholarship and of Swedish society in general. In a sense, Jeffrey Tyssens also provides an illustration of this approach, as Déguignet becomes a type—a representative of the rural poor (at his specific time and place). In Tyssens' article, language acquisition, migration and contact with national institutions such as the army create openings for the circulation of new ideas, revealing something important yet external to Déguignet himself.

Apart from this, biography is often useful to cut across conventional divides in historiography, as an individual seldom engages in only one activity but rather fits together different engagements and issues in ways that may not be self-evident to historians in hindsight. By viewing the subject as a point at which different historical structures and developments intersect, biography can 'cut across arbitrary divisions between historical fields and approaches', as Ludmilla Jordanova puts it, thereby enriching a historiography that is often divided into narrower fields.<sup>49</sup> In this issue, we see how secularism is entangled with radical politics (Jansson and Vanderpelen-Diagre), humanistic scholarship (Larsson and Kosuch) and art (Veltman), and how these other dimensions are central to how the subjects of these studies experience and act in relation to belief and non-belief. Thus, biography is useful for connecting the history of secularism to other historical research fields. In addition to political history, intellectual history, and art history, the examples above clearly illustrate rela-

48 Birgitte Possing, *Understanding Biographies: On Biographies in History and Stories in Biography* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2017), p. 79.

49 Ludmilla Jordanova, *History in Practice* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006), p. 46. For a discussion, see Josefin Häggglund, "Biografi som metod för politisk idéhistoria: Erfarenheter från ett forskningsprojekt om Carl Lindhagen," in *Perspektiv på politisk idéhistoria*, ed. Hjalmar Falk, My Klockar Linder, and Petter Tistedt (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2023).

tions between secularism and social history (Tyssens), as well as the history of literature and media history (Stainthorp).

These are just some examples, departing from the articles in this issue, of what we think biography can bring to the history of atheism, secularism and humanism, and to secular studies in general. To sum up with a few key points, which are far from capturing everything in the articles, biography can be used to focus on the central moment of conversion or de-conversion; it can also be used to give a more complex understanding of such processes. Biography can be used as a prism to tell a larger story of a zeitgeist or movement. However, it may also be employed to complicate or correct simplified established historical narratives. Biography may be used to uncover and show entanglements of secularism with other topics and contexts. Relatedly, biography is historiographically useful to connect with other research fields. Finally, the study of biography as a historical genre may be used to analyse the rhetoric and self-understanding of secularism as a historical movement.

This special issue started with a small workshop and can be viewed as a pilot study.<sup>50</sup> As such, it is based on a rather narrow selection of cases, temporally, culturally and geographically, in modern Western Europe, if covering Catholic, Protestant and—to some extent—Jewish contexts. This obviously limits the scope of this issue. However, this issue is the start, not the entirety, of this discussion on biography; future problem-driven biographies of individuals from other parts of the world—whether different national or denominational Christian settings or Jewish, Hindu or Muslim contexts—have the potentiality to significantly contribute to the discussion of secularism and biography and to secular studies in general and can thereby expand this discussion. To conclude, it is our conviction that there may be more productive ways of combining biography and secularism, and it is our humble hope that this special issue will inspire and encourage more such projects.

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