In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of nonreligiosity – that stuff which is defined by how it differs from religion (Lee 2012) – as a substantial or concrete phenomenon in human life and society, the presence of which might be documented and theorised (Lee and Bullivant 2010; Zuckerman 2010a, 2010b; Keysar and Kosmin 2007). A new wave of nonreligious rationalism and anti-religion, especially visible in the guise of New Atheism (see Amarasingam 2010), provides obvious examples of nonreligion as concrete socio-cultural phenomena. Another example is nonreligious secularism, discussed in various proto- (e.g. Asad 2003) and actual (see McLennan 2007; 2010) post-secularist arguments. These treatments show the way in which secularist concepts and ideologies often have nonreligious components that impact upon how they consider, construct and constrain religion in particular ways. The postsecular literature tends to conflate secularism and nonreligion – hence its interest in a new concept, postsecularism, rather than untangling the secularist and nonreligious (especially anti-religious) threads. Implicitly, however, postsecularist writings also provide clear examples of how nonreligion exists in socially, culturally and politically meaningful ways, which should, as a result, be attended to in social research.

These conspicuous examples are, however, only part of an emerging field of empirical research which might be much broader in its scope and more subtle in the phenomena it includes. This paper introduces the general methodological problems facing researchers who wish to account for nonreligion, before identifying the one assumption that researchers are likely to bring to this generally unfamiliar field of enquiry and which is already and demonstrably limiting the scope of

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1 I am enormously grateful to Ole Riis and Christopher R. Cotter for their insightful and generous comments and suggestions against earlier drafts of this article.

2 See Campbell (1971) for an early contribution which has become a foundational text for those newly interested in the study of nonreligion.
research methodologies. This assumption is that nonreligious forms are primarily intellectual rather than social, practical, symbolic, aesthetic and/or material. I use findings from my own research, an exploratory project working with nonreligion and secularity in south east England, to demonstrate that, to the contrary, the latter forms exist and provide alternative possibilities to researchers in the field. The general aim of this paper is to help open up sociology to the wide-ranging prospects that the study of nonreligion presents, whilst also providing some potential new ‘ways in’ to this new and broad field of study.

A Contradistinction in Terms

The first and potentially most treacherous object would-be sociologists of nonreligion face relates to the working terminology they will use to understand and construct their methodologies. The general issue is how unfamiliar and under-theorised the concept is in social science, as well as the confusions that can arise as sociologists’ heads are turned by the many available theological and philosophical conceptualisations of nonreligion (Campbell 1971), conceptualisations which are informed by concerns quite distinct from describing empirical reality. Campbell highlighted this problem in 1971, but the subsequent years of inactivity mean that the situation has hardly advanced. In fact, one of the most immediate improvements nonreligion researchers could make to their methodologies is to provide a clear statement or glossary of their core terms, a practice that would improve the communication of their research and also help them reflect more deeply on the terms they are using. Meanwhile, sociologists of nonreligion and religion are making ‘schoolboy errors’. They routinely place ‘religion and atheism’ in an uncomfortable pairing, for example – despite the fact that one (or several) cultural turns in the sociology of religion (Lynch 2012) mean the same scholars are beyond reducing the former to being purely a matter of belief in God (i.e. theism). This is something I discuss further below, in relation to the intellectualisation of nonreligion. An issue that needs to be dealt with upfront, however, is what the notion of ‘nonreligion’ means and how it differs, in some senses, from the concept of ‘secularity’; the subsequent discussion of how this concept can be operationalised is contingent upon being clear in this.

In fact, the study of nonreligion presents researchers with a prospect quite different from the study of secular. To study the secular maintains religion as the centre-of-gravity in a research project because