

An Introduction to Atheism, Agnosticism, & Non-Religious Worldviews

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Guest Editors Foreword: Atheism, Agnosticism, & Non-Religious Worldviews

Research in psychology of religion has roots stretching back into the 19th century, however only recently has it begun to give sustained focus on atheists, agnostics, and types of nonreligious worldviews (Coleman, Hood, & Shook, 2015; Streib & Klein, 2013). This development is important for at least two reasons. Nonreligion and nonbelievers in gods comprise a substantive and perhaps growing population that cannot be ignored. Also, the psychology of religion is incomplete without a consideration of those who are variously nonreligious and nonbelievers in gods. Before introducing the collection of nine articles for this special issue of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, “Atheism, Agnosticism, and Nonreligious Worldviews” we reflect on estimated prevalence of atheist and nonreligious individuals, discuss misconceptions associated with nonreligion, note how investigating secular worldviews is critical for the psychology of religion, and provide a brief overview of the diversity of nonreligion.

Atheism and formations of nonreligion have been a continually underestimated phenomenon in American psychology which has primarily focused on American Protestantism (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2018). Social scientists rarely seek to investigate or acknowledge their existence across historical settings (c.f., Brown, 2017), and while it is only recently that such positions have become discussed, “atheists have always been with us” (Rossano, 2012, p.82). However, Keysar and Navarro-Rivera (2013) place estimates at between 450 to 500 million individuals, or about 7% of the global population. Also nonreligious (self-)identification is increasing throughout the world (Keysar, 2017), and some researchers now consider places like Norway, Sweden, and East Germany to be overwhelmingly secular (Schmidt & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2003; Zuckerman, 2009). A recent analysis of the 2014-2016 European Social Survey found that nonreligious individuals were a majority population in over half of the 22 countries surveyed (Bullivant, 2018). Stinespring

and Cragun (2015) provide an empirically grounded model suggesting the number of nonreligious could reach almost half of the United States population in the next 25 years, and research suggests that children are much less religious than their parents (Cragun, Hammer, Nielsen, & Autz, 2018; Twenge, Exline, Grubbs, Sastry, & Campbell, 2015). Research indicates there are “hidden” atheists in religiously sanctioned positions—pastors of congregations and Rabbinical leaders who hide their nonbelief from their faithful adherents (Dennett & LaScola, 2010; Shrell-Fox, 2015; “The Clergy Project”, 2018).

In terms of “First World” nations, the United States stands out for its relatively low number of self-identified atheists, usually ranging between 3% and 12%, depending on the question asked. There remains a variety of limitations to consider when interpreting self-reports of religious and nonreligious identification (see Coleman & Jong, 2018). One of the most pressing issues to consider here is the perceived social undesirability of atheism worldwide (Gervais, 2014; Gervais et al., 2017; also see Cheng, Pagano, & Shariff, 2018), and the tendency of individuals to respond in socially desirable ways (Paulhus, 2002). In a recent study using the *unmatched count technique* used for studying socially sensitive topics (e.g., Raghavaro & Federer, 1979), Gervais and Naijle (2018) found that as much as an estimated 32% of their representative American sample identified as atheist—almost tripling previous estimates. When relying on traditional survey methods in cultures where religious identification is perceived to be socially desirable and identification as atheist is stigmatized, the number of atheists may be an underestimation. Since we can expect the number of atheist and nonreligious individuals in the world to become more visible, the task ahead for psychologists of religion and nonreligion is to ensure that appropriate conceptualizations, methodologies, and psychometric instruments are developed to suitably capture and represent these worldviews along with the diversity they embody.

When examining the role of religious variables in health and wellbeing outcomes among atheists, studies indicate that they actually have deleterious effects (Speed, 2017; Speed & Hwang, 2017; Speed & Fowler, 2016). This is because the efficacy of religiosity may depend on an individual's valuation of religion (Klinger, 2012). In a well-rounded psychology of religion, researchers will need to draw valid comparisons between atheist and theist samples. One way to achieve this is to identify and include meaningful constructs that atheists do value, instead of centring inquiry on independent variables (e.g., gods, prayer) that are valued by one group and not the other. Atheists and the nonreligious value other things, have other beliefs, other worldviews, and other sources of meaning worthy of investigation in their own right (Coleman, Silver, & Holcombe, 2013; Farias, 2013; Streib & Klein, 2013).

Although categories such as nonreligion and atheism are linguistically defined in terms of the ways an individual does not believe or behave, they also conceal a wide range of "positive" beliefs, values, behaviours, and worldviews (Lee, 2014; Silver, Coleman, Hood, & Holcombe, 2014). Only recently have social scientists begun to probe for these components that populate the lives of the nonbelievers. Although most studies have operationalized atheists or the nonreligious as a single, unified category (for important exceptions, see Schnell & Keenan, 2011; Silver et al., 2014), these studies can provide insight into the psychological diversity found in what might be more appropriately labelled as atheism(s) and nonreligion(s).

For example, research suggests that some nonreligious can be characterized by increased self-mastery and individualism (Farias & Lalljee, 2008; Houtman & Mascini, 2002; Schnell & Keenan, 2011). Without belief in any divine authority, atheists are more likely to view morality and meaning in life as self-constructed (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Smith, 2011; Speed, Coleman, & Langston, 2018), which may lead to greater diversity in worldview. Some atheists appreciate and participate in ritual activities, and enjoy the community of their

fellow nonbelievers, as well as believers (Cimino & Smith, 2015; Farias et al., 2018; Smith, 2013). Intellectual pursuits and scientific interests are recurring themes among atheists (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Coleman & Arrowood, 2015; Schnell, 2015; Smith, 2013). Some nonreligious are particularly apathetic about religion and even their own disbelief (Lee, 2014; Quack & Schuh, 2017; Silver et al., 2014); whereas in some contexts, and in some aspects, they may be more rigid and set in the beliefs they do hold (Uzarevic, Saroglou, Clobert, 2017). Both atheists and the nonreligious find moments of awe, wonder, and beauty to be deeply moving experiences, with common themes directed at nature and humanity (Coleman et al., 2013; Deal & Magyar-Russell, 2018; Delaney, 2016; Preston & Shin, 2017).

The broad conceptual convergence on aspects of nonreligious and atheist worldviews is a promising sign for a psychology of religion in need of nonreligious measures with "positive" content. Further exploration of the diversity of these worldviews components, and their psychological antecedents and consequences will advance the psychology of religion and nonreligion.

Our intention for this special issue of *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, guest edited by the authors of this Introduction, was to challenge psychologists and cognitive scientists to move beyond and investigate atheism, agnosticism and nonreligious worldviews as full-fledged constructs rather than a solely "negative" identity. Moreover, we were also interested in the development of measurement instruments specifically for use in atheist samples, because this represents one of the most pressing lacunae for the field. The nine articles chosen for this issue address each of these topics in unique ways.

Taves, Asprem, and Ihm (2018) outline a building block methodology for moving beyond the dichotomies of religion and nonreligion, and towards a broader, meaning systems and worldview approach. Importantly, their methodology allows for the systematic investigation of "positive" components to nonreligious belief systems, and for their comparison with other

belief systems. Shults, Gore, Lemos, and Wildman (2018) provide the first cognitively informed computational models of the mechanisms that drive the expansion of nonreligious worldviews within a population. They utilize empirical data of the sort with which psychologists and cognitive scientists of religion are familiar, but demonstrate how new computer simulation tools are able to exceed the analytic and predictive capacity of traditional methodologies. Keller, Bullik, Klein, and Swanson (2018) combine the richness of qualitative data with the precision of quantitative methodology in comparing two in-depth case studies each from the United States and East Germany. Their study examines the autobiographical narratives of different ways of becoming atheist in different cultural surrounds. Deal and Russell (2018) present a qualitative investigation of how environmental activists experience transcendence directed at the marvels of the everyday, natural world. They argue that previous theories of sanctification are unable to accommodate the phenomenologically similar nontheistic orientations, and provide further directions for integration. Cheng, Pagano, and Shariff (2018) introduce a scale measuring perceived microaggressions among atheists. This instrument is particularly important given atheists are one of the most discriminated against groups in the world, and will help establish exactly how atheists perceive this prejudice. Bradley, Exline, Uzdavines, Stauner, and Grubbs (2018) present the first scale measuring different reasons why some individuals go godless. Since many current atheists are deconverts, this instrument advances the study of how individuals arrive at their nonbelief. Brulin, Hill, Laurin, Mikulincer, and Granqvist (2018) present four experimental studies exploring how the social support system of state welfare might influence the accessibility of religious concepts and function as a surrogate for religious beliefs when primed with threats. Their research emphasizes the importance of comparing religious systems with other cultural phenomena, as well as the necessity of testing hypothesis in cross-cultural settings. Cragun, Hammer, Nielsen, and Autz's (2018) article contributes the

growing literature detailing how processes of secularization unfold by intergenerational transmission. Past research has been restricted by limited measurement instruments; however Cragun and colleagues employ a multi-item measure of nonreligiousness and nonspirituality, finding adolescents are substantially more secular than their caregivers. Galen's (2018) article suggests that by studying the nonreligious, the psychology of religion can better understand itself. For example, although the salutary effects associated with religious and spiritual variables are often attributed to the putative uniqueness of these worldviews, Galen critically reviews key studies using religious and nonreligious samples, concluding that secular mechanisms may be the driving force behind these effects.

These articles highlight starting points and paths for continued growth in developing methodologies and theories that will allow atheists and the nonreligious to be understood apart from, yet compared to, their religious counterparts. It is a well-worn scientific truism to proclaim more research is needed in a given field. As guest editors of this special issue we are pleased to present articles that will grow the psychological study of the nonreligious and we further the plea that much more research is needed.

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