Chapter 15. Nonreligion, Atheism, & Mental Health

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Abstract

Based on the well-established link between religiosity and positive mental health outcomes, it has been argued that nonreligiosity is a health liability. However, most of this research suffers from methodological problems that limit their generalizability to nonreligious populations, such as atheists and agnostics. In the current chapter, we draw attention to these methodological issues, and argue in favor of a richer conceptualization of nonreligion than has been theorized in previous literature. We further review recent work from various countries around the world, which challenges the notion that nonreligiosity presents a health risk, finding instead that the nonreligious experience similar levels of health and wellbeing benefits as the religious. We end by briefly discussing the limitations and recent backlash at this literature, while suggesting that the study of the nonreligious may transform how we understand the interaction between beliefs, rituals, and health.

Keywords: atheism; agnosticism; nonreligion; belief; meaning, positivism; health

Introduction

Given the established link between religiosity and positive mental health, does it mean that being an atheist or agnostic presents a health risk? Or, on the contrary, is it possible that the non-religious might endorse a belief system and engage in activities which fulfill a similar role in promoting health — as religious beliefs and practices do for religious individuals? This chapter provides a tentative answer to these questions. Because this subject is deeply embedded in a cultural view that perceives religious people as ‘better’ than the non-religious, a view which has shaped the work of psychological and medical researchers,⁸⁹ we will begin the chapter by deconstructing some of the key misconceptions about non-religious individuals. After this, we will review the evidence comparing mental health outcomes for the nonreligious with those of religious individuals.

1. Atheists don’t believe in anything

Scientists have studied the relationship between religiosity and health for over a century,¹ starting with Galton’s² pioneering study of whether the royal family lived longer because they had millions of people praying for them — they didn’t. In contrast, it is only in the past decade that researchers have begun to explore the potential health consequences of nonreligiosity.³ Given that psychologists have been studying religion for over 100 years, it has clearly taken a very long time to ask what these individuals might believe in, and whether these beliefs might have similar psychological functions to religious ones. There is now a corpus of research showing that atheists and agnostics endorse a variety of ontological, epistemological, and ethical beliefs about reality.^{4,5,88} Experimental psychological research has uncovered that beliefs in science or in progress are strengthened when nonreligious individuals are exposed to

high levels of uncertainty, existential anxiety, or stress,^{6,7} suggesting that these are meaningful beliefs than nonreligious individuals cling to in times for need.⁸ If this suggestion is correct, it radically changes our understanding of beliefs and its functional role: the benefits of beliefs are probably not driven by their supernatural content but by the process of believing which causally and meaningfully gives structure to the world and events in everyday life.⁸⁸

Belief in science or progress naturally does not exhaust the varieties of beliefs nonreligious individuals might espouse. Humanism, Positivism, Existentialism, Marxism, Transhumanism are other well-known examples of nonreligious belief systems within Western culture. How any of these beliefs interact with health is unknown.⁸⁸ We have clearly come a long way from when atheists were classified by personality psychologists as adherents of ‘extremes of social, political, and religious outlook’ like fundamentalists and communists.⁹ However, as we describe below, the stereotypes about the lack of moral qualities in atheists are very much alive.

2. Atheists are a-moral and rationalist

It is a well-documented phenomenon that the perception of prejudice and discrimination is associated with negative mental health consequences.¹⁰ Expressed atheism and other religious dissent is often met with scorn, ridicule, and even violence;^{11,12} further to this, perceived discrimination among self-identified atheists is associated with lower levels of psychological wellbeing.^{13,14,15} Research suggests that prejudice against atheists stems from their lack of belief in a god.¹⁶ More specifically, the popular perception that belief in God is necessary to maintain one’s moral character seems to be the root of prejudice toward atheists. As a consequence, across a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds, research indicates

atheists are viewed as untrustworthy and immoral¹⁷; in the USA, atheists are less accepted than any other ethnic, religious, or minority group.^{18,19} Stereotypes targeting atheists are not limited solely to issues of morality, though, and studies^{20,21} demonstrate it is not uncommon for them to be viewed as angry, unhappy, cynical, joyless, and incapable of experiencing moments of profundity and awe.

The idea that nonreligious individuals are less moral has recently been contradicted in a large cross-cultural study of atheists and agnostics across Western and Eastern countries (China, Japan, England, USA, Brazil, & Denmark). Participants were asked to rank, out of a list of 50 values, the five that made their lives most meaningful. This list included values such as science, nature, love, infinity, family, sex, etc. Surprisingly, there was remarkable high agreement between nonreligious individuals and the general population of these countries. When it comes to 'finding meaning in the world and your own life' the values that ranked highest for all were 'family' and 'freedom.'²² These results not only contradict the stereotype of atheists and agnostics as less moral, but it shows that they share moral worldviews that are similar to those of the general population.

Concerning rationality, starting in 2012 various psychological experiments conducted in the USA and then Canada apparently showed that non-religious individuals had a more rational-analytical thinking style, which contrasted with the more intuitive style of religious people.^{23,24,25} Neuroimaging evidence corroborated this by claiming that the nonreligious were more able to inhibit supernatural thoughts, which was correlated with a higher activation of the right Inferior Frontal Gyrus.²⁶ However, in the last two years new evidence from cross-cultural and neural stimulation data emerged that contradicted the older studies. It was found that,

with some exceptions such as in the USA, atheists and agnostics are overall not higher on rational thinking than religious individuals²⁷ (although see a recent study by Stagnaro and colleagues²⁸); another set of studies was also not able to find any differences in cognitive styles between these populations and showed that the stimulation of the right Inferior Frontal Gyrus was not associated with a decrease of religious beliefs or attributions.²⁹

There are a number of other misconceptions about the nonreligious, such as that they don't engage in self-transcendence or don't have rituals similar to that of religious individuals. That atheists are able to experience awe, self-transcendence, and even delight in mysticism is clear from the literature. We can refer to work by Coleman^{4,30,31} and colleagues⁹⁰ on profound experiences among atheists. Additionally, empirical research from Silver and colleagues³² identified six types of atheists, such as the "Ritual Atheist/Agnostic" type, who appreciate and participate in ritual activities, and a recent book by John Gray³³ also discusses various types of atheism, in which the last two chapters are dedicated to mystical atheists. Finally, there is also emerging fieldwork depicting how atheists engaging with mindfulness meditation report an array of self-transcendent experiences.³⁴

Less well known, and admittedly a minority, some nonreligious have created ritual ceremonies. The most recent example is that of the Sunday Assemblies in the UK and the USA which mimic Christian Evangelical services, where religious songs are replaced by upbeat pop tunes and the sermon can focus on topics such as science, literature, or feminism.³⁵ This ritual creation from the nonreligious is something that stretches back much further. August Comte, the well-known father of sociology and of the theory of Positivism created a 'Positive Religion' intently focused on humanist values of compassion, love, and self-knowledge³⁶ (see also the

account by Comte's friend John Stuart Mill).³⁷ There were several of these churches in France, the UK, and even in Brazil, where they held services, processions, and rituals of baptism, wedding, as well as funerals. As far as we know, only one Positivist church remains active in the south of Brazil where its leader is attempting to grow its membership (see Fig. 15.1). For a video which shows parts of their services see the short documentary 'Understanding Unbelief in Brazil' by Ariane Porto: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pDKyVDgJvA>.

Fig. 15.1. The priest of the last church of Positivism sitting by the altar of the Positivist Church in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Photograph by Aubrey Wade, aubreywade.com.

To summarise: nonreligious individuals hold various types of beliefs which are meaningful to them and may help them cope with adverse events in life, they don't seem to differ from religious individuals concerning moral priorities, or in cognitive style. Lastly, although rare, they can also create and engage with rituals that closely mirror that of Western religions.

Methodological Problems

It is unfortunate that psychologists and medical researchers invested in the study of religion and its health correlates have for almost 100 years neglected the study of the nonreligious. The prejudices against this population is methodologically transparent when the nonreligious are treated in the negative — simply as people who lack belief in God. There are several reasons such a “negative approach” to conceptualizing nonreligion has endured in social scientific research on mental health. First, the varieties of nonreligious experience and identification do not enjoy the same deep historical structure and elucidation as their religious compatriots. Although in no way absent across history,³⁸ deviations from the culturally prevailing religion have historically been met with ridicule, scorn, and even death.³⁹ As a result, the different ways in which an individual might be nonreligious have not been articulated to the degree that religious variety has been (e.g., Catholics, Sufi, Protestant, etc.). Second, and relatedly, although the large, national, and multinational surveys used to cull mental health and other data from usually include a variety of religious self-identifications to select, ways in which a nonreligious individual might self-identify in positive terms, such as humanist or naturalist for example, are not included. Third, when studies do measure religiosity or belief as a continuous variable, atheists and nonreligious individuals are often conceptualized as occupying the low

end of these continuums.⁴⁰ Two consequences of this are: 1) it confuses a zero or low score on a religiosity scale with the absence of theistic belief⁵ and 2) it creates a biased comparison, where the mental health of atheists and the nonreligious is predicted by constructs they reject and / or do not value, while the mental health of theists and the religious is predicted by constructs that are believed in and valued.⁴¹ To use an analogy, this would be the same as using the low end of an omnivore scale to draw inferences about the psychology of vegans or measuring the mental health of devout Muslims based on their rejection of Christianity or Hinduism, for example. Defining atheism and nonreligion by what is lacking does not provide a solid footing from which to explore mental health in the nonreligious.

In spite of its methodological shortcomings, the existing research on nonreligion and mental health is still informative, because it points to a puzzle which can be solved in-part, we argue, by enriching our conceptualizing of nonreligion and atheism. What is this puzzle? It is the interesting observation, first identified by Galen and Kloet^{42,43,44} that strongly nonreligious and atheistic individuals appear to experience similar salutary effects as those well-documented to be experienced by strongly religious individuals. In the next sections, we provide a necessarily selective review of the existing research.

Nonreligion, atheism, and mental health: A review

The enduring relationship between religiosity is well documented¹, but as is often the case, the proverbial devil is in the details. For lacking religion, does the “nonreligious man assume a tragic existence,” as once proclaimed by historian of religion Mircea Eliade (p. 203)?⁴⁵ According to Schumaker⁴⁶ being nonreligious contributes to maladaptive psychological

outcomes by depriving the individual of the health benefits bequeathed by religion. Such sentiments are echoed by some researchers who view religion as a *sui generis* source of meaning and psychological health that cannot be fulfilled in secular ways.^{e.g., 47,48,49} Given the putative benefits associated with religiosity, which cover a variety of domains related to psychological and physical wellbeing (see the other chapters in this volume for a review), this position would be understandable if the nonreligious had been a very unusual, minority sample; admittedly they are in some countries but that is not the case in most Western countries, and some Eastern ones, particularly Japan and China, where there are significant proportions of nonreligious individuals.⁵⁰ We will now focus on the evidence available on the nonreligious and mental health starting with meaning in life.

Meaning in Life

The perception of meaning in life is an important component of mental health. One reason nonreligiosity is viewed as a health liability is due to the assumption that the nonreligious either struggle with or are deprived of life meaning. There is considerable evidence that religion is an important aspect of meaning in life for religious individuals.⁵¹ However, it is only recently that researchers have sought to compare theists and atheists, and this has challenged the assumption that atheists have deficits in perceived meaning in life and related constructs.

In one study, Schnell and Keenan⁵² compared a German sample of self-identified atheists recruited from an online forum with a representative German sample of religious “nones” with “Religionists.” They found that the nones, followed by the atheists, reported an

overall lower degree of life meaningfulness compared to the religious individuals. However, it is possible that the content of some of the meaningfulness scale items exacerbated any real difference, as they could be interpreted as having theistic undertones (e.g., “I think my life has a *deeper* meaning.” our emphasis), something that might have placed atheists at an *a priori* disadvantage. Overall, though, there was no difference in the degree of experienced crises of meaning between atheists and the religious group.

Schnell was able to identify three different sub-types of atheists based on their commitment to different sources of meaning, two of which valued several sources of meaning (e.g., knowledge, individualism, community) more strongly than religious individuals. In a more recent study using an American sample, Nelson and colleagues⁵³ asked atheists and theists to respond to a writing prompt asking them to list sources of personal meaning in life. They found that compared to theists, atheists were more likely to report statements that the researcher’s coded as having “no meaning” in life. However, one of the two examples the authors give for this code (“I don’t find my life meaningful in any objective sense”) appears to be a non-answer to the researchers’ central question asking for *personal* sources of meaning in life, which would exclude exactly the type of response they included in their analysis. More interestingly, atheists were more likely to report sources of life meaning that did not fit the researcher’s coded scheme. In addition, compared to theists, atheists reported less presence of meaning in life, *but* theists also reported a greater need for meaning.

In a sample of atheists affiliated with various secular organizations in America, Caldwell-Harris and colleagues¹⁵ found that atheists were just as likely as theists to respond affirmatively to statements about finding meaning in life experiences and having a sense of purpose. In a

different study with American undergraduate students and a general sample, Sedlar and colleagues⁵⁴ found that atheists were just as likely as theists to experience struggles with ultimate meaning and purpose. Furthermore, in a nationally representative American sample Speed, Coleman, and Langston⁵⁵ compared two proxies for lack of meaning in life, the presence of nihilistic (perceived lack of purpose) and fatalistic attitudes (nothing one can do to change their lives), and found no differences between atheists, nonreligious individuals, or theists, nor any difference based on whether individuals were raised in (non)religious households. They did, however, find that atheists and the nonreligious were more likely than theists to agree that meaning in life is endogenous (i.e., self-generated). large cross-cultural study of atheists and agnostics across Western and Eastern countries (China, Japan, England, USA, Brazil, & Denmark). Participants were asked to rank, out of a list of 50 values, the five that made their lives most meaningful. This list included values such as science, nature, love, infinity, family, sex, etc. Surprisingly, there was remarkable high agreement between nonreligious individuals and the general population of these countries. When it comes to ‘finding meaning in the world and your own life’ the values that ranked highest for all were ‘family’ and ‘freedom.’⁵⁶

We have mentioned above a large cross-cultural survey of six countries where they found that both atheists/agnostics and religious individuals valued family and freedom above other potential sources of meaning, such as God, love, or science. But there is mixed evidence for this similarity of sources of meaning. For example, a study of a highly secularised country, Denmark, found that religious individuals were more attached to Vertical Transcendent sources of meaning (spirituality and religiosity) than atheists, who preferred Self-Actualisation values (e.g. achievement, freedom, individualism).⁹¹ Similar results have been reported for the United

Kingdom,⁹² though this study also found that spiritual 'New Age' individuals scored as high as atheists in values of Self-Actualisation. To make things more complicated, the Danish study⁹¹ indicated that some of the worldview differences between religion and non-religious individuals disappeared when controlling for age and gender, which led them to conclude that most sources of meaning are common human values, regardless of one being religious or not. But this rings counter-intuitive. We would expect that holding a religious worldview implies the availability and frequent use of religious explanations in everyday life. Early models of attribution theory applied to religion predicted exactly that⁹³ but these have been robustly disconfirmed by various studies showing that even very religious individuals tend to make more naturalistic than religious explanations in their everyday lives, and to see God as a distal rather than a proximal cause^{94,95}; the exception to this seems to be when religious individuals are faced with life threatening events.⁹⁶

These findings need to be understood in the light of culture and history. It is likely that when religious worldviews are used by most people and life is embedd in a rich tapestry of religious rites, individuals will more often resort to religious worlviews. But, as historians have highlighted, the rise of Protestantism in the West brought with it a tsunami of changes – from the erosion of religious ideas and rites to the advent of modern science⁹⁷ – that secularised much of our way of finding religious causation in our lives. It is thus unsurprising the similarities found between unbelievers and religious individuals when it comes to explaining life events.

In sum, these studies add nuance to our understanding of the relationship between meaning in life and nonreligion in two ways. First, they suggest that whether or not atheists and theists perceive equal levels of meaning in life depends in-part on how open-response data is

coded and how measures of meaningfulness are worded. Second, they suggest there may be no negative consequences if and when atheists do report lower levels of meaningfulness, although further research is needed to understand this, especially outside of the USA and Europe. The perception that life meaning is something particularly difficult for atheists to achieve or that religion is the *sine qua non* of meaning in life is not supported by the current data. In other words, the absence of religion does not appear to leave behind what Yaden and colleagues⁵⁷ and Crescioni and Baumesiter⁵⁸ have argued as some kind of meaning gap. In fact, Heintzelman and King⁵⁹ reviewed of 195 studies using two common measures of meaning in life and found less than five studies with sample mean scores below the scale mid-point. In other words, meaning in life appears to be a common component of human life regardless of (non)religiosity. Finally, we also found that atheists and religious individuals espouse similar naturalistic explanations in their daily lives.

Nonreligion and general wellbeing

It is generally well-known that religious people have high levels of wellbeing. A review of the literature found that, out of 72 studies, 56 found a positive relationship between religiosity and wellbeing, and only one reported a negative relationship.¹ If nonreligiosity carries a penalty, we might expect the least religious countries to be associated with lower levels of wellbeing. However, at the societal level, countries that are the least theistic often fair better than countries with high numbers of religious individuals. For example, they have higher overall socioeconomic development,⁶⁰ report higher levels of happiness,⁶¹ lower rates of homicide and sexual transmitted diseases,⁶² and better quality of life and better governmental services.⁶³

Moreover, across 33 countries, participation in a non-religious organization correlated with equal or higher levels of self-rated health than participation in a religious organization.⁶⁴

Although a country's level of secularization is not always and everywhere correlated with an increase in wellbeing,⁶⁵ greater numbers of nonreligious individuals in a country generally correlate with a wide range of positive health outcomes.⁶⁶

Let us look closer at sub-samples from various countries where the published data reveals either a pattern of null results when comparing theists/atheists and religious/nonreligious or finds that the nonreligious report experiencing equivalent levels of psychological wellbeing. For example, in a 2011 field study that included 360 participants from 29 countries who were walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain, Farias, Coleman, and colleagues⁶⁷ found no differences between positive/negative affect and self-reported mental health problems between atheists and theists. Similarly, samples of Italian⁶⁸ and American⁶⁹ participants have not found differences between atheists and theists on life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing. Looking only at self-identified religious compared to nonreligious individuals in a systematic random sample from Kyoto, Japan, Roemer⁷⁰ found no differences in levels of psychological distress.

Even in samples of American children and teenagers, DeCamp and Smith⁷¹ found that when controlling for known protective factors, such as the quality of one's parental relationship, there is no difference in the amount of anti-social behavior (e.g., alcohol use and vandalism) exhibited based on (non)religiosity.

When researchers do find statistically significant differences between samples, the effect size is often small, and whether the differences are of practical significance is difficult to

establish. For example, a study with 821 total theists and atheists in Puerto Rico found theists reported higher life satisfaction, however atheists experienced higher psychological flourishing, and both differences were very small in effect size.⁷²

One consistent finding across various studies has been that of a U-shape curve, where the most strongly religious and non-religious show better health outcomes than the moderately religious and less strongly non-religious. This finding has been identified in the United States of America,^{73,74,66} including the USA prison population context,⁷⁵ and South Asian migrants in the USA,⁷⁶ in Turkey,⁷⁷ Israel,⁷⁸ and in East Germany.⁷⁹

We may ask: if the nonreligious are able to reproduce the positive functions of beliefs, do they also experience the potential negative consequences of adhering strongly to a worldview, as it happens with religious individuals when they experience desecration or sacred loss?⁴⁶ The answer is yes. New research on atheist members of a death metal worldview show that they experience higher positive effect and pro-social attitudes when listening to their preferred music; on the other hand, they are able to experience sacred loss and desecration of their death metal objects, as if these were religious, and feel particularly angry and depressed when this happens.⁸⁰

What of experimental studies that contrast religious with nonreligious individuals? These are rare and often biased. To give one specific example, that of pain tolerance and alleviation and the role of belief. Waccholtz and Pargament⁸¹ reported that a spiritual affirmation meditation (e.g., God is love) led to greater pain tolerance than a secular affirmation condition (e.g., I am good). Along similar lines, in a functional resonance magnetic stimulation experiment, Wiech, Farias and colleagues⁸² compared pain alleviation in practicing

Catholics versus non-religious individuals while they were contemplating either a religious or a secular portrait. They found stronger pain alleviation in the religious group as well as a stronger activation of the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, a region known to drive top-down inhibitory circuits. Both of these studies suffer from the same methodological constraint: they were unable to provide the nonreligious group with a condition (affirmation or image) which might have had the same strength of meaning as the religious condition had for the other group. A more recent experiment where they compared nonreligious with religious postgraduate students on various psychophysiological measures when exposing participants to acute stress used a more balanced priming method, where both types of participants either wrote about a very important event in their lives where religion or science had been particularly meaningful, or, in the control condition, they wrote about their favourite season.⁸³ The results showed no difference in outcomes for either group and no differences between the experimental and control groups, suggesting that neither religious or secular beliefs were particularly useful in helping participants cope with acute stress.

The literature on atheism and wellbeing is still in its infancy and the findings reported above are often crude. As we reported in the previous paragraph, there are studies suggesting that religious individuals may accrue special benefits but, overall, this research has a much more developed and extensive battery for assessing the varieties of religious experiences and beliefs than of non-religion. By contrast, atheists are usually clumped together as a single type of individuals, and we are often left with a simplistic, inaccurate portrayal, or even worse – a caricature. For this literature to develop there needs to be a more sophisticated understanding of the varieties of atheist worldviews, including of beliefs, value priorities, and life-goals.

Conclusion: Rethinking the study of religion, nonreligion, and health

There is a world of research to undertake in order to understand who the nonreligious are, the variety of their beliefs and worldviews, as well as practices, and how these might interact with mental health. There is no doubt that the literature is limited and contentious. It is important to note that there is a slow trickle of recent literature which represents in, some ways, a backlash at the findings we have presented here. For example, some survey work suggests that atheists and agnostics may sometimes experience higher levels of physical health but not of psychological health or wellbeing like religious individuals.⁸⁴ Another example from social psychological research highlights that the nonreligious can be dogmatic and prejudiced towards their outgroups (e.g. nonliberal or religious groups), and show a lack of flexibility in taking a different perspective.^{85,86,87} None of this is particularly unexpected or surprising and it has certainly not been our intention here to present the nonreligious as superior—morally or otherwise—to religious individuals, an obviously flawed approach. What we have attempted here was, on the one hand, to point out the historical neglect, and the conceptual and methodological biases on this topic. On the other hand, we reported the variety of nonreligious beliefs and how these nonreligious individuals may experience health benefits that mirror the findings from the literature on religion and health. The reasons for this are unclear but may be associated with their beliefs, meaning systems, but also their social networks and secular rituals (including meditation).

There is one final reason why this work is important and will have repercussions beyond the understanding of the nonreligious *per se*: it may well be that the salutary effects of religion have little to do with the supernatural contents of beliefs and rituals, but with the strength of

beliefs and the actions enacted in rituals. If that is the case then we'll have to entirely review the literature on mental health and religion, as well as many suppositions in the psychology of religion.

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