



# Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions

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## Abstract

What do we currently know about atheists and secular people? In what ways are atheism and secularity correlated with positive societal outcomes? This article offers a thorough presentation and discussion of the latest social scientific research concerning the identities, values, and behaviors of people who don't believe in God or are non-religious, and addresses the ways in which atheism and secularity are positively correlated with societal well-being.

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## Introduction

According to Psalm 14 of the Bible, people who don't believe in God are filthy, corrupt fools, entirely incapable of doing any good. Although those sentiments were written over 2,000 years ago, non-believers are still stigmatized to this day, with recent studies showing that a negative view of atheists is quite pervasive, especially in the United States (Harper 2007; D'Andrea and Sprenger 2007; Koproske 2006; Downey 2004; Heiner 1992). In an extensive study of how Americans view various minority groups, Penny Edgell et al. (2006, 230) and her colleagues found that 'atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic.' A Religion and Public Life Survey (2002) found that 54 percent of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of atheists and 28 percent have an unfavorable opinion of people who are "not religious." One laboratory study found that people gave lower priority to patients with atheist or agnostic views than to Christian patients when asked to rank them on a waiting list to receive a kidney (Furnham et al. 1998). Other surveys have found that most Americans would not vote for non-religious presidential candidates (Joyner 2007; Hunter 1990).

But it isn't just within the Bible or public opinion polls that one finds a negative appraisal of secular people. Philosopher John D. Caputo (2001, 2–3) has written that people who don't love God aren't "worth a tinker's damn," and that anyone who isn't theistically religious is nothing more than "selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon...a loveless lout." Psychologist Justin Barrett (2004) has described atheism as "unnatural" (p. 108) and an "odddity" (p. 118), while sociologist Rodney Stark (2008) has publicly stated that irreligious people "are prickly...they're just angry" (Duin 2008). Finally, some state constitutions – such as those in South Carolina and Arkansas – actually ban unbelievers from holding public office (Heiner 1992), and in many courtrooms of America, divorced parents have had custody rights denied or limited because of their atheism (Volkh 2006).

What gives? Is the widespread dislike, disapproval of, and general negativity towards atheists warranted, or is it a case of unsubstantiated prejudice? Maybe secular, non-believing men and women aren't so unsavory, wicked, or despicable after all.

Perhaps, there are some positive attributes correlated with secularity, such as lower levels of prejudice and ethnocentrism, or greater support for gender equality. And maybe societies with higher percentages of secular people are actually more healthy, humane, and happy than those with higher percentages of religious people. To explore these matters, we need to consider what social science actually reveals about people who don't believe in God or are irreligious, and examine just what empirically observable patterns emerge when considering the real lives, opinions, and overall state of well-being of atheists and secular people.

## Definitions

Before proceeding, let's define our terms. An *atheist* is someone who doesn't believe in God and/or finds the very concept of God meaningless or incoherent (Baggini 2003). An *agnostic* is someone who is unsure or undecided about the existence of God, or who believes that there are certain matters – such as existence of a God – that are beyond the scope of human knowledge and comprehension (Eller 2005). Other terms commonly associated with atheist/agnostic include “freethinker” “humanist,” and “skeptical” (Pasquale 2009). A *secular* person is someone who is non-religious, irreligious, or generally uninterested in, indifferent to, or oblivious to religious beliefs, activities, and organizations (Kosmin 2007). Finally, a *none* refers to someone who, when asked in a survey what his or her religions is, stated “none.”

Of course, things can be messy. For instance, someone can be secular and yet not be an atheist, such as an individual who never attends religious services or activities, doesn't describe herself as religious, and yet still believes in something she would refer to as God (Shibley 2004). Or a person can be religious while also being an atheist; there are many religious traditions – particularly in the East – that don't contain a specific belief in God (Eller 2007; Martin 2007), and for many other people, belief in God is largely absent from their idiosyncratic religious identities (McGuire 2008; Casebolt and Niekro 2005). Then there are people who eschew the designation “religious” in favor of “spiritual” (Fuller 2001; Stark et al. 2005). Finally, millions of people are “culturally religious,” identifying with a religious tradition, but without believing in the theological content thereof (Demerath 2000; Zuckerman 2008).

## How Many Atheists and Secular People are There?

There are somewhere between 500 million and 750 million non-believers in God worldwide (Zuckerman 2007). If we were to go beyond the narrow confines of non-belief in God and include religiously unaffiliated or non-religious people, these numbers would be significantly greater.

Although atheists and irreligious people certainly exist in every country, we definitely find much lower concentrations of atheism and secularity in poorer, less developed nations than in the richer industrialized democracies (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Bruce 2003). For instance, atheism and secularity are hardly discernible in the nations of Africa (Yirenkyi and Takyi 2009; Inglehart et al. 2004). Latin America is also quite religious (Chesnut 2003), with the only countries of secular note being Argentina, where, according to a Pew Global Attitudes Survey (2002), only 39 percent of Argentines claim that religion is “very important” in their lives, and Uruguay, where 13 percent of the population does not believe in God (Inglehart et al. 2003). Atheism and secularity are also minimal throughout the Arab World (Eller 2009). The only nation of secular significance in the Middle East is Israel; 37 percent of Israelis are atheist or agnostic (Kedem 1995) and

75 percent of Israelis define themselves as “not religious” or having a “non-religious orientation” (Dashefsky et al. 2003).

Survey data of religious belief in China is extremely unreliable (Guest 2003; Demerath 2001, 154), with estimates of high degrees of atheism most likely being exaggerations (Overmyer 2003; Yang 2004). Figures of between 8 and 14 percent of Chinese people being atheist are probably more accurate (Barrett et al. 2001; O’Brien and Palmer 1993). Although strong secular movements do exist within India (Narisetti 2009), a BBC Survey (2004) found that <3 percent of Indians do not believe in God, and Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that only 5 percent of Indians do not believe in God, with 88 percent of Indians regularly engaging in prayer and/or meditation. The BBC Survey (2004) also found that 30 percent of South Koreans do not believe in God, while Eungi (2003) reports that 52 percent of South Koreans do not believe in God. Japan is one of the most secular nations in the world (Schneider and Silverman 2010), where 65 percent of the people are non-believers (Norris and Inglehart 2004; Demerath 2001, 139).

Rates of atheism and secularity are markedly high in Europe (Bruce 2002; Brown 2001; Hayes 2000; Zuckerman 2008; Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001; Gil et al. 1998; Shand 1998). Ronald Inglehart et al. (2004) found that 61 percent of Czechs, 49 percent of Estonians, 45 percent of Slovenians, 34 percent of Bulgarians, and 31 percent of Norwegians do not believe in God. A Eurobarometer Report (2005) found that 33 percent of the French, 27 percent of the Dutch, 27 percent of Belgians, 25 percent of Germans, and 20 percent of the British do not believe in God or any sort of spirit or life force. Only 51 percent of Danes and 26 percent of Swedes believe in a “personal God” (Bondeson 2003) and nearly half of all Swedes are decidedly secular (Ahlin 2005). The 2004 BBC survey found that 24 percent of Russians do not believe in God and Inglehart et al. (2004) report that 30 percent of Russians do not believe in God.

Concerning North America, 28 percent of Canadians are secular (Guth and Fraser 2001), and between 19 percent and 23 percent do not believe in God (Bibby 2002; Altemeyer 2009). In the United States, rates of atheism and secularity have been steadily increasing for several decades (Kosmin and Keysar 2009; Paul 2009; Phillips 2007; Gallup Poll, 2005a; Hout and Fischer 2002; Condran and Tamney 1985). Kosmin and Keysar (2009) report that roughly 12 percent of Americans are atheist or agnostic, 15 percent of Americans choose “None” when it comes to religious preferences, and 16 percent of Americans describe themselves as secular or somewhat secular. The Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey (2007) found that 5 percent of Americans do not believe in God, with 16 percent of Americans choosing “unaffiliated” as their religious identification. A Survey reports (Baylor Religion Survey 2005) that 4.6 percent of American don’t believe in anything beyond the physical world, 14.3 percent don’t believe in God, per se, but do believe in a “higher power or cosmic force,” and 2.8 percent have “no opinion” when it comes to belief in God. Sherkat (2008) reports that 6.5 percent of Americans are atheist or agnostic, a 2007 Barna survey reports that 9 percent of Americans are atheist, agnostic, or have “no faith,” and a 2008 Harris Poll (Harris Poll 2008) found that 19 percent of Americans are atheist or agnostic – the highest level of non-belief ever reported in a national survey of Americans. Given these percentages, we can estimate that somewhere between 10 million and 47 million adult Americans are atheist, agnostic, or secular.

## Demographics

While atheists and secular people are found in every demographic category, certain patterns stand out. For example, men are much more likely to be irreligious than women

(Rice 2003; Veevers and Cousineau 1980). Men make up 58 percent of Americans who claim “no religion,” 70 percent of Americans who self-identify as “atheist,” and 75 percent of those who self-identify as “agnostic” (Keysar 2007). Men are also much more likely to become apostates – people who were once religious but are no longer, having rejected their religion at some point (Hadaway and Roof 1988; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997). Indeed, a substantial and international body of research makes it clear that on all measures of religiosity, men rate lower than women (Francis 1997; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Miller and Stark 2002; Furseth 2009; Walter and Davie 1998; Hayes 2000; Miller and Hoffman 1995; Batson et al. 1993).

Concerning race/ethnicity, Kosmin and Keysar (2009, 2006) report that 10 percent of Native Americans, 11 percent of African-Americans, 16 percent of Hispanic-Americans, 17 percent of White Americans, and 30 percent of Asian-Americans claim to be “secular” or “somewhat secular.” They further note that 20 percent of Whites, 13 percent of Blacks, 17 percent of Hispanics, and 32 percent of Asian-Americans claim “none” or “don’t know” as their religion.

Atheists tend to be young (Lambert 2004; Hayes 2000). Keysar (2007) reports that one-third of American atheists are under 25 years old, and half are under age 30. Kosmin and Keysar (2006) found that 23 percent of Americans between ages 18–34 describe themselves as secular or somewhat secular, but only 10 percent of Americans over age 65 did so. Voas and Day (2007) report that 63 percent of British young adults (age 18–24) claim to belong to no religion, while only 22 percent of British people over age 65 identify as such.

Higher education is positively correlated with atheism, agnosticism, and secularity (Baker 2008; Sherkat 2008, 2003; Johnson 1997; Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1975). For example, 42 percent of Americans claiming to have “no religion”, 32 percent of American atheists, and 42 percent of American agnostics have graduated from college – all higher than the percentage of college graduates in the general American adult population, which is 27 percent (Kosmin 2008; Keysar 2007). Attending college as well as graduate school – and having an “intellectual orientation” – are also significant predictors of who will reject or abandon their religion at some point in their life (Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Altemeyer 2009; Hayes 2000, 1995a; Sherkat and Ellison 1991; McAllister 1998; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Hadaway and Roof 1988). Furthering the link between education/intellectualism and secularity, recent studies have found that secular people score markedly higher on tests of verbal ability and verbal sophistication when compared religious people (Sherkat 2006), and secular people also score markedly higher on indicators of scientific proficiency than religious people (Sherkat 2009). And Larson and Witham (1997, 1998) found that among the members of the United States National Academy of Sciences, only 7 percent claimed to believe in a personal God and only 8 percent believed in immortality, and Ecklund and Scheitle (2007) report that professors at America’s top universities are far more likely to be atheists than the general American population.

Considering the geography of the irreligious, as already mentioned, European nations – along with Japan, South Korea, and Israel – contain the highest proportions of atheists and secular individuals. In the United States, atheists and secular people are most heavily concentrated on the West Coast and in the Northeast, and are least abundant in the South (Killen and Silk 2004; Kosmin and Keysar 2009). The 10 states with the highest proportion of people with “no faith” are Oregon, Washington, Vermont, Colorado, Delaware, Idaho, California, New Hampshire, Wyoming, and Montana, and the ten states with the lowest proportion of people with no faith are North Dakota, South Dakota,

South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Maine, Texas, North Carolina, and Louisiana (Kosmin and Keysar 2006). And according to the Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey (2007), God belief is weakest in Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, Arizona, and certain states of New England, and strongest in Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Louisiana.

Finally, lesbians and homosexual men are about twice as likely to become apostates than heterosexual men and women (Sherkat 2002).

In sum, men are more likely than women to be atheist or secular, younger people are more likely to be non-believers or unaffiliated than older people, the Pacific Northwest and parts of New England have the highest concentration of “Nones,” the racial-ethnic group with the highest degree of secularity is Asian-American, and homosexuals are more likely to reject religion than heterosexuals. Also, higher education appears to be correlated with secularity. Finally, among religious groups themselves, Jews are the most likely to be irreligious (Rebhun and Levy 2006), for as Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (2007, 313) notes, “modern Jews are highly secularized, scoring low on every measure of religious belief and participation in every known study.”

### Values, Beliefs, Opinions, and Worldviews

It is often assumed that someone who doesn't believe in God doesn't believe in *anything*, or that a person who has no religion must have no values. These assumptions are simply untrue. People can reject religion and still maintain strong beliefs. Being godless does not mean being without values. Numerous studies reveal that atheists and secular people most certainly maintain strong values, beliefs, and opinions. But more significantly, when we actually compare the values and beliefs of atheists and secular people to those of religious people, the former are markedly less nationalistic, less prejudiced, less anti-Semitic, less racist, less dogmatic, less ethnocentric, less close-minded, and less authoritarian (Greeley and Hout 2006; Sider 2005; Altemeyer 2003, 2009; Jackson and Hunsberger 1999; Wulff 1991; Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992, 1997; Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Batson et al. 1993; Argyle 2000).

Concerning *political orientations*, atheist and secular people are much more likely to be registered Independent than the general American population, and they are much less likely to be right-wing, conservative, or to support the Republican party than their religious peers (Kosmin 2008). Keysar (2007, 38) reports that 50 percent of American *atheists* are Independent, 26 percent are Democrat, and 10 percent are Republican and that 43 percent of American *agnostics* are Independent, 22 percent are Democrat, and 15 percent are Republican. Greeley and Hout (2006) report that only about 21 percent of people claiming “no religion” voted for Republican candidates in recent elections. In the 2008 presidential election, specifically, 76 percent of atheists and agnostics voted for Obama, and only 23 percent voted for McCain (Barna Research Group Survey 2008). Grupp and Newman (1973) and Nassi (1981) have found that irreligiosity is strongly and consistently correlated and with liberal, progressive, or left-wing political perspectives, and Gay and Ellison (1993) found that – when compared to various religious groups – nonreligious Americans are the most politically tolerant, supporting the extension of civil liberties to dissident groups.

As for *gender equality and women's rights*, atheists and secular people are quite supportive (Hayes 1995b). Recent studies show that secular individuals are much more supportive of gender equality than religious people, less likely to endorse conservatively traditional views concerning women's roles, and when compared with various religious denominations,



“Nones” possess the most egalitarian outlook of all concerning women’s rights (Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1985, 1993; Petersen and Donnenwerth 1998; Hoffman and Miller 1997). Additional polls reveal that abortion rights are more likely to be supported by the secular than the religious (Gallup Poll 2006; ABC News Poll 2001).

Concerning the *acceptance of homosexuality and support for gay rights*, atheists and secular people again stand out (Linneman and Clendenen 2009; Hayes 1995b). When compared with the religious, non-religious people are far more accepting of homosexuality and supportive of gay rights and gay marriage (Sherkat et al. 2007; Burdette et al. 2005; Lewis 2003; Loftus 2001; Roof and McKinney 1987), and are far less likely to be homophobic or harbor negative attitudes towards homosexuals (Altemeyer 2009; Rowatt et al. 2006; Schulte and Battle 2004; Aubyn et al. 1999; VanderStoep and Green 1988; Kunkel and Temple 1992). According to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Survey (2008), 60 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans support gay marriage, compared to roughly 26 percent of Protestants and 42 percent of Catholics. According to Newport (2008), 76 percent of Americans who never or seldom attend church consider homosexuality morally acceptable, compared with 21 percent of weekly and 43 percent of monthly church attenders.

Additional studies consistently find that atheists and secular people tend to take a more liberal/progressive stand on a multitude of contemporary social issues (Hoffman and Miller 1997; Hood et al. 1996; Nelson 1988). For example, secular Americans were far less supportive of the *U.S. invasion of Iraq* than religious Americans (Smidt 2005); only 38 percent of secular Americans favored invasion compared with 68 percent of Evangelical Protestants, 57 percent of Mainline Protestants, and 58 percent of Catholics, and 47 percent of Jews. Guth et al. (2005) found that only 32 percent of secular Americans consider the Iraq War justified, compared with 89 percent of Mormons, 87 percent of Evangelicals, 73 percent of Mainline Protestants, and 84 percent of Catholics. When it comes to the *death penalty*, atheists and nonreligious people are also markedly less supportive than their religious peers (Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Gallup Poll, 2004). As for the general *treatment of prisoners*, secular people are much less supportive of retribution and are less likely to favor harsh/draconian sentencing than religious people (Grasmick et al. 1992; Blumstein and Cohen 1980). A recent survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Survey (2009) found that secular, religiously unaffiliated Americans are the group least supportive of the governmental use of *torture*. Concerning *doctor assisted suicide*, non-church attenders are much more likely to support it than weekly church attenders (Carroll 2007; Stark and Bainbridge 1996), and support for *stem cell research* is strongest among the secular (Nisbet 2005); Harris Poll (2004) found that 84 percent of “nonreligious” Americans support stem cell research, compared with 55 percent of “very religious” Americans. Finally, secular people are much more likely to support the *legalization of marijuana* than religious people (Gallup Poll, 2005b; Hoffman and Miller 1997).

The above information reveals that atheists and secular people have very clear and pronounced values and beliefs concerning moral, political, and social issues. As Lynn Nelson (1988, 134) has concluded, religiously unaffiliated people “have as well-defined a sense of social justice as weekly churchgoers.” But I would go farther. I would argue that a strong case could be made that atheists and secular people actually possess a *stronger or more ethical* sense of social justice than their religious peers. After all, when it comes to such issues as the governmental use of torture or the death penalty, we see that atheists and secular people are far more merciful and humane. When it comes to protecting the environment, women’s rights, and gay rights, the non-religious again distinguish themselves as being

the most supportive. And as stated earlier, atheists and secular people are also the least likely to harbor ethnocentric, racist, or nationalistic attitudes. Strange then, that so many people assume that atheists and non-religious people lack strong values or ethical beliefs – a truly groundless and unupportable assumption.

### **Criminality and Moral Conduct**

In many people's minds – and as expressed so clearly in Psalm 14 cited at the outset of this essay – atheism is equated with lawlessness and wickedness, while religion is equated with morality and law-abiding behavior. Does social science support this position?

Although some studies have found that religion does inhibit criminal behavior (Baier and Wright 2001; Powell 1997; Bainbridge 1989; Elifson et al. 1983; Peek et al. 1985) others have actually found that religiosity does not have a significant effect on inhibiting criminal behavior (Cochran et al. 1994; Evans et al. 1996; Hood et al. 1996). “The claim that atheists are somehow more likely to be immoral,” asserts Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (2007, 306), “has long been disproven by systematic studies.”

Admittedly, when it comes to underage alcohol consumption or illegal drug use, secular people do break the law more than religious people (Benson 1992; Gorsuch 1995; Hood et al. 1996; Stark and Bainbridge 1996). But when it comes to more serious or violent crimes, such as murder, there is simply no evidence suggesting that atheist and secular people are more likely to commit such crimes than religious people. After all, America's bulging prisons are not full of atheists; according to Golumbaski (1997), only 0.2 percent of prisoners in the USA are atheists – a major under-representation.

If religion, prayer, or God-belief hindered criminal behavior, and secularity or atheism fostered lawlessness, we would expect to find the most religious nations having the lowest murder rates and the least religious nations having the highest. But we find just the opposite. Murder rates are actually *lower* in more secular nations and higher in more religious nations where belief in God is deep and widespread (Jensen 2006; Paul 2005; Fajnzylber et al. 2002; Fox and Levin 2000). And within America, the states with the highest murder rates tend to be highly religious, such as Louisiana and Alabama, but the states with the lowest murder rates tend to be among the least religious in the country, such as Vermont and Oregon (Ellison et al. 2003; Death Penalty Information Center, 2008). Furthermore, although there are some notable exceptions, rates of most violent crimes tend to be lower in the less religious states and higher in the most religious states (United States Census Bureau, 2006). Finally, of the top 50 safest cities in the world, nearly all are in relatively non-religious countries, and of the eight cities within the United States that make the safest-city list, nearly all are located in the least religious regions of the country (Mercer Survey, 2008).

What about altruism? Although studies report that secular Americans donate less of their income to charitable causes than the religious (Regnerus et al. 1998), it should be noted that it is the most secular democracies on earth – such as Scandinavia – that donate the most money and supportive aid, per capita, to poorer nations (Center for Global Development, 2008). Furthermore, secular people are much more likely than religious people to vote for candidates and programs that redistribute wealth from the richer segments of society to the poorer segments through progressive taxation. Finally, Oliner and Oliner (1988) and Varese and Yaish (2000), in their studies of heroic altruism during the Holocaust, found that the more secular people were, the more likely they were to rescue and help persecuted Jews.

## Life Satisfaction and Psychological Well-Being

Are atheism and secularity somehow linked to unhappiness, emotional instability, or psychological problems?

The relationship between religiosity/secularity and psychological well-being is a heavily-researched matter (Sherkat and Ellison 1999), although one that is far from settled (Hwang 2008; Pasquale 2007a,b). Some studies suggest that religiosity is positively correlated with positive mental health outcomes (Levin and Taylor 1998; Levin and Chatters 1998) while others find no such correlation (Musick 2000; King and Schafer 1992; Gee and Veevers 1990; Brown and Gary 1987; Bergin 1983; Stones 1980; Campbell et al. 1976; Atchley 1997; Crawford et al. 1989). Schumaker (1992) has argued that non-religious people are more likely to have having psychological problems, yet Ventis (1995) has argued that secular people are actually psychologically healthier than religious people (see also Beit-Hallahmi 2007). Many studies report that religiosity is correlated with reduced levels of depression (Koenig 1995; Ellison 1994; Levin 1994), and yet others suggest that religiosity can have a negative or no influence on depression (Bugge et al. 2001; O'Connell and Skevington 2005; Sorenson et al. 1995; Francis et al. 1981; Wilson and Miller 1986). Mirola (1999) found that being religiously involved helps lower levels of depression among women, but not men. Some studies indicate that secular people are less happy than religious people (Altemeyer 2009; Reed 1991; Steinitz 1980), and yet international comparisons show that it is the most secular nations in the world that report the highest levels of happiness among their populations (Beit-Hallahmi 2009; Zuckerman 2008; De Place 2006). According to Greeley and Hout (2006, 153), among Americans who describe themselves as "very happy," secular people don't fare as well as religious people, and yet, among people who describe themselves as "pretty happy," nonreligious Americans actually fare the best. Religiosity may also be correlated with lower death anxiety (Duff and Hong 1995; Spilka et al. 1985) – but not necessarily (Phelps 2009; Zuckerman 2008). Ross (1990, 239) found that people with stronger religious beliefs had significantly lower levels of psychological distress than those with weaker religious beliefs, but that "those with no religion had the lowest distress levels." Religiosity may be correlated with longer life expectancy (Musick et al. 2004; McCullough and Smith 2003; Hummer et al. 1999) – but some have challenged even this finding (Bagiella et al. 2005).

While acknowledging the many disagreements and discrepancies above, the fact still remains that a preponderance of studies do indicate that secular people don't seem to fare as well as their religious peers when it comes to selected aspects of psychological well-being (Hackney and Sanders 2003; Pargament 2002; Schnitker 2001; Hood et al. 1996; Idler and Stanislav 1992; Petersen and Roy 1985). For instance, Ellison (1991), Jones (1993), and Pollner (1989) found that religious beliefs correlate with a sense of life-satisfaction and well-being, and Myers (1992) found that religious faith is correlated with hope and optimism. McIntosh et al. (1993) report that religious people have a better time adjusting to and coping with sad or difficult life events than secular people; Mattlin et al. (1990) and Palmer and Noble (1986) report that religion is beneficial for people dealing with chronic illness or the death of a loved one. Based on a systematic examination of over 100 studies – and drawing heavily from the work of Koenig et al. (2001) – McCullough and Smith (2003, 191–192) conclude that "people who are religious devout, but not extremists, tend to report greater subjective well-being and life satisfaction...more ability to cope with stress and crises...and fewer symptoms of depression" than secular people. However, it should be pointed out that some have vigorously refuted such sweeping conclusions, arguing that the link between religiosity and positive health



outcomes is grossly exaggerated (Sloan and Bagiella 2002). Finally, there is certainly the possibility that because being non-religious in the United States makes one a member of a widely un-liked, distrusted, and stigmatized minority, this could take a psychological toll on the mental health and sense of well-being of atheists and secular people, who may suffer from a sense of isolation, alienation, or rejection from family, colleagues, or peers (Downey 2004).

As for suicide, however, regular church-attending Americans clearly have lower rates than non-attenders (Comstock and Partridge 1972; Stack and Wasserman 1992; Martin 1984), although this correlation has actually not been found in other nations (Stack 1991). Of the current top-ten nations with the highest rates of suicide, most are relatively secular (World Health Organization, 2003). But it is worth noting that eight of these top-ten are post-Soviet countries, suggesting that decades of totalitarianism, depressed economies, and a lack of basic human freedoms may be more significant in explaining the high rates of suicide than low levels of God-belief.

### Family and Children

Studying the relationship of religion to family life has been a staple of social science for decades (Edgell 2003; Houseknecht and Pankhurst 2000; Sherkat and Ellison 1999; Thomas and Cornwall 1990; Ammerman and Roof 1995; D'Antonio and Aldous 1983; Darwin and Henry 1985).

But what about secularity and family life?

Some studies report that non-religious people have higher rates of divorce than religious people (Hood et al. 1996; Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Heaton and Call 1997), but a 1999 Barna study (Barna Research Group Survey 1999, 2007) found that atheists and agnostics actually have lower divorce rates than religious Americans. And according to Kosmin (2008), divorce is a widespread phenomenon that affects the religious and secular in roughly equal measure. As for the effect of divorce on later religious or secular identity, Lawton and Bures (2001) found that kids whose parents had divorced were more likely to become "Nones" later in life than kids whose parents remained married, a finding confirmed by Zhai et al. (2007).

While Fergusson et al. (1986) found that non-religious New Zealanders experienced higher rates of domestic violence than their religious counterparts, and Ellison and Anderson (2001) report that regular church-attenders have lower rates of domestic violence than non church-attenders, Brinkerhoff et al. (1992) found no such correlation in Canada, where non-affiliated women experienced lower rates of domestic violence than conservative Christian women.

As for the number of children per household, nonreligious Americans are fairly average (Kosmin and Keysar 2006). However, Gottlieb (2008) reports that strongly religious people are far more likely to have large families with lots of children than secular people, and the most religious nations on earth have birth rates triple that of the least religious nations on earth (see also Bainbridge 2005).

Concerning the actual raising of children, it appears that, just as religious offspring tend to follow in the footsteps of their religious parents (Bader and Desmond 2006; Sherkat 2003; Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1975; Hayes and Pittelkow 1993; Sherkat and Wilson 1995), secular children also tend to be raised by secular parents (Ecklund and Scheitle 2007). Nelsen (1990) found that among American families, if the father had no religion but the mother did, about one-sixth of such children grew up to become religious "Nones;" if the mother had no religion but the father did, about half of such children

became religious “Nones;” and if both parents had no religion, approximately 84 percent of such children grew up to have no religion themselves. Clearly, childhood socialization is a major factor in determining whether someone will be religious – or not.

Of children who are raised in non-religious homes, what do we actually know about their upbringing? Christel Manning (2009) has observed that atheist/secular parents are not amoral nihilists. Rather, atheist/secular parents positively embrace a meaningful moral order, which they actively convey to their children. And in contrast to conservative Christians, who tend to foster obedience in their children (Ellison and Sherkat 1993a), secular parents emphasize the value of “questioning everything,” along with the pursuit of truth, the importance of not harming others, rational problem-solving, acting responsibly, and doing what is best for humanity and the planet. Manning’s qualitative research reveals that, as broached earlier, secular people are not without values. They simply embrace – and impart to their children – rational, this-worldly values that aren’t centered around belief in, or obedience to, God.

While on the topic of child-raising, consider the issue of corporal punishment – for example, spanking. Ellison and Sherkat (1993b) found that the less religious parents were, the less likely were to support the use of corporal punishment on children, and Douglas (2006) reports that approval of the spanking of children and slapping of teenagers is generally lower among more secular nations and higher among more religious nations, and also lower among more secular regions within the USA than more religious regions, and of the 17 countries in the world that have actually outlawed the hitting of children, nearly all are among the most secular nations in the world, including Denmark, Sweden, and Bulgaria.

## Sex and Sexuality

While much has been written concerning the relationship between sex and religion (Runzo and Martin 2000; Manning and Zuckerman 2005; Parrinder 1996), what do we know about sex and secularity?

In the most empirically sound study on sex ever conducted in the United States, Michael et al. (1995) found that, for the most part, people who claimed “None” as their religion had similar sexual behaviors as religious people, with the following exceptions: 16 percent of “Nones” and 17 percent Jews (highly secularized) had over 20 sex partners in their lifetime, compared with 7 percent of Conservative Protestants, 8 percent of mainline Protestants, and 9 percent of Catholics (see also Barkan 2006; Laumann et al. 1994). Also, Nones have sex for longer periods of time, are more likely to have engaged in anal sex than religious people, and non-religious women are more likely to have received oral sex than religious women.

Additional research reveals that, compared with the religious, secular adults are more likely to have had premarital sex, to have had an extra-marital affair, and to approve of oral sex (Janus and Janus 1993). Also, secular adults are less condemning of pre-marital and extra-marital sex (Cochran and Beeghly 1991), are more likely to engage in a wider variety of sexual behaviors (Mahoney 1980), and have less guilt about their own sexual activities than their religious peers (Vernon 1968). Davidson et al. (1995) found that non-church attending women were less likely to view masturbation as a sin, to view masturbation as un-healthy, or to feel ashamed about masturbating than regular church-attending women.

Although Hadaway and Roof (1979) found that secular adults watch more X-rated movies than religious adults, a recent study by Edelman (2009) found that, when it comes

to paying for on-line pornography, states with more secular populations have lower consumption rates than states with more religious populations; in fact, one of the most religious states in the country, Utah, actually leads the nation in on-line pay-for-porn consumption. Finally, Rosenbaum (2009) found that teenagers who take religion-inspired “virginity pledges” are just as likely to engage in pre-marital sex as teenagers who don’t take such pledges, but it is the non-pledges who are more likely to protect themselves from pregnancy and disease when they have sex, which helps explain why STD infection rates and teen pregnancy rates are lower in more secular nations compared with more religious nations (Paul 2005).

### National and State Comparisons

One consistent assertion made by religious people is that if a society or country loses faith in God, or becomes secular, the results won’t be good. It is a theo-sociological claim: societies characterized by significant levels of belief in God are expected to fare much better than those without. And it is a claim that is easily testable. The results, however, indicate that the claim is unsupported. For when we compare more secular countries with more religious countries, we actually find that – with the exception of suicide – the more secular fare markedly better than the more religious on standard measures of societal well-being (Zuckerman 2008; Crabtree 2005; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Admittedly, nations with atheistic dictatorships, such as Vietnam, formerly-Communist Albania, or the former U.S.S.R., do miserably on various indicators of societal well-being. However, this is most likely due to the dictatorship element of the equation, and not the atheistic element. After all, nations led by religious dictatorships – such as Chile under Pinochet, Haiti under Duvalier, Spain under Franco, or modern-day Iran – also fare poorly, particularly concerning civil and human rights.

As noted earlier, the most secular democracies in the world score very high on international indexes of happiness and well-being (Kamenev 2006) and they have among lowest violent crime and homicide rates (Paul 2005). But there’s more. A perusal of any recent *United Nations World Development Report* reveals that when it comes to such things as life expectancy, infant mortality, economic equality, economic competitiveness, health care, standard of living, and education, it is the most secular democracies on earth that fare the best, doing much better than the most religious nations in the world (Zuckerman 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Bruce 2003). Consider women’s equality and women’s rights: women fare much better in more secular countries when compared with women in more religious countries and that women’s equality is strongest in the world’s most secular democracies (Inglehart et al. 2003; Inglehart and Norris 2003). And a UNICEF (2007) report found that the least religious nations on earth – such as Sweden and Holland – are simultaneously the best countries for the care and well-being of children. Of the top ten best countries in the world within which to be a mother, all are highly secular nations; of the bottom worst 10, all are highly religious (Save the Children, 2008). And the nations with the lowest levels of corruption are simultaneously among the most secular (Beit-Hallahmi 2009). When it comes to intolerance of racial or ethnic minorities, levels are lower in less religious countries, and higher in more religious countries (Gallup Poll 2009, April 7). Concerning environmental protection, secular nations fare much better than religious nations, with the most secular democracies on earth doing the most to enact strong and progressive laws and green programs (Germanwatch, 2008). According to one international ranking, the “greenest” countries in the world are simultaneously among the most secular (Reader’s Digest, 2009). Additionally, the nations that score the

highest when it comes to the quality of political and civil liberties that their citizens enjoy tend to be among the most secular nations on earth (Nationmaster, 2009). As for reading and math skills and scientific literacy, it is again the more secular nations that fare the best (Lynn 2001; UNICEF, 2002). The most secular nations in the world are also the most peaceful, while the most religious nations are the least peaceful (Vision of Humanity, 2008). And according to the Legatum Prosperity Index (2009), secular nations are far more prosperous than religious nations. Finally, according to *The Economist's* Quality of Life Index (2005), which takes into account multiple indicators of subjective well-being as well as objective determinants of quality of life, the “best” nations on earth are overwhelmingly among the most secular, while the “worst” are overwhelmingly among the most religious.

Within the United States, we find similar patterns: the states with the highest rates of poverty tend to be among the most religious states in the nation, such as Mississippi and Tennessee, while the states with the lowest poverty rates tend to be among the most secular, such as New Hampshire and Hawaii (United States Census Bureau 2008). The states with the highest rates of obesity are among the most religious in the nations, while the states with the lowest rates of obesity are among the least religious (Calorielab.com 2008). And it is the more religious states that tend to have infant mortality rates higher than the national average, while the less religious states tend to have lower infant mortality rates (United States Census Bureau, 2005). Additionally, it is among the most religious states that one finds the highest rates of STDs (Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2007) and teen pregnancy (Guttmacher Institute, 2006). America's Bible Belt also contains the lowest rates of college-educated adults, and of the states with the highest percentage of college educated adults, most are among the most secular in the country (United States Census Bureau, 2007).

Evidently, a preponderance of people of faith in a given society is not necessarily beneficial, nor is a preponderance of atheists or secular people automatically deleterious. In fact, as I have tried to show, states and nations with a preponderance of nonreligious people actually fare better on most indicators of societal health than those without (Rees 2009; Zuckerman 2008; Norris and Inglehart 2004). Of course, correlation is not causation. We cannot be sure that atheism and/or secularity directly cause positive societal outcomes. But we can be quite sure that atheism and/or secularity certainly do not hinder societal well-being, either.

## Conclusion

This essay began with a well-known Biblical quote stating that atheists are simply no good. Do the findings of contemporary social science support this Biblical assertion? The clear answer is no. Atheism and secularity have many positive correlates, such as higher levels of education and verbal ability, lower levels of prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism, and homophobia, greater support for women's equality, child-rearing that promotes independent thinking and an absence of corporal punishment, etc. And at the societal level, with the important exception of suicide, states and nations with a higher proportion of secular people fare markedly better than those with a higher proportion of religious people.

This essay has presented what social scientists currently know about atheists and secular people in relation to personal and societal well-being. The numerous studies cited above provide information about who tends to be irreligious as well as what atheists and secular people tend to believe and do. In assembling this information, I have tried my best to

provide a thorough, fair-minded summation and discussion of the available data, and while it is certainly possible for others to provide a more negative appraisal of atheists and secular people than perhaps I have presented here (Bainbridge 2005), I have done my best to not exclude inconvenient studies or facts that might refute or taint my general argument. That said, there may of course be studies or findings that I didn't include because I am unaware of them, hence their non-inclusion was not because of my own deliberate omission, but rather because of my own ignorance. Also, we must remember that all social scientific conclusions are tentative and that statistics can be interpreted numerous ways. But, as Robert Putnam (2000, 23) has so insightfully argued, "we must make due with the imperfect evidence that we find, not merely lament its deficiencies." Furthermore, it is still far preferable and more rational to base our arguments upon the findings of careful scholarship – flawed or debatable though it may be – than on mere anecdote or personal prejudice (Best 2001).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that what is missing from this essay – and what is clearly beyond its limits – are satisfying *explanations* for the many important patterns that we find. Why are men more likely to be atheists than women? Why is education correlated with secularity? Why are rates of irreligion so high among Jews and Asian Americans? Why are secular people more supportive of homosexual rights than religious people? Why is violent crime most heavily concentrated in the most religious regions of the USA? Why do the most secular nations on earth enjoy the highest levels of gender equality? Alas, such questions abound. We can only hope that continued social scientific research into the nature of atheism and secularity can begin to provide some satisfying answers.

## Short Biography

Phil Zuckerman received his PhD from the University of Oregon in 1998. He is currently an associate professor of sociology at Pitzer College. He lives in Claremont, California, with his wife and three children. He is the author of *Society Without God* (NYU, 2008) and *Invitation to the Sociology of Religion* (Routledge, 2003), and editor of *Atheism and Secularity* (Praeger, forthcoming).

## Note

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