

Atheism, Agnosticism, and Irreligion

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Abstract

Research on the topics of atheism, agnosticism, and irreligion has been limited during much of the last century. We explain the reasons for a lack of research in this field and discuss the recent interest in this topic. The most recent wave of research has been concentrated during the past decade and tends to look at the dual issues of who composes the religiously unaffiliated and why they choose this self-identification. Recent research has begun to take a much wider and deeper view on the subject. This includes research on particular segments of the population such as atheists, as well as understanding how the religiously unaffiliated are viewed by the broader culture. We conclude by describing important directions for future research. In particular, there is a need to break out the separate forms of irreligion and use creative new methodologies to find and study this significant portion of the population.

INTRODUCTION

Research about the religiously unaffiliated and those who reject religion has been largely understudied within social scientific studies of religion until the recent emergence of a greater interest in the topic. The understudied nature of this topic can be closely traced to two complementary forces within the sociology of religion. The first is the assumed processes of secularization, which were largely taken as axiomatic by early scholars. While this perspective took many forms (Gorski & Altinodu, 2008), at its heart it assumed that through processes of modernization and rationalization religion would become extinct (or at least severely marginalized). As a result the study of religion was largely a pointless one, much as studying silent films would be far less worthwhile as talkies came into prominence. While it is now clear that any possible disappearance of religion is by no means imminent, there were many years of lag between this realization and a return to studying those people who have abandoned or were never raised in a religious worldview.

A second cause of the understudy of irreligion by social scientists is due to the emphasis on religious economies and supply-side studies of religion

(e.g., Stark & Finke, 2000), which became the strongest challenger to secularization's theoretical dominance. By focusing on religious organizations it is easy to forget that some people are outside of the theoretical sampling frame by virtue of not belonging to a religious organization and perhaps not even wanting to belong. These two forces led first to an avoidance of all things religious throughout much of the early twentieth century and then a narrow emphasis on the presence of religion for the last few decades. Fortunately, in the last 10 years there has been a slow but steady shift back to looking at a lack of religion as a worthy topic of inquiry. This is important not only because it represents a large segment of the population in many parts of the world, but also because theoretically it provides a realistic foil against which to test theories of religion. For example, how can we fully understand conversion if we do not explain the pushes and pulls toward atheism or agnosticism as alternatives?

Thus, over the past decade it has become obvious for a number of reasons that the religiously unaffiliated and those who are irreligious need to be studied in a more systematic manner. A major part of the need for this comes from the realization that the religiously unaffiliated or disaffiliated compose a substantial and growing portion of the population in many countries. While in 1972 the General Social Survey found that 5% of adult Americans self-identified as having no religious preference, this number had risen to 18% in 2010. Furthermore, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found this number was 20% in 2012, suggesting the continuance of an upward trajectory. One major difficulty in studying this group is that because they were largely ignored for much of the twentieth century it is challenging to study longitudinal changes in who falls into this category or how the causes have changed over time, but recent work in the field is beginning to fill in these gaps.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Research that explicitly studied the religiously unaffiliated from a social scientific perspective began in the 1960s but then largely disappeared in the 1980s (but see Condran & Tamney, 1985; Tamney *et al.*, 1989). The prominent works during this period included Campbell (1972), Filsinger (1976), Hadaway and Roof (1979), Hale (1977), Vernon (1968a, 1968b), and Welch (1978a, 1978b). Even during this period, the scholarly work in the field was quite limited. As Hale summarized:

Only in the last decade or so has even a faint interest begun to emerge. Why this is so remains a mystery ... 'irreligion,' however conceptualized, and the

unchurched phenomenon, however quantified, continue to suffer from inattention

(1977, pp. 169–170).

Although Sherkat (1991; and Sherkat & Wilson, 1995) addressed issues of apostasy in the course of examining religious “switching” more generally, Hayes (2000) and Hout and Fischer (2002) represent the start of what may be thought of as the second wave of research on religious nones. Sherkat Hayes (2000) looked at the religiously unaffiliated across 10 developed countries and found that they were more likely to be young, unmarried men, with high levels of education. Hout and Fischer (2002) highlighted that this segment of the population was growing in the United States and set about explaining the rise as resulting from shifting views on identity as a reaction against the perceived overlap of religion and politics. Because the Religious Right had made religion synonymous with conservative political values, Hout and Fischer proposed that many liberals had abandoned the self-affiliation of religious that existed before the 1990s. Recent research by Putnam and Campbell (2010) supports their conclusions about the growing connection between secularism and politics in the American context. This research made major contributions to both explaining the religiously unaffiliated, but even more importantly beginning to rekindle interest in the topic, which had largely been dormant for two decades.

At the same time, Norris and Inglehart (2004) refocused the secularization debate toward explaining religious affiliation as a result of existential security and in turn hypothesized that irreligion is higher where people are not constantly worried about death and disease. The exceptional religiosity of the United States is explained as a result of high rates of immigration from developing countries and high-income inequality. This study has come to be an important force shaping subsequent discussions of secularization and irreligion, both explicitly and implicitly.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Bainbridge (2005, 2007) conducted one of the few quantitative studies dedicated to atheism (also see Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Sherkat, 2008). Drawing on control theories of deviance, he attempts to explain atheism and the rise in atheism as a result of low social obligations. Specifically those with fewer social attachments and those who avoid social interaction are more likely to be atheists, which explains in part why lower fertility around the world can be correlated with rising atheism. In contrast, the vast majority of studies have clumped atheists in with all other types of irreligion. This type

of research is a good indicator of the benefits of noting nuances that exist in this population.

Attempting to advance the study of secularism on its own terms rather than as a residual of religion, Baker and Smith (2009a) examine the role of identity in claiming no religion. They found that having religiously unaffiliated parents, low levels of childhood religious socialization, nonreligious friends, and being married to a spouse who is not religious were strongly associated with claiming no religion. These factors are far more predictive than sociodemographic characteristics, such as race, age, education, or the region of the county in which one resides. Analogous to the formation and maintenance of a particular religious identity, there appears to be a similar process of friends and family reinforcing an irreligious or unaffiliated identity. Qualitative studies of the narrative identities of atheists (Smith, 2011) and apostates (Zuckerman, 2011), as well as of the “imagined community” of secularism (Cimino & Smith, 2007, 2011) are beginning to flesh out this perspective on secularism more fully. Understanding secularity as identity opens up a wealth of research possibilities, such as using secular categories as a meaningful status in psychological studies (e.g., Beit-Hallahmi, 2007; Caldwell-Harris, 2012; Caldwell-Harris *et al.*, 2011).

This sense of identity, rather than objective beliefs or behaviors is very important, according to the work of Lim *et al.* (2010). By using a variety of high-quality national surveys, this study found that many religious nones were what the authors termed “liminal,” moving in and out of identifying as nones without actually changing much about their religiosity other than self-identification. This is a major contribution in that it helps demonstrate the ephemerality of the label and explains how it is possible for the proportion of the population who is religiously unaffiliated to shift quickly one way or the other. This work is closely related to a similar vein of study that looks at the issue of apostasy and leaving religion. The key recent study on this topic is by Vargas (2012), who looks at why people choose to leave, based on political views and life stressors. These are essential elements both for understanding why people are pulled toward disaffiliation and also what pushes them away from religion.

In a work that suggests an important new direction in the field, Baker and Smith (2009b; also Baker, 2012) attempt to specify some primary forms of secularism by examining atheists, agnostics, and nonaffiliated believers separately. Each group has distinct political and religious characteristics, such as agnostics being less opposed to religion and nonaffiliated believers showing the highest levels of personal spirituality. These distinctions show that secularisms are not uniform and should not be treated as if they are.

Edgell *et al.* (2006) take a different angle on the issue by looking at how irreligion in the form of atheism is viewed by the broader American public. They found that not only is it perceived as a negative social status for many Americans, but more people are willing to discuss their disapproval for it compared to many other traditionally ostracized minority groups. For example, as of 2003, people were less likely to want their child to marry an atheist compared to a Muslim, African American, Hispanic, or Jew. Thus, the stigma of atheism or irreligion is an important consideration for research in the area because of potential response bias and disavowal of the labels even if they are accurate, as well as studying the effects of stigmatization (Cragun *et al.*, 2012).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the major directions that future research can pursue is to emphasize and outline the nuance present among the secular segments of the population. For all of the reasons listed, this has largely been an overlooked element of studies of irreligion. Typically, secularists are thought of as a single group. This pattern can be traced at least in part to the massively influential RELTRAD typology of Steensland *et al.* (2000). In this systematic creation of religious tradition categories to better understand and quantitatively study religion in the United States, a category of “nones” was created for all respondents who were not religious. While this was a useful and necessary solution, it has meant that most studies over the past decade have chosen to describe all people who are not religiously affiliated as being uniform, when in fact there is substantial diversity within this general category. Most notably, while atheists do not believe in God or a higher power, many people who are religiously unaffiliated still hold traditional religious beliefs, including theism. Furthermore, the use of a general nones category means that the nominally religious, those who claim an affiliation, but never attend religious services or engage in any private acts such as prayer or meditation, are not studied as a (relatively) secular segment of the population.

In order to begin to overcome this difficulty, we propose the use of four subcategories of secularism: atheists, agnostics, nonaffiliated believers, and nonpracticing believers. This has the simultaneous benefit of being relatively feasible to accomplish with many existing datasets and of having clear, theoretically useful boundaries. Generally speaking, atheists and agnostics would be grouped on the basis of beliefs about God or a higher power, nonaffiliated believers are all other respondents who do not claim a religious affiliation, and nonpracticing believers are those who self-identify with a religion, but do not engage in religious behaviors. Of course, all of this raises issues of methodology, as some techniques such as forcing respondents to identify

with a label such as “atheist” will yield lower estimates of disbelief in God than a questions specifically about theism.

Another area of future research that is emerging (e.g., Killen & Silk, 2004; Smith, 2011, Zuckerman, 2011) is in the use of qualitative research to flesh out what these categories mean in daily life and how they are understood by those who identify with the labels. It is one thing to enumerate the number of people with a particular identity, but quite another to explain how they feel and understand this position. Even within the numerous studies of secularization there is rarely a direct study of those who are religiously dis- or unaffiliated. Instead, there has tended to be speculation about the motivations and desires of these people. Future research should use ethnographic methods to better understand how secular identities are formed, maintained, and expressed. As with quantitative research, methodological caveats about understanding the rich diversity of secularism apply.

From a methodological perspective, one of the primary difficulties in studying this segment of the population is the rarity. Especially for quantitative techniques such as surveys, it can be very difficult in a nationally representative sample of 1500 people to analyze the 30 who might be atheists. This difficulty is starting to be overcome because of much larger surveys, but even so it poses problems that do not exist when studying larger groups in society. One solution is to instead do purposive sampling. This has been attempted recently by looking at atheist organizations (e.g., Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006). The difficulty in this approach is that it gets at a very particular and likely skewed portion of the unaffiliated, those who feel so strongly enough about religious disaffiliation that they engage in atheist affiliations. This is not representative of the larger segment of the population who may be more apathetic than antagonistic, or even “spiritual but not religious” (Chaves, 2011, pp. 38–41). Moving forward, regardless of the methodologies employed, researchers will be forced to use creative strategies that go beyond organizational attachment to locate and study this growing portion of the population in meaningful ways.

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