

Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being:

How the Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions

By PHIL ZUCKERMAN

(Note: This is a rough draft of an essay that is slated to be published in Sociology Compass in the Fall of 2009).

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, nonbelievers 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 (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% of Americans have an unfavorable opinion of atheists and 28% 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, Meader, and McClellan, 1998). Other surveys have found that most Americans would not vote for nonreligious 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 "oddity" (p.118), while sociologist Rodney Stark 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 (Volokh, 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 religion 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 eschew the designation "religious" in favor of "spiritual"

(Fuller, 2001; Stark, Hamberg, and Miller, 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% of Argentines claim that religion is “very important” in their lives, and Uruguay, where 13% of the population does not believe in God (Inglehart et al., 2004). 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% of Israelis are atheist or agnostic (Kedem, 1995) and 75% of Israelis define themselves as “not religious” or having a “nonreligious 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% 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 less than 3% of Indians do not believe in God, and Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that only 5% of Indians do not believe in God, with 88% of Indians regularly engaging in prayer and/or meditation. The 2004 BBC survey also found that 30% of South Koreans do not believe in God, while Eungi (2003) reports that 52% 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% of the people are nonbelievers (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; Grontenhuis and Scheepers, 2001; Gil et al., 1998; Shand, 1998). Ronald Inglehart and his colleagues (2004) found that 61% of Czechs, 49% of Estonians, 45% of Slovenians, 34% of Bulgarians, and 31% of Norwegians do not believe in God. A 2005 Eurobarometer report found that 33% of the French, 27% of the Dutch, 27% of Belgians, 25% of Germans, and 20% of the British do not believe in God *or* any sort of spirit or life force. Only 51% of Danes and 26% 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% of Russians do not believe in God and Inglehart et al. (2004) report that 30% of Russians do not believe in God.

Concerning North America, 28% of Canadians are secular (Guth and Fraser, 2001), and between 19% and 23% 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% of Americans are atheist or agnostic, 15% of Americans choose “None” when it comes to religious preferences, and 16% of Americans describe themselves as secular or somewhat secular. The Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey (2007) found that 5% of Americans do not believe in God, with 16% of Americans choosing “unaffiliated” as their religious identification. A 2005 Baylor Religion Survey reports that 4.6% of American don’t believe in anything beyond the physical world, 14.3% don’t believe in God, per se, but do believe in a “higher power or cosmic force,” and 2.8% have “no opinion” when it comes to belief in God. Sherkat (2008) reports that 6.5% of Americans are atheist or agnostic, a 2007 Barna survey reports that 9% of Americans are atheist, agnostic, or have “no faith,” and a 2008 Harris Poll found that 19% 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% of Americans who claim “no religion,” 70% of Americans who self-identify as “atheist,” and 75% 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 (2006, 2009) report that 10% of Native Americans, 11% of African Americans, 16% of Hispanic Americans, 17% of White Americans, and 30% of Asian Americans claim to be “secular” or “somewhat secular.” They further note that 20% of Whites, 13% of Blacks, 17% of Hispanics, and 32% 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% of Americans between ages 18-34 describe themselves as secular or somewhat secular, but only 10% of Americans over age 65 did

so. Voas and Day (2007) report that 63% of British young adults (age 18-24) claim to belong to no religion, while only 22% of British people over age 65 identify as such.

Higher education is positively correlated with atheism, agnosticism, and secularity (Baker, 2008; Sherkat, 2008; Sherkat 2003; Johnson, 1997; Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). For example, 42% of Americans claiming to have “no religion,” 32% of American atheists, and 42% of American agnostics have graduated from college -- all higher than the percentage of college graduates in the general American adult population, which is 27% (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 (1998, 1997) found that among the members of the United States National Academy of Sciences, only 7% claimed to believe in a personal God and only 8% 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 ten 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 2007 Pew Forum Religious Landscape Survey, 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% of American *atheists* are Independent, 26% are Democrat, and 10% are Republican and that 43% of American *agnostics* are Independent, 22% are Democrat, and 15% are Republican. Greeley and Hout (2006) report that only about 21% of people claiming "no religion" voted for Republican candidates in recent elections. In the 2008 presidential election specifically, 76% of atheists and agnostics voted for Obama, and only 23% voted for McCain (Barna

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 to various religious denominations, "Nones" possess the most egalitarian outlook of all concerning women's rights (Brinkerhoff and Mackei, 1993, 1985; Petersen and Donnenworth, 1998; Hoffman and Miller, 1997). Additional polls reveal that abortion rights are more likely to be supported by the secular than the religious (Gallup, 2006; ABC News, 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 to the religious, nonreligious people are far more accepting of homosexuality and supportive of gay rights and gay marriage (Sherkat, Powell-Williams, and Maddox, 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, Maynard, and Gorsuch, 1999; VanderStoep and Green, 1988; Kunkel and Temple, 1992). According to a 2008 Pew Forum survey, 60% of religiously unaffiliated Americans support gay marriage, compared to roughly 26% of Protestants and 42% of

Catholics. According to Newport (2008), 76% of Americans who never or seldom attend church consider homosexuality morally acceptable, compared to 21% of weekly and 43% 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% of secular Americans favored invasion compared to 68% of Evangelical Protestants, 57% of Mainline Protestants, and 58% of Catholics, and 47% of Jews. Guth and colleagues (2005) found that only 32% of secular Americans consider the Iraq War justified, compared to 89% of Mormons, 87% of Evangelicals, 73% of Mainline Protestants, and 84% 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 (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); a 2004 Harris Poll found that 84% of “nonreligious” Americans support stem cell research, compared to 55% 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 nonreligious people lack strong values or ethical beliefs – a truly groundless and unsupportable 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.” And according to Michael Argyle (2007:218), “studies have found very little effect of religion on crime or delinquency...and serious offenses,” concluding that “the effect of religion appears to be very small here.”

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 Golumbraski (1997), only 0.2% 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 8 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-research matter (Sherkat and Ellison, 1999), although one that is far from settled (Hwang, 2008; Pasquale, 2007a). 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; Sprang, McNeil, and Wright, 1993; 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, 2001; O'Connell and Skevington, 2005; Sorenson, Grindstaff, and Turner, 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, House, and Williams, 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; Schnittker, 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 and colleagues (1993) report that religious people have a better time adjusting to and coping with sad or difficult life events than secular people; Mattlin and colleagues (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 always the possibility that because being non-religious in the United States makes one a member of a widely un-liked, distrusted, and stigmatize 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 nonreligious 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 found that atheists and agnostics actually have lower divorce rates than religious Americans. And according to Kosmin and Keysar (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 and colleagues (2007).

While Fergusson and colleagues (1986) found that nonreligious 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 and colleagues (1992) found no such correlation in Canada, where nonaffiliated 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% 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 seventeen 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 and colleagues (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% of “Nones” and 17% Jews (highly secularized) had over 20 sex partners in their lifetime, compared to 7% of Conservative Protestants, 8% of mainline Protestants, and 9% 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 to 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 (Cohcran and Beeghley, 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 and colleagues (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 to 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 unsupportable. 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 to women in more religious countries and that women's equality is strongest in the world's most secular democracies (Inglehart, Norris, and Welzel, 2003; Inglehart and Norris, 2003). And a 2007 UNICEF 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 ten, 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, April 7, 2009). 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, 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 (U.S. 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, 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 Diseases 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.

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