

- Francis, L. (1984). Dimensions of Christian belief. *Educational Studies*, 10, 103–111.
- Park, C.L. (in press). Attending to the construct of beliefs in research on religion/spirituality and health: Commentary on *Beyond Belief*. *Journal of Health Psychology*.
- Saroglou, V. (2010). Religiousness as a Cultural adaptation of basic traits: A five-factor model perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14, 108–125.
- Sherkat, D.E. (2008). Beyond belief: Atheism, agnosticism, and theistic certainty in the United States. *Sociological Spectrum*, 28, 438–459.

Atheists are rejecting today’s culturally evolved religions, not a “first” natural religion

John R. Shook*

Science and the Public EdM program, University at Buffalo, New York, USA, and Center for Neurotechnology Studies, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington, Virginia, USA

Caldwell-Harris proposes that specific personality traits and thinking styles, such as cognitive flexibility and individualism, will understandably correlate with dissent from a dominant cultural ideology like a religion. This sociological basis for explaining the traits of atheists is more convincing than simplistic biological theories about religion’s origins. It cannot be stressed enough that ignoring sociocultural context can only distort scientific research into religion. Brains do not confront reality directly, and they do not generate identities or narratives by themselves. Any sophisticated belief system that exists today is more the result of cultural evolution than natural selection, and there was no “first form of religion” from which all other religions descended.

The quest for the natural religion or the natural belief in God is as hopeless as searching for the natural government or the natural art form. Neither religion or irreligion is more “natural” for humanity as a whole, and anyone can be a non-believer. Today’s cultures have a vast supply of ideas about unnatural things, from tooth fairies to demons, so an overactive agency detector cannot be observed in its pure natural state. If a hypothetical child were raised in isolation from all notions of anything unnatural and from teleological explanations for natural affairs, what are the odds that any spontaneous suggestions about unseen agents would bear any resemblance to Yahweh or even a sprite?

We must be skeptical towards theories proposing that religious beliefs were originally conceived in pretty much the same way across humanity, or that there could be much in common between some “original” religions and any religion on record. Religious partisans are nevertheless rhetorically draping themselves in the “naturalness” of religion; yet, curiously, they are not promoting early – more natural? – religious practices, which (mostly Christian) academics label animism, ancestor worship, totemism, shamanism, polytheism, and so on. Listening to some proponents of religion, you’d think that the “original” and most natural religion was about Trinitarian supernaturalism, monotheistic deism, or at least spiritualistic pantheism (although none of these conceptions are older than the chariot). Naturally, religions must evolve or perish, and religions that were useful long ago could not be so useful today. Yet the

*Email: pragmatism.org

rampant cultural relativism accurately predicted by a pragmatic theory of religion clashes with a search for religious beliefs “natural” to all humanity.

The origins of religious ideas from long ago must be disconnected from inquiries into the modern appeal of religion. Many religions traditionally connected them because their current plausibility rested on their allegedly divine origins. Many secularists have connected them because discovering a naturalistic origin for religion could make atheism more plausible now. All the same, relying on some connection between origins and plausibility will let both sides down. What was plausible long ago lacks the same appeal today, as William James remarked concerning religion’s moral progress (James, 1902); and what people of today find meaningful may not leave them content with mere atheism (Comte-Sponville, 2008).

As for observed correlations between personality types and degrees of religiosity, perhaps we live in unusual times. In societies dominated by one religion, to the degree that nearly all publicly conform, most personality types would find a religious role. Emotional piety can sit in the pews with stoic simplicity and intellectual curiosity, and a sophisticated religion can co-opt even the most intelligent and skeptical, guiding them into the roles of teachers, scholars, leaders, and reformers. Religions have benefitted from the mutations of freethinking and heresy as much as any cultural structure. In the west, perhaps only science has displayed as much change as Christianity over the past 500 years. For many reasons, Christianity is now in a highly fractured condition. Its capacity for appealing to most personality types is technically still on display, so long as “Christianity” is left vaguely defined.

Our current situation is not one of unitary religious dominance; religious pluralism and denominational variety, along with religious mobility, social freedom, and permissible free thought provide a noticeably different climate from just 50 years ago. Denominations themselves can be more flexible by subtly or not so subtly shifting their public stances to better “compete” in the wide-open marketplace of ideas and identities. This mutual self-definition implies further factors about people’s religiosity today: (1) people are more self-selective; (2) they are more self-reflective; (3) they develop more of a religious self-narrative; and (4) these self-narratives can be partially borrowed from their religious group. Because people are not only self-selecting their public identities, but also selecting and self-identifying with the narratives that justify those identities, they can respond to questioning using those justifications.

Atheism, for its part, is not a denomination, but it can play the role of an ideological camp in a religiously contested social arena, where the same sociological factors apply. Many non-believers will be atheist “self-identifiers,” or even admit doubting God to themselves (as “self-admitters”), only if the public narrative about atheism sounds acceptable. During Enlightenment times, atheism justified itself by claiming to be more rational and anti-authoritarian. And as Caldwell-Harris argues, so long as the public image of “the atheist” remains a caricature of a rationalistic nonconformist, statistical portraits of the self-identifying atheist will lean towards that profile. Furthermore, non-believers uninterested in identifying as an atheist can still rely on atheism’s group narrative of intellectual independence to frame their justifications. Non-believers need not fit that cultural profile, but that profile is supplied to fit for them. Hypothetically, if the public image of the non-believer had long been a civic-minded altruistic humanist (a fond wish of humanist organizations), a different set of personality types would be now stepping forward. Stepping back to make Caldwell-Harris’s larger point again, if non-belief were not a matter of

contested ideology and public dissent, the observed effects would largely subside. What personality types are correlated with disbelief in Santa Claus? Correlations found among 4-year-olds would not be mirrored among adults.

Until research into individual identity choices becomes even more contextually nuanced, raw correlations between personality types and announced degrees of religious belief will mostly reflect ongoing public relations struggles and ideological propaganda.

References

- Comte-Sponville, A. (2008). *The little book of atheist spirituality*. New York: Penguin.
 James, W. (1902). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature*. New York: Longmans, Green & Co.

RESPONSE

What theoretical frameworks do scholars need? What type of society do we all want?

Catherine Caldwell-Harris*

Department of Psychology, Boston University, USA

My target article had the goal of normalizing atheism or non-belief, characterizing it as emerging out of expected and even adaptive aspects of human nature, in contrast to the historical view of atheism as deviant or, at least, unnatural. Given respondents' expertise in psychology, personality, and religion, they found this uncontroversial. Respondents discussed ideas for future research and how to characterize non-belief. They argued for different theoretical frameworks and some criticized the view that religious belief is a natural, or automatic, consequence of human cognition. On the more controversial side, Johnson broached the topic of whether religious institutions or beliefs are better than secular ones for maximizing individual and societal well-being. I'll review and expand on these topics in order of least to most controversial.

More nuanced views of non-believers open up new directions for research

My goal was to find generalizations relevant to the broad category of non-believers, but Hood wonders if my conclusions about atheists' possibly low sociality are primarily relevant to the subset of non-believers who avoid religious institutions. In the Ecklund and Lee (2011) study cited by Hood, a small percentage (17%) of atheist scientists reported attending a religious service at least twice in the prior year. Those scientists reported doing so to please a spouse or partner, or out of desire for community, or so their children could learn about religion to make their own choices. Those who care about sharing an activity with their spouse or partner may be more social than those non-believers who always avoided religious services. This is a

*Email: charris@bu.edu