

Beyond Disbelief:

A Study of Some “Nones”: Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, Freethinkers, and Sceptics

A Preliminary Report

*To you, I'm an atheist;
To God, I'm the Loyal Opposition.
Woody Allen (attributed)*

We investigated, via an international¹ sample using the world-wide web, a variety of beliefs, attitudes and values with a focus on individuals taking a critical stance on religion. The present report concerns 2563 respondents who classified themselves as atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and sceptics, by checking boxes corresponding to these labels. We used these labels because of their currency and, with the possible exception of agnostics, the existence of numerous publications, societies, organizations, and blogs employing these terms to identify their domain. These labels do not represent mutually exclusive positions and hence our survey made it possible for respondents to accept multiple labels, and many did.

Our sample was therefore likely a subset of what have come to be called *nones*; those who respond to religious surveys by describing themselves as atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, secularists, or simply “not religious.” It is fairly well established that people are much more willing to report that they do not believe in gods, spirits, or religion than they are willing to call themselves atheists. Some estimates suggest that as few as 25% of nonbelievers will self-identify as atheist.² One likely reason for this is that people generally hold that atheism is antitheism; a perhaps well-grounded belief as we shall see. It seems a fairly safe hypothesis that a substantial majority of nones are *nontheists* but not *atheists*. We will therefore consider our entire sample as largely, if not exclusively, *nontheist* with a large subset of *atheists*.

Rationale

The internet has changed many things, including the world of atheists and other nontheists. Prior to the advent of the internet, such people were relatively isolated, possibly able to find a few books such as Bertrand Russell’s “Why I am not a Christian” at the local library, but with little material to stimulate any incipient irreligion unless they lived in major centres. It is likely the internet, even more than works by Dawkins, Hitchens, and the others or, rather, the interaction between the two that has created what has been called, for better or worse, the “new atheism.”³ Much has been written about the characteristics of the new atheists and much of this has been based on the writings of a few highly visible atheists. Little is known about the depth or breadth of such views.⁴ In addition to the direct effects of such writings, it is the chatter on the internet about such books and the rise of atheist blogs such as Atheist Planet, Pharyngula, and many others that is creating a sense of community among nonbelievers, doubters, and sceptics. Hence, we thought it timely to investigate the characteristics of the people connected, however peripherally, to this new internet

community. We therefore contacted atheist, humanist, sceptical, and freethinking web pages and blogs inviting participation. The people included in our study are a very particular and circumscribed population, but one with an increasingly vocal and active presence throughout the world and generating considerable discussion within Western society. A more detailed understanding of the characteristics of this emerging community might be useful not only for the self-understanding of these groups but also provide insights for others as well.

What we studied

Attributes surveyed included age, sex, and family background, as well as moral values and religious, social, and political attitudes. As the title indicates, the present report is a preliminary overview provided at this time, with gratitude, as feedback to our respondents about what we were up to, and because many expressed considerable interest in hearing of our findings.

First, we present some basic demographic information, followed by descriptive information about the opinions and attitudes of unbelievers and doubters responding to our survey regarding morality, social issues, attitudes to religion, spirituality, and their confidence and commitment to those attitudes and opinions. Some of these findings corroborate those of previous surveys and provide a little more detail. Our major interest, however, was, as our title suggests, to go a little beyond presenting descriptive statistics and to test some models predicting how attitudes toward spiritual matters, morality, and social issues, as well as confidence in one’s own views collectively affect attitudes to religion among nontheists.

Some of the main findings so far

1. Atheists as a group were very strongly antitheist and antireligion with a high frequency of self-reported hostility to religion and negativity to spirituality. As a group atheists strongly endorsed antireligious statements. Agnostics, on the other hand were somewhat less hostile and slightly more likely to express some indifference to, and, occasionally, sympathy for, religion.
2. Nontheists generally reported coming to their views very largely during late adolescence. This was true even of older respondents, some of whom did, however, report later (de)conversions.
3. Most respondents reported coming from at least moderately religious families. The degree of family background religiosity was associated with country religiosity and reports of negative family influences on religious attitudes, but not with hostility to religion.

4. Atheists expressed greater, and agnostics less, sense of gain regarding, and confidence in the correctness of, their views than other nontheists.
5. The nontheists were remarkably liberal, with 91% rating themselves as left of centre. Although atheists were not more likely to describe themselves as socially or fiscally liberal than other nontheists they were more likely to endorse certain specific social issues, which we view as a particular type of liberalism we labelled *naturalistic* (i.e., science-relevant) *liberalism*.
6. Nontheists, particularly humanists, generally endorsed very positively a type of morality associated with liberalism, called *individuating*, and atheists and sceptics, tended to reject a type of morality associated with conservatism, called *binding/purity* morality. This rejection was not explained by atheists' general liberalism, but by their naturalistic liberalism.
7. The strong negative attitudes toward religion were independently associated with 1) metaphysical claims (atheism and spirituality – in opposite directions), 2) both kinds of morality (individuating and binding/purity – in opposite directions), 3) naturalistic liberalism, and 4) confidence in their views.

Our most general conclusion from our preliminary analyses is that nonbelief, doubt, and scepticism about God are merely indicators, one outcome of a complex world-view entailing attitudes and opinions about a complex of metaphysical claims, moral values, and social attitudes.

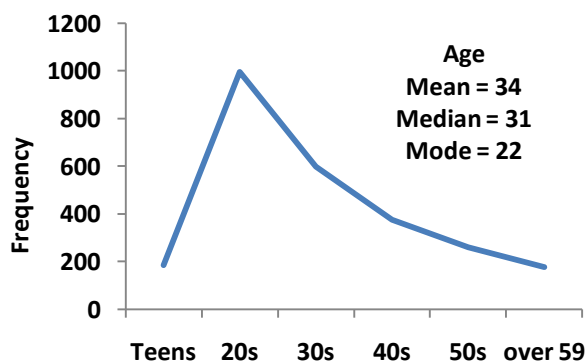
Further details follow. Note: When we refer to groups being different or correlations as significant we have employed an alpha of $p < .001$.

Demographics and Background

*When I turned 17-18, I realized that the only reason I was a Muslim was because my parents were Muslims.*⁵

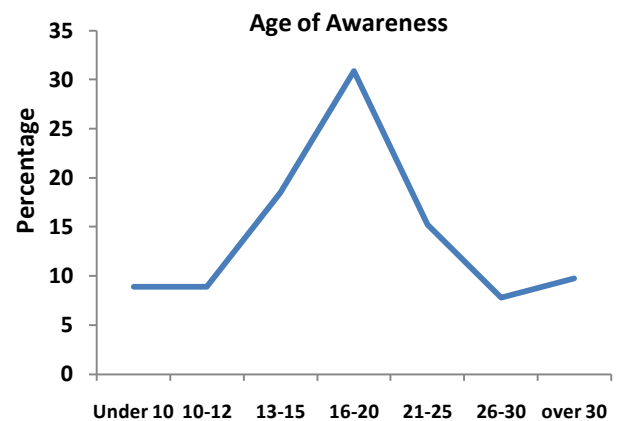
Consistent with prior research, nontheists in our study, and especially atheists, were most often young (Figure 1), male (74%, all nontheists; 82%, atheists), highly educated, liberal, and hostile to religion.⁶ Atheists were slightly overrepresented among the teens and in the 20s.

Figure 1
Histogram of current ages by decade (all nontheists)



Most nontheists reported coming to their current views during adolescence, most often between 16 and 20 regardless of their age of reporting (Figure 2). The function in Figure 2 is strikingly similar in form to that generated in a recent study using different sampling techniques.⁷ Despite the bias toward youth, there was a substantial minority of the middle-aged and seniors (over 59 for our purposes) among the respondents. Slightly less than a quarter of individuals over 30 do report arriving at their unbelief after 30. Even seniors, however, most often reported coming to their current (ir)religious views during adolescence. The consistency of the adolescent age effect does hint at the possibility of an emerging developmental individual difference factor possibly interacting with social factors.

Figure 2
The reported age of awareness of one's views on religion:
Note: For older nontheists there was a rise in the function after thirty but the peak at 16-20 remained.



Nontheists most often came from at least moderately religious homes and greater family religiosity was associated with greater rated negative family influence on their views (Table 1). There was no relation between atheism or any other category and family religiosity. Rated hostility to religion was not correlated with family background or negative family or other influences. Thus, we found no evidence for social or psychodynamic sources of hostility to religion.

Respondents from Latin America, US, and Canada reported more negative family influence than those from Europe, UK, or Australia (Figure 3). Consistent with this, respondents from these countries and regions generally reported stronger religious family backgrounds (Figure 4).

Figure 3
Percentage of nontheists reporting negative family influence from each of six countries/regions

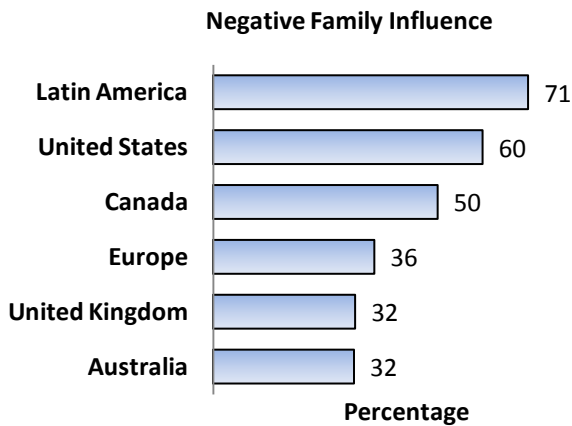
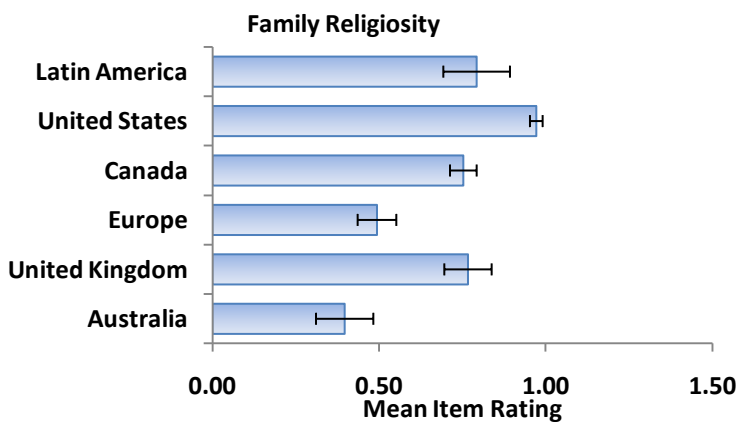


Figure 4
Means and standard errors of family religiosity ratings scaled from -2 (strongly anti-religious) to +2 (strongly religious)



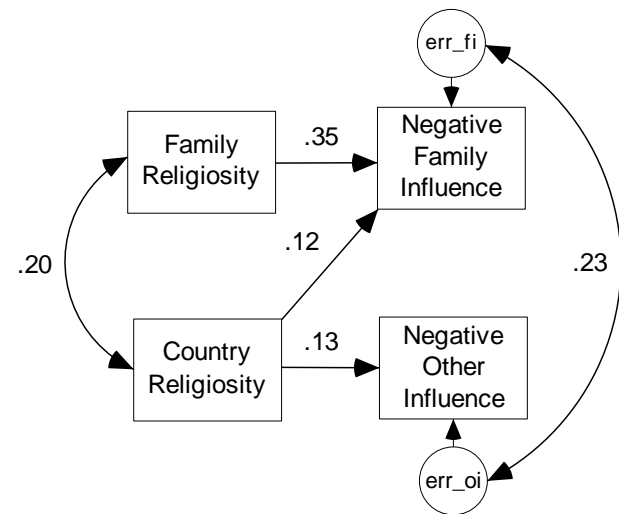
Family religiosity is correlated with rating of country religiosity⁸ (Table 1) but, whereas family religiosity is much more strongly correlated with family negative influence than with others influences, country religiosity is correlated about equally with both family and other negative influence (Table 1).

Table 1
Pearson product-moment correlations among family and country religiosity and family and other (friends, peers, teachers, and other adults) influences: All coefficients are significant.

	Country Religiosity	Family Influence	Others Influence
Family Religiosity	.20	.38	.07
Country Religiosity		.19	.14
Family Influence			.23

Family and country religiosity scores are correlated but the country religiosity – family influence correlation remains significant but reduced after controlling for the family-country correlation. In contrast the family religiosity – others influence correlation is no longer significant when controlling for country religiosity. Thus, whereas family religiosity contributes directly only to negative family influence, country religiosity makes independent contributions about equally to family and other negativity as one might expect from a pervasive sociocultural factor (Figure 5).

Figure 5
Path analysis predicting effects on family and other Influences on religious views of family and country religiosity: All path coefficients are significant.



$\chi^2 = 3.67, RMSEA = .03$

Negative Attitudes to Religion (NARS)

Atheists are grumpy and want answers⁹

Approximately half of the atheists rated themselves as *hostile* to religion, compared to 18% rating themselves as *indifferent* and only 5% as *sympathetic*. Percentages for other nontheists were similar. Negative attitudes toward religion are not surprising, though the unanimity and strength of those attitudes are striking.

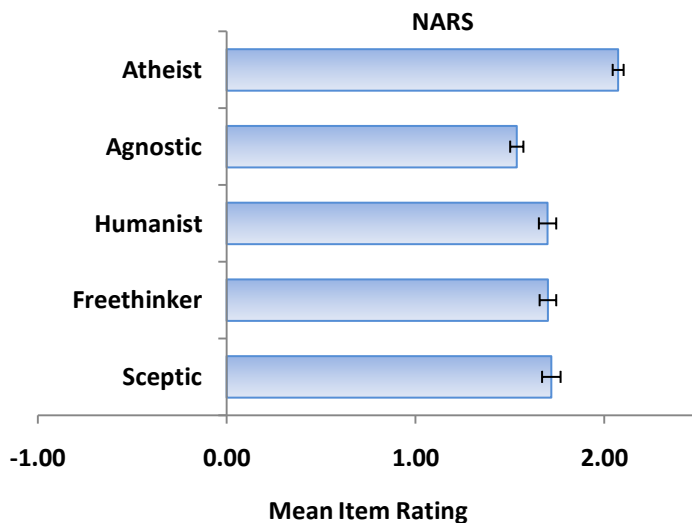
We further examined hostility to religion via a Negative Attitudes to Religion Scale (NARS),¹⁰ which consisted of 11 negative statements about religion. We selected common negative statements made by *some* nonbelievers about religion and asked if and to what degree *many* nonbelievers would agree or disagree with those statements. Over 90% of atheists surveyed agree that religions are opposed to progress and social change, and over 80% believe that religions do more harm than good and that the world would be better off without religion. Across items, a clear plurality and often a majority of atheists selected the highest level of agreement for these anti-religious statements. Atheists not

only believe in the separation of church and state, oppose tax exemptions for religious institutions but are also almost unanimous, at 99% agreement, that there is no place for religious symbols or rituals in the public sphere in a secular society. Similar percentages agree that religions are based on ignorance and uncritical thinking and lead to hypocrisy. Perhaps particularly revealing is that over 85% of our respondents agreed with the rather strong statement that the “It is a violation of the rights of children to indoctrinate them into religion without a choice among points of view;” a sentiment perhaps especially associated with the new atheism.¹¹

There was considerable internal consistency among the items enabling us to combine them into a single NARS score (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .90$). This score was particularly high among atheists, whereas agnostics were somewhat more temperate in their hostility to religion than atheists, although they clearly came down on the same side (Figure 6).

Atheists endorsed every item on the NARS more strongly than other nontheists. Three of the four items generating the greatest difference were epistemic in nature. These were that religion is an impediment to social progress, that religions are based on ignorance and that they oppose scientific progress. Thus, the majority of atheists express views very much in accord with what are sometimes described as the “strident” views of the new atheists.

Figure 6
Means and standard errors for Negative Attitudes to Religion Scale (NARS) for each group of nontheists: Note that all means are positive and the full scale is from -3 (strongly disagree) to +3 (strongly agree).



The overall mean for all respondents indicated rather clear agreement with negative statements about religion. One clear conclusion of the findings is that the atheism we sampled is antitheism, antireligion, and anti-spiritual. It is not mere disbelief in God, but active opposition to god(s), religion(s) and spiritual claims.

Moral Issues

*I grew up going to church. My grandmother constantly quoted the bible. It was made clear to me as a child that enjoying one's body is shameful.*¹²

Although atheists and other nonbelievers strongly endorsed a number of moral values from the Moral Issues Scale (MIS) classified as *Individuating* (Table 1), which include values of fairness, justice, kindness, and personal autonomy, they were also likely to devalue or reject moral values classified as *Binding/Purity* values, such as loyalty, respect for authority and tradition and moral purity, which have been closely associated with political conservatism and traditional versus liberal religiosity (Table 2).¹³

Nontheists generally endorsed individuating values (Mean = 5.2, SD = .7) weakly endorsed or rejected binding/purity values Mean = 1.9, SD = 1.1). Humanists were most likely to endorse individuating values and atheists most likely to reject binding/purity values. These values and the vigour and firmness with which they are endorsed or rejected would also seem to correspond rather closely to the views expressed by the more vocal and visible new atheists.

Table 2
Factor analysis (orthogonal (varimax) rotation) of the Moral Issues Scale: Each item is described as being “important for my moral thinking.” One item, sacrificing for the group, correlated with both factors and was not used in constructing the two morality measures. IM = Individuating, BP = Binding/Purity morality.

	Factor Loadings (Correlations)	
	IM	BP
Individuating morality		
Supporting the rights of others	.7	.0
Being fair to others	.7	.1
Being kind to others	.7	.2
Avoiding harm to Others	.7	.0
Being helpful to others	.7	.3
Supporting the autonomy of others	.6	-.0
Binding/Purity morality		
Being Patriotic and Loyal	.1	.8
Showing respect for legitimate authority	.2	.7
Showing respect for Traditions	.1	.7
Being pure by avoiding carnal pleasures and disgusting things	.0	.5

Atheists were also distinctive in their self-reported emotional reactions to violation of moral values. We asked whether moral violations made respondents angry, sad, disappointed, disgusted, surprised, or anxious. Anger, sadness, disappointment, and disgust were the common moral

emotions. Atheism was more likely to be associated with anger and disgust at moral violations, whereas agnosticism was more likely to be associated with sadness.

Social Issues

All groups were particularly liberal with regard to social issues. In response to a question asking if they considered themselves liberal on social issues a striking 91% of our sample rated themselves as left of centre politically. Respondents were, however, considerably less liberal on fiscal matters (Figure 7).

We also looked at a number of social issues on which liberals and conservatives disagree. The social issues items broke down into several factors (Table 3). One factor that particularly interested us included abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, human cloning, and evolution. Such issues seem to reflect particular kind of liberalism; a science-based or naturalistic liberalism that advocates the use of scientific technology for managing biological matters of reproduction, suffering, and illness based on individual choice. Consistent with this interpretation this factor included degree of acceptance of evolution.

Table 3

Four factors from the Social Issues items. Complete statements as they appeared in the survey are here.¹⁴ SC = Security Concerns. NL = Naturalistic Liberalism. RE = Religious Extremism Concerns. EL = Environmental Liberalism

	SC	NL	RE	EL
Security Concerns				
Military Readiness	.7	-.1	.0	-.2
War	.7	.0	.0	-.3
Death Penalty	.7	-.1	.0	.0
Police Authority	.7	-.1	.0	.2
Naturalistic Liberalism				
Abortion	-.1	.8	.0	.1
Stem Cell Research	-.1	.7	.1	.0
Euthanasia	.0	.7	.0	.2
Evolution	-.1	.5	.2	.1
Religious Extremism Concerns				
Religious Fundamentalism	.0	.1	.9	.1
Religious Terrorism	.1	.1	.8	.1
Environmental Liberalism				
Overpopulation	.1	.1	.1	.8
Global Warming	-.3	.2	.0	.7

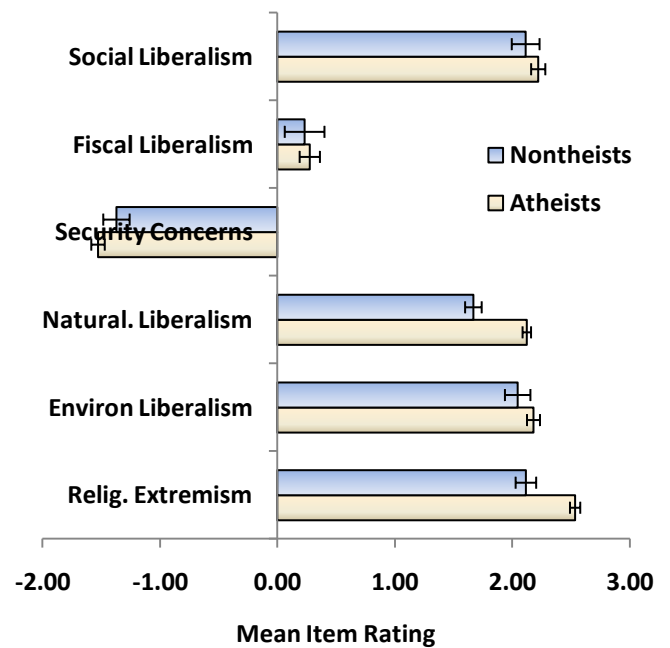
Both atheism and scepticism were positively correlated with naturalistic liberalism, but less with other forms of liberalism. We therefore suggest that the liberalism of atheists may have somewhat different motivational bases than the liberalism of non-atheists. In Figure 7, we compare differences between

atheists and other nontheists on several measures relevant to liberalism-conservatism. Although atheists score somewhat more liberal than other nontheists on most measures, they differ particularly on what we have called naturalistic liberalism and, not surprisingly, on concerns about the effects of religious extremism on freedom of expression.

Humanists were more likely than non-humanists to describe themselves as socially and fiscally liberal and to endorse social liberal views more strongly than non-humanists even in this generally very liberal sample.

Figure 7

Means and standard errors for six liberalism-conservatism measures: Nontheists in this figure refer to nontheists other than atheists.



Spirit Beliefs

Gods and souls are equally central to the notion of a religion. Belief that there is some essence beyond the physical body is indeed more universal than beliefs in high gods. Some Buddhists may, for example, be atheist but they certainly believe they have a soul. Hence, the centrality of god-beliefs and their negation excessively narrows the study of irreligion.

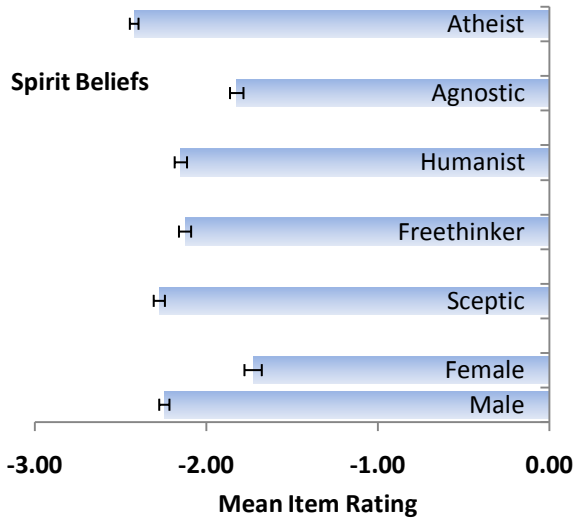
We therefore included a brief three-item scale on Spirit Beliefs, which were combined to create a Spirit Beliefs Scale (SBS: Cronbach’s α = .81). The three items were:

1. People have an immaterial soul that continues to exist after bodily death.
2. Some sort of spirit or life force pervades all that lives.
3. There is a real possibility that the human mind can function independently of the brain.¹⁵

Spiritual beliefs were negatively associated with atheism and scepticism (Figure 8), as well as naturalistic liberalism, and a

preference for scientific over literary reading. These latter variables were mutually positively correlated, but nonetheless made independent contributions to the prediction of spirit beliefs. Women were less negative about spirit claims than men were. In their strong rejection of spirit notions, many are atheists in the Dawkins rather than the Harris mould.

Figure 8
Means and standard errors of Spirit Beliefs for different groups: Note that all means are negative. The scale is from -3 to +3.



Only 1.4% of atheists obtained positive scores on the spirituality measure, compared to 29.2% of other nontheists. The 2.9% (the figure was 2.8% for US respondents) for atheists is considerably less than the 12.5% reported to “considering themselves spiritual” in a recent US study.¹⁶ That study also reported that 25.6% of agnostics considered themselves spiritual compared to 10.6% (11.3% for US respondents) in our study obtaining positive scores in their evaluation of spiritual ideas. The discrepancy likely lies in the different approaches. We asked specific questions about belief in certain spiritual entities, whereas the earlier study asked about the respondents “spirituality.” To describe oneself as spiritual might mean little more than that one has certain sensibilities rather than expressing any particular metaphysical beliefs.

Confidence and Sense of Gain

Confidence in one’s world view was assessed by the Confidence Scale (CS: Cronbach’s $\alpha = .71$).¹⁷ We also asked whether respondents felt a sense of loss or gain as a result of adopting their current religious beliefs and attitudes. Respondents, but especially atheists, were generally highly confident in their current views, and overwhelmingly considered that their current views represented a substantial gain over their prior beliefs. Atheism was significantly positively associated with both confidence ($r = .26$) and a sense of gain ($r = .21$). Agnosticism, on the other hand, was

associated with both reduced confidence ($r = -.25$) and less of a sense of gain ($r = -.15$). That confidence and feelings of gain were especially strong among atheists may reflect the acceptance of a coherent world view, likely one with a scientific basis.

More on NARS

As noted above, one of the more striking findings of our study was the degree of hostility directed to religion in our sample and the willingness to endorse rather strongly very negative statements about religion. Having assessed moral values as well as social and spiritual attitudes along with confidence and commitment to one’s views, we attempted to assess the independent contributions each of these factors makes to attitudes to religion. We therefore employed multiple regression analysis to predict NARS scores using as predictors, 1) stated atheism and spirituality, 2) individuating and binding/purity morality, 3) naturalistic liberalism, and 4) confidence in one’s views. Each of these made independent contributions to NARS scores. Thus, objection to religion was based on a combination of metaphysical stance, moral values, naturalistic liberalism, and degree of confidence. The results are presented in Table 4. The beta (β) coefficients represent the independent contribution of each of the variables to the prediction of NARS scores taking into account their correlation with one another; the larger the coefficient the greater that variable’s contribution. The contribution of atheism, naturalistic liberalism, and confidence are particularly strong but all are significant ($p < .001$). In contrast to these philosophical, moral and social attitudes, neither family nor country religiosity makes any contribution to the prediction of NARS.

Table 4
Relative contributions of Metaphysical Claims, Moral Values, Naturalistic Liberalism and Confidence in predicting NARS

	β
Metaphysical Claims	
Atheism	.26
Spirituality	-.08
Moral Values	
Individuating	.09
Binding/Purity	-.08
Naturalistic Liberalism	.25
Confidence	.28

A Note on Agnostics

I’m not saying that the big bang did not happen, only that I don’t believe that anyone can be as certain as they seem to be. In other words I am as agnostic about scientific pronouncements as I am about religion.¹⁸

Agnostics tended to be consistently more measured or muted in many of their opinions sampled here, which may reflect a

more general personality or temperamental trait potentially applying to more than just opinions on religion. If such is the case many de facto atheists may preferentially identify as agnostics in surveys based on temperament rather than opinion thereby distorting the ratio of atheists to agnostics. As noted in our introductory remarks we did not treat categories as mutually exclusive and many respondents checked more than one label to describe themselves. For example, 2054 respondents checked atheist, and 1103 checked agnostic; but both boxes were checked by 674 respondents. Had we not allowed this it is possible that many or most of the 674 might have checked agnosticism only. Forced-choice surveys may therefore underestimate the number of atheists. This applies a fortiori to questions that add adjectives that convey a sense of absolute or dogmatic certainty such as the description “convinced atheist”.¹⁹ Our hypothesis is that, even beyond our sample, the majority of agnostics are, in fact, atheists and that many would so self-identify if given the opportunity to qualify their commitment. Consistent with this hypothesis, although those checking both atheist and agnostic were, on most measures, intermediate between those checking only atheists or only agnostic, they were generally more similar to atheists than to agnostics (See Figure 9 for examples). Interestingly, one variable for which agnostic- atheists were rather precisely intermediate was confidence (Figure 10).

Figure 9
Means and standard errors for Spirit Beliefs and NARS for Agnostics, Agnostic Atheists, and Atheists: Note inflection indicating relative similarity of Atheists and Agnostic-Atheists.

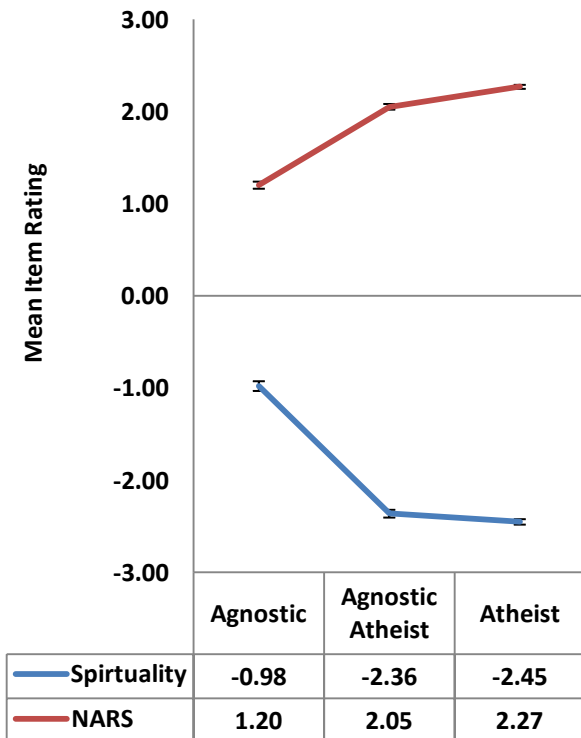
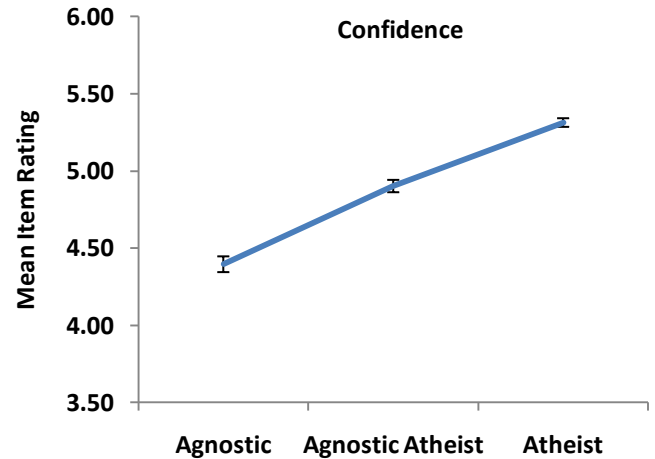


Figure 10
Means and standard errors for Confidence for Agnostics, Agnostic Atheists, and Atheists: Linear function reveals Agnostic-Atheists to be intermediate between atheists and agnostics.



Study Limitations

Some respondents would have liked to have been provided with definitions for our categories. We had struggled with this concern and decided to go with self-labelling without constraining the meaning of those labels. Thus the survey was one about the characteristics of people who label or identify themselves as atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers and sceptics. One problem with attempting to define such terms is that to cover the range of possible qualifiers would require an essay rather than a definition. More practically, we anticipated that, however inclusive our definition, we would get numerous complaints that "I cannot respond to your questions because I don't agree with your definition of . . ." We expect atheists are likely at least as diverse a group in terms of their identity (i.e., their self descriptions) as any religious group, say self-identified Catholics, who, especially nowadays, hold diverse explicit and implicit opinions about what it means to be a Catholic which may or may not correspond with official doctrine. Yet Catholics generally can be differentiated from other religious groups on a variety of opinions and even very basic psychological characteristics.

Atheists being, by and large, a rather analytic and critical lot, often have difficulty responding to standard statements of opinions, which are often, even typically, complex and often polysemous statements. Being of an analytic turn of mind biases one to dissect and discuss rather than offer a global judgment on each claim. This characteristic offers challenges to an attitude survey because what an attitude survey attempts to do, in a nutshell, is to select statements that characterize particular perspectives and assume that respondents will understand the sort of moral, social, political, or religious sentiment or stance that is represented by that statement and express an opinion on it. Perhaps we

will provide a preamble in future surveys to indicate explicitly that this is the approach we expected people to take.

As we have emphasized at several points, atheists and other nontheists generally expressed strong negative opinions about religion. Our sample was a targeted rather than a random sample of the nonreligious. Respondents participated mostly as a result of appeals through various organizations, websites and blogs whose central purpose was secular, nonreligious and frequently explicitly atheistic. It is therefore possible that many attitudes were more strongly expressed than would have been the case in a less self-selected sample of the nonreligious. On the other hand, negativity to religion seems to be growing among the general population. A recent general survey of Canadians by Carleton University, for example, reported that almost 75% agree with statements that “religion breeds conflict” and “religious people are too intolerant.”²⁰

Future Directions

The present pilot survey was deliberately a very general and coarse-grained, even scattershot, effort – the drilling of a number of crude test holes in promising locations in hopes of reaching some productive aquifers. We think we have uncovered a few promising leads for future study. These would include: further studies from alternative theoretical perspectives of the interaction of moral values with social, political, and religious attitudes and, in particular, the hostility to religion of atheists; closer examination of later ages of deconversion or enlightenment; the relation between self-labelling as used in the present study and more continuous measures involving probability statements about the likelihood of truth in various aspects of theism and religion; investigation of the role of specific alternative world-views provided by science and reason in providing life satisfaction for atheists; and further investigation of the more moderate attitudes and the qualified attitudes of agnostics, particularly whether this represents a more general trait of openness to alternatives or unwillingness to commit to a single viewpoint

Final Remarks

We conclude that there is much more to atheists than their religious disbelief. Given that they have no formal creed, they share many values, attitudes, and opinions. We speculate that they also share basic cognitive and temperamental biases underlying their highly similar values, attitudes, and opinions of which atheism is only one, negative, example.

We were struck by the finding that a global rating of country religiosity based on quite independent data was associated with both perceived family negative influence, independently of family religiosity, and equally with negative influence of peers. Also interesting is the finding that neither family nor general cultural religiosity was related to hostility or negative attitudes toward religion or, for that matter any other characteristics of our respondents. Thus, an increased sense of opposition to their own irreligious views by being immersed in a religious culture and/or family does not

appear, in itself, to affect the attitudes and values of atheists, agnostics, etc. Rather, it appears that commitment to certain moral and epistemic values lies at the heart of their negative attitudes to religion.

Consistent with the role of epistemic values, several of the characteristics of our respondents are consistent with those of the new atheists that have been characterized as “scientific.” Scientism is typically used as a term of abuse, applied to those who, in the view of one who uses the term, overextend the domain of science.²¹ The new atheists would argue, however, that the general tendency of science has ever been to extend its border and is, in the view of these same people, on the point of eliminating them altogether. The new atheism is founded on a scientism describable as *naturalism without borders*. NWB appears to aspire to do the equivalent of erasing from those old maps the words “hic sunt dracones.” The current, and perhaps last, dragon for the new atheists and, apparently, for many of our respondents, is religion.

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¹We received responses from 56 countries. These included, using the ISO-alpha2 codes: AR, AU, AT, BE, BR, BN, CA, CH, CL, CN, CR, CZ, DK, EC, EE, EG, ES, FI, FR, DE, GB, GR, HR, HU, IS, IN, ID, IE, IR, IL, IT, LV, LT, MY, MX, NL, NO, NZ, PE, PH, PL, PT, RO, RS, RU, SK, SI, SE, SG, TR, UA, UG, UY, US, VE, ZA. A large majority of respondents were from the US (1683), with sizable minorities from Canada (365), Europe (188), UK (116), Australia (79), and Latin American (58). We acknowledge that the use of country codes is a rather blunt instrument to assess the broader religious social context, especial in the US, with its marked regional differences (e.g., Kosmin, B. A., & Keysar, A. (2006). *Religion in a free market: Religious and non-religious Americans: Who, what, why, where*. Paramount Market Publishing). It is all the more striking, therefore, that we obtained rather clear-cut results.

²Halman, L. (2010). Atheism and secularity in the Netherlands. In P. Zuckerman (Ed.), *Atheism and secularity*. Vol. 2, Praeger.

³It might have been better termed the “re-newed atheism” as militant atheism, and many of its arguments, are as old as atheism itself (See Bremmer, I. M. (2007). Atheism in antiquity. In M. Martin (Ed.) *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. Cambridge University Press. For more recent historical resurgence of atheism and vilification of such things as revealed religion and priestcraft, see Caron, N. (2009). Debating freedom of speech and conscience. *Common-Place*, 9 (4).

⁴Nontheists remain empirically a relatively unexamined segment of society. Baker, J. B. & Smith, B. (2009). None too simple: Examining issues of nonbelief and nonbelonging in

the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 48, 719-733.

- ⁵ Hazrat, a Pakistani atheist, retrieved from The Freethinker, <http://freethinker.co.uk/> Sept 7, 2010
- ⁶ For reviews of such findings see: Beit-Hallahmi, B. (2007). Atheists: A psychological profile. In M. Martin (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to atheism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Zuckerman, P. (2009). Atheism, secularity, and well-being: How the findings in social science counter negative stereotypes and assumptions. *Sociology Compass*, 3/6, 949-971.
- ⁷ Pasquale, F. A. (2010). A portrait of secular group affiliates. In P. Zuckerman (Ed.) *Atheism and secularity*, Vol. 1. Praeger.
- ⁸ Country religiosity values were taken from Gallup Worldview, 2007-8.
- ⁹ Christian student: cited <http://www.daylightatheism.org/2010/09/the-atheists-are-multiplying.html>, Sept 5, 2010
- ¹⁰ We originally labelled this scale Attitudes to Theism but later realized that Negative Attitudes to Religion more accurately reflects the content of the scale. The items are: 1. Religions persist partly because of uncritical thinking on the part of believers. 2. We would all be better off if the religious practiced their beliefs privately and didn't interfere with questions of public policy. 3. Religions generally do more harm than good. 4. Religions have opposed scientific progress in the past, and they continue to do so. 5. It is a violation of the rights of children to indoctrinate them into religion without a choice among points of view. 6. If religion were to disappear tomorrow, the world would be better off. 7. Religion is basically founded on ignorance. 8. It is a violation of the rights of the non-religious to give religions special tax exemptions. 9. Religion is an impediment to social progress. 10. Religious morality encourages hypocrisy. 11. Religious symbolism in government and public life, such as the use of prayers in legislatures, has no place in a secular society.
- ¹¹ Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God delusion*. New York; Houghton Mifflin. Humphreys, N. (1997). What shall we tell the children? *Social Research*, 65, 777-805.
- ¹² Hillary, Comment on CNN Belief Blog, How Christians Spoil Sex, Sept 3, 2010
- ¹³ Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96, 1029-1046.
- ¹⁴ 1) Naturalistic Liberalism
- Evolution is the best explanation so far of our origins.
 - Abortion should be legally available with few or no restrictions.
 - There should be no special restrictions on stem-cell research.
 - Euthanasia should be legally available with suitable safeguards.
- 2) Security Issues

- It is better for a country to be ready to go to war than to be pushed around or to waste time in negotiations.
- It is important to have the death penalty available as a deterrent to very serious crimes such as murder.
- One of the most important things a government can do is to make sure that its military forces remain strong, even if social programs have to be cut back.
- There is too much focus on the rights of suspects, because police need more authority to deal with criminals.

3) Environmental Liberalism

- Overpopulation is a serious world problem.
- Global warming is at least partly caused by human activity and is a serious problem for the environment.

4) Religious Extremism

- The spread of extremist or "fundamentalist" religious faiths constitute threats to our freedom of expression.
- The spread of religious extremism poses a risk of increasing violence, including terrorism, when adherents feel their religious beliefs have been insulted.

Omitted Items The first 4 items in this list varied considerably across countries appearing to be more serious North American issues. The last item, on cloning, was not consistently associated with any other factor.

- Strict control on the possession of handguns would help to reduce the incidence of gun violence.
- Marijuana should be freely available for medicinal use.
- Marijuana should be decriminalized.
- The main problem with capital punishment is that there are too many wrongful convictions.
- Human cloning should be severely restricted.

¹⁵ One of our respondents pointed out that it is possible to hold the fully mechanistic belief that human consciousness might someday be instantiated in artificial machines. We agree that this is a reasonable stance and will re-frame this question in future studies. Nonetheless, this item is positively correlated with the other two items and the resulting scale has excellent internal consistency for a three-item scale.

¹⁶ Baker & Smith (2009) op. Cit.

¹⁷ The items were: 1) I am confident in my belief system. 2) I aspire to live and act according to my belief system. 3) My belief system is grounded in absolute truth. 4) Most people would agree with my belief system if they took time to understand it. 5) In my heart I believe that my belief system is more correct than others. Two items load on a different factor and appear to reflect commitment rather than confidence: 1) I would support a war that supported my belief system. 2) If it came down to it I would sacrifice my life to defend my beliefs. Responses to the two items did not differ across groups.

¹⁸ From an exchange at SpiritualAgnostics@yahoo.com retrieved Sept. 8, 2020

¹⁹ As was used in the 2007, National Survey by Horizon Research Consultancy Group, Ltd. This likely accounted for

the anomalously miniscule estimates of atheism reported in this survey.

²⁰ Jedwab, J. (2010). To believe or not to believe, is that the question? Canadian views on Religion. Unpublished document, Association for Canadian Studies.

²¹ For numerous examples see Stenger, V. J. (2009). *The new atheism: Taking a stand for science and reason*. Prometheus Books.