

Atheism: Contemporary Rates and Patterns¹

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Determining what percentage of a given society believes in God – or doesn't -- is fraught with methodological hurdles. First: low response rates; most people do not respond to surveys, and response rates of lower than 50% cannot be generalized to the wider society. Secondly: non-random samples. If the sample is not randomly selected – i.e., every member of the given population has an equal chance of being chosen -- it is non-generalizable. Third: adverse political/cultural climates. In totalitarian countries where atheism is governmentally promulgated and risks are present for citizens viewed as disloyal, individuals will be reluctant to admit that they do believe in God. Conversely, in societies where religion is enforced by the government and risks are present for citizens viewed as non-believers, individuals will be reluctant to admit that they don't believe in Allah, regardless of whether anonymity is "guaranteed." Even in democratic societies without governmental coercion, individuals often feel that it is necessary to say that are religious, simply because such a response is socially desirable or culturally appropriate. For example, the

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designation “atheist” is stigmatized in many societies; even when people directly claim to *not* believe in God, they still eschew the self-designation of “atheist.” Greeley (2003) found that 41% of Norwegians, 48% of the French, and 54% of Czechs claimed to not believe in God, but only 10%, 19%, and 20% of those respondents self-identified as “atheist,” respectively. A final methodological problem: terminology. Definitions of specific words seldom translate well cross-culturally. Signifiers such as “religious” or “God” have different meanings in different cultures (Beyer, 2003), making cross-national comparisons of beliefs between markedly different societies tenuous. Despite the above methodological limitations, we *can* make reliable estimates. Though methodological flaws persist, in the words of Robert Putnam (2000:23): “we must make do with the imperfect evidence that we can find, not merely lament its deficiencies.”

Below is a presentation of the findings of the most recently available surveys concerning rates of non-belief in God in various countries worldwide.

Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 25% of Australians do not believe in God. According to Paul (2002), 24% Australians are atheist or agnostic.

Guth and Fraser (2001) found that 28% of Canadians “show no evidence of religious salience or activity.” According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 22% of those in Canada do not believe in God. According to Bibby (2002), when asked

“Do you believe that God exists?” 6% of Canadians answered “No, I definitely do not” and another 13% answered, “No, I don’t think so,” for a total of 19% classifiable as either atheist or agnostic. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999:121), 30% of Canadians do not believe in God or a “Higher Power.”

Between 20% and 22% of those in New Zealand do not believe in God (Inglehart, et al, 2004; Paul, 2002).

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 6% of those in the United States do not believe in God. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBCi, 9% of Americans do not believe in God. Rice (2003) found that 3.8% of Americans don’t believe in God or “a spirit or life force.” According to Hout and Fischer (2002), between 3-4.5% of Americans are either atheist or agnostic; Marwell and Demerath (2003) suggest an estimate of 7%. According to Froese (2001), 8% of Americans are atheist or agnostic. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999:99), 5% of Americans do not believe in God or a “Higher Power.”

Latin America

A 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC found that 7% of Mexicans do not believe in God. Inglehart et al (2004) found that 2% of Mexicans do not believe in God.

The 1999 Gallup International Pollⁱⁱⁱ found that nearly 7% of Argentines chose “none” as their religion. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 4% of those in Argentina do not believe in God.

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 12% of those in Uruguay do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 3% of those in Chile do not believe in God, down from 5% in 1990.

According to Hiorth (2003), Barret et al (2001), the 1999 Gallup International Poll, and Inglehart et al (2004, 1998), less than 1-2% of those in El Salvador, Guatemala, Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Paraguay, and Venezuela are atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious.

Europe

Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that 39% of those in Britain do not believe in God. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC, 44% of the British do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 31% of the British do not believe in God, although only 10% self-identify as “atheist.” According to Bruce (2002), 10% of the British self-identify as an “agnostic person” and 8% as a “convinced atheist,” with an additional 21% choosing “not a religious person.” According to Froese (2001), 32% of the British are atheist or agnostic. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999:121), 39% of the British do not believe in God or a “Higher Power.”

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 44% of those in France do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 48% of the French do not believe in God, although only 19% self-identify as “atheist.” According to Froese (2001), 54% of the French are atheist or agnostic. According to Davie (1999), 43% of the French do not believe in God.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that 54% of Swedes do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 74% of Swedes said that they did not believe in “a personal God.” According to Greeley (2003), 46% of Swedes do not believe in God, although only 17% self-identify as “atheist.” According to Froese (2001), 69% of Swedes are either atheist or agnostic. According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2000), 82% of Swedes do not believe in a “personal God.” According to Davie (1999), 85% of Swedes do not believe in God.

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004) 48% of Danes do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 49% of Danes do not believe in “a personal God.” According to Greeley (2003), 43% of Danes do not believe in God, although only 15% self-identify as “atheist.” According to Froese (2001), 45% of Danes are either atheist or agnostic. According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2000), 80% of Danes do not believe in a “personal God.”

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 31% of Norwegians do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 54% of Norwegians said that they did not believe in “a personal God.” According to Greeley (2003), 41% of Norwegians do not believe in God, although only 10% self-identify as “atheist.” According to

Gustafsson and Pettersson (2002), 72% of Norwegians do not believe in a “personal God.” According to Froese (2001), 45% of Norwegians are either atheist or agnostic.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that 28% of those in Finland do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 33% of Finns do not believe in “a personal God.” According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2002), 60% of Finns do not believe in a “personal God.” According to Froese (2001), 41% of Finns are either atheist or agnostic.

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 42% of those in the Netherlands do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 43% of the Dutch do not believe in God, although only 17% self-identify as “atheist.” Houtman and Mascini (2002) found that 39% of the Dutch are either agnostic or atheist. According to Froese (2001), 44% of the Dutch are either atheist or agnostic.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that 31% of West Germans do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 35% of West Germans do not believe in God. According to Froese (2001), 35% of West Germans are either atheist or agnostic. According to Greeley (2003), 75% of East Germans do not believe in God. According to Pollack (2002), 74% of East Germans and 38% of West Germans do not believe in God. According to Shand (1998), 42% of West Germans and 72% of East Germans are either atheist or agnostic.

Between 17% and 27% of those in Switzerland do not believe in God (Inglehart et al, 2004; Greeley, 2003). Between 18% and 26% of those in Austria do not believe in God (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Greeley, 2003; Froese, 2001).

Inglehart et al (2004) found that 15% of those in Spain do not believe in God, and according to Greeley (2003), 18% of Spaniards do not believe in God. According to Froese (2001), 24% of Spaniards are either atheist or agnostic.

Inglehart et al (2004) found that 6% of Italians do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 14% of Italians do not believe in God. According to Froese (2001), 15% of Italians are either atheist or agnostic. According to Davis and Robinson (1999), 23% of Italians disagreed (some strongly) that a God exists who concerns himself with every human being personally.

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004) and Froese (2001), between 42% and 43% of Belgians do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 8% of Albanians do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 34% of Bulgarians do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 40% of Bulgarians do not believe in God.

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 61% of Czechs do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 54% of Czechs do not believe in God. According to a 1999 Gallup International Poll, over 55% of Czechs chose "none" as their religion. Between 10% and 28% of those in Slovakia do not believe in God (Inglehart et al, 2004; Greeley, 2003; Gall, 1998).

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 7% of Croatians do not believe in God. According to a 1999 Gallup International Poll, 5.5% of Croatians and 6.4% of those in Bosnia chose “none” as their religion. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 4% of Romanians do not believe in God.

Between 4% and 5% of those in Ireland do not believe in God (Inglehart et al, 2004; Greeley, 2003; Davie, 1999). Between 4% and 9% of those in Portugal do not believe in God (Inglehart et al, 2004; Greeley, 2003).

According to Inglehart et al (2004) and Greeley (2003), between 35% and 38% of those in Slovenia do not believe in God. Inglehart et al (2004) found that 32% of Hungarians do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 35% of Hungarians do not believe in God. According to Froese (2001), 46% of Hungarians are either atheist or agnostic.

According to Inglehart et al (2004) and Greeley (2003), between 3% and 6% of those in Poland do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 16% of those in Iceland do not believe in God. According to Froese (2001), 23% of those in Iceland are either atheist or agnostic.

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 16% of those in Greece do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 4% of those in Cyprus do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004) and the 1999 Gallup International Poll, less than 1-2% of those in Turkey are nonreligious.

Russia and Former Soviet States

A 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC found that 24% of Russians do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 30% of Russians do not believe in God, but only 5% self-identify as “atheist” (Froese, 2004). According to Greeley (2003), 48% of Russians do not believe in God.

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 17% of those in Belarus do not believe in God. Froese (2004) reports that 5% of Ukrainians are self-described atheists. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 20% of Ukrainians do not believe in God. According to Yelensky (2002), 44% of Ukrainians claim “none” in terms of religious identification.

Froese (2004) found that 6% of those in Latvia are self-described atheists, but according to Inglehart et al (2004), 20% of those in Latvia do not believe in God, far fewer than in 1990, when 42% did not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 29% of those in Latvia do not believe in God.

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 13% of Lithuanians and 49% of Estonians do not believe in God, although only 1% and 11% describe themselves as atheists, respectively (Froese, 2004).

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 14% of those in Armenia do not believe in God, although only 7% are self-described atheists (Froese, 2004). According to a 1999 Gallup International Poll, over 11% of Armenians chose “none” as their religion.

According to Froese (2004), less than 1% of those in Azerbaijan and 4% of those in Georgia are atheist. According to Froese (2004), 12% of those in Kazakhstan are atheist. According to Barrett (2001), 29% of those in Kazakhstan are nonreligious, with 11% claiming to be atheist. According to the 1999 Gallup International Poll, almost 19% of Kazakhs chose “none” as their religion.

According to Froese (2004), 7% of those in Kyrgyzstan, 6% of those in Moldova, 4% of those in Uzbekistan, 2% of those in Tajikistan, and 2% of those in Turkmenistan, are atheist. According to Barret et al (2001), 3.5% of Uzbeks are atheist. According to Johnstone (1993), 28% of those in Kyrgystan, 27% of those in Moldova, 26% of Uzbeks, 18% of those in Turkmenistan, and 13% of Tajikistan, are nonreligious.

Asia

Survey data of religious belief in China is extremely unreliable (Guest, 2003; Demerath, 2001:154). Estimates of high degrees of atheism are most likely exaggerations (Overmyer, 2003). Only recently has sound scholarship begun to emerge (Yang, 2004). That said, according to Barrett et al (2001), 8% of the Chinese are atheist. According to Marshall (2000), 10% of the Chinese identify as atheist. According to O’Brien and Palmer (1993), between 10-14% of those in China are “avowed atheists.”

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004, 1998), 6% of those in India do not believe in God. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC, less than 3% of Indians do not believe in God.

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 65% of those in Japan do not believe in God. According to Demerath (2001:138), 64% do not believe in God and 55% do not believe in Buddha. According to the 1999 Gallup International Poll, nearly 29% of the Japanese chose “none” as their religion. According to Johnstone (1993:323), 84% of the Japanese claim no personal religion, but most follow “the customs of Japanese traditional religion.”

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 81% of those in Vietnam and 24% of those in Taiwan do not believe in God.

Barret et al (2001) report that 15% of North Koreans are atheist. According to Johnstone (1993), 68% of North Koreans are nonreligious, however, for reasons similar to those discussed above concerning China, this high estimate should be met with skepticism.

A 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC found that 30% of South Koreans do not believe in God. According to Eungi (2003), 52% of South Koreans do not believe in God.

According to Barret et al (2001), 9% of those in Mongolia are atheist. According to Johnstone (1993), 20% of those in Mongolia, 7% of Cambodians and 5% of Laotians are nonreligious.

Inglehart et al (2004) found that 13% of those in Singapore do not believe in God. According to the 1999 Gallup International Poll, over 12% of those in Singapore chose “none” as their religion.

According to Moaddel and Azadarmaki (2003), less than 5% of Iranians do not believe in God. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC, less than 2% of those in Indonesia do not believe in God.

According to Inglehart et al (2004), Barrett et al (2001), the 1999 Gallup International Poll, and Johnstone (1993), less than 1% of those in Indonesia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Iran, Malaysia, Nepal, Laos, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Philippines, are non-believers in God.

Africa

According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC, Hiorth (2001) Inglehart et al (2004, 1998), Barrett et al (2001), the 1999 Gallup International Poll, and Johnstone (1993), less than 1% of those in Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Zambia, are atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious.

According to Johnstone (1993), 2.7% of those in Congo, 4% of those in Zimbabwe, 4% of those in Namibia, 1.5% of those in Angola and the Central African Republic, and 5% of those in Mozambique are nonreligious.

According to a 1999 Gallup International Poll, nearly 11% of South Africans chose “none” as their religion. According to Inglehart et al (2004), 1% of South Africans do not believe in God.

The Middle East

According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC, 15% of Israelis do not believe in God. According to Yuchtman-Ya’ar (2003), 54% of Israelis identify themselves as “secular.” According to Dashefsky et al (2003), 41% of Israelis identify themselves as “not religious.” According to Kedem (1995), 31% of Israelis do not believe in God, with an additional 6% choosing “don’t know,” for a total of 37% being atheist or agnostic.

A 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC found that less than 3% of those in Lebanon do not believe in God. According to Moaddel and Azadarmaki (2003), less than 5% of those in Jordan and Egypt do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al (2004), less than 1% of those in Jordan and Egypt do not believe in God.

According to Barret et al (2001) less than 1% of those in Syria, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen are secular. According

to Johnstone (1993), less than 2% of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, and Kuwait are nonreligious. According to Johnstone (1993), less than 1% of those in Iraq are nonreligious.

The West Indies

According to Hiorth (2003), 40% of Cubans claim “none” as their religion. According to Barrett et al (2001), 30% of Cubans are nonreligious, with 7% claiming to be atheist. According to Johnstone (1993), 9% of those in Trinidad and Tobago, and 3% of Jamaicans are nonreligious. According to Hiorth (2003) and Johnstone (1993) less than 1% of those in Haiti are non-religious.

According to Inglehart et al (2004), 7% of those in the Dominican Republic do not believe in God, and the 1999 Gallup International Poll found that almost 10% of those in the Dominican Republic chose “none” as their religion.

The Top 50

Below is a list of the top fifty countries containing the largest percentage of people who identify as atheist, agnostic, or non-believer in God.

Country	Total Pop.(2004)	% Atheist/ Agnostic/ Nonbeliever in God (minimum - maximum)	actual #
1. Sweden	8,986,000	46-85%	4,133,560-7,638,100
2. Vietnam	82,690,000	81%	66,978,900
3. Denmark	5,413,000	43-80%	2,327,590-4,330,400
4. Norway	4,575,000	31-72%	1,418,250-3,294,000
5. Japan	127,333,000	64-65%	81,493,120-82,766,450
6. Czech Rep.	10,246,100	54-61%	5,328,940-6,250,121
7. Finland	5,215,000	28-60%	1,460,200-3,129,000
8. France	60,424,000	43-54%	25,982,320-32,628,960
9. South Korea	48,598,000	30%-52%	14,579,400-25,270,960
10. Estonia	1,342,000	49%	657,580
11. Germany	82,425,000	41-49%	33,794,250-40,388,250
12. Russia	143,782,000	24-48%	34,507,680-69,015,360
13. Hungary	10,032,000	32-46%	3,210,240-4,614,720
14. Netherlands	16,318,000	39-44%	6,364,020-7,179,920
15. Britain	60,271,000	31-44%	18,684,010-26,519,240

16. Belgium	10,348,000	42-43%	4,346,160-4,449,640
17. Bulgaria	7,518,000	34-40%	2,556,120-3,007,200
18. Slovenia	2,011,000	35-38%	703,850-764,180
19. Israel	6,199,000	15-37%	929,850-2,293,630
20. Canada	32,508,000	19-30%	6,176,520-9,752,400
21. Latvia	2,306,000	20-29%	461,200-668,740
22. Slovakia	5,424,000	10-28%	542,400-1,518,720
23. Switzerland	7,451,000	17-27%	1,266,670-2,011,770
24. Austria	8,175,000	18-26%	1,471,500-2,125,500
25. Australia	19,913,000	24-25%	4,779,120-4,978,250
26. Taiwan	22,750,000	24%	5,460,000
27. Spain	40,281,000	15-24%	6,042,150-9,667,440
28. Iceland	294,000	16-23%	47,040-67,620
29. New Zealand	3,994,000	20-22%	798,800-878,680
30. Ukraine	47,732,000	20%	9,546,400
31. Belarus	10,311,000	17%	1,752,870
32. Greece	10,648,000	16%	1,703,680
33. North Korea	22,698,000	15% (?)	3,404,700
34. Italy	58,057,000	6-15%	3,483,420-8,708,550
35. Armenia	2,991,000	14%	418,740
36. China	1,298,848,000	8-14% (?)	103,907,840-181,838,720
37. Lithuania	3,608,000	13%	469,040

38. Singapore	4,354,000	13%	566,020
39. Uruguay	3,399,000	12%	407,880
40. Kazakhstan	15,144,000	11-12%	1,665,840-1,817,280
41. Estonia	1,342,000	11%	147,620
42. Mongolia	2,751,000	9%	247,590
43. Portugal	10,524,000	4-9%	420,960-947,160
44. United States	293,028,000	3-9%	8,790,840-26,822,520
45. Albania	3,545,000	8%	283,600
46. Argentina	39,145,000	4-8%	1,565,800-3,131,600
47. Kyrgyzstan	5,081,000	7%	355,670
48. Dominican Rep.	8,834,000	7%	618,380
49. Cuba	11,309,000	7% (?)	791,630
50. Croatia	4,497,000	7%	314,790

(?): certainty/validity on these figures is relatively low

We can also include Mexico (2-7% do not believe in God), Poland (3-6%), Moldova (6%) Romania, Georgia, and Uzbekistan (4%), India (2-6%), Ireland (4-5%), and Chile (3%). From 50+ countries above, the total worldwide number of atheists, agnostics, and non-believers in God is somewhere between 504,962,830 and 749,247,571. These numbers are conservative; were one to factor in a mere .25% of such highly populated countries as Egypt, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria,

Burma, Tanzania, and Iran, as non-believers in God, estimates would be significantly larger.

Given the above estimates, we can deduce that there are approximately 58 times as many atheists as there are Mormons, 41 times as many atheists as there are Jews, 35 times as many atheists as there are Sikhs, and twice as many atheists as there are Buddhists. Finally, nonbelievers in God as a group come in fourth place after Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion), and Hinduism (900 million) in terms of global ranking of commonly-held belief systems.

Explaining High Rates of Non-Belief

What accounts for the staggering differences in rates of non-belief between nations? For instance, why do most nations in Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia contain almost no atheists, while many European nations contain an abundance of non-believers? There are various explanations (Zuckerman, 2004; Paul, 2002; Stark and Finke, 2000; Bruce, 1999). One leading theory comes from Norris and Inglehart (2004), who argue that in societies characterized by plentiful food distribution, excellent public healthcare, and widely accessible housing, religiosity wanes. Conversely, in societies where food and shelter are scarce and life is generally less secure, religious belief is strong. Through an examination of current global statistics on religiosity as they relate to income distribution, economic inequality, welfare expenditures, and basic

measurements of lifetime security (such as vulnerability to famines, natural disasters, etc.), Inglehart and Norris (2004) convincingly argue that despite numerous factors possibly relevant for explaining different rates of religiosity world-wide, “the levels of societal and individual security in any society seem to provide the most persuasive and parsimonious explanation” (p.109).ⁱⁱⁱ Of course, there are anomalies, such as Vietnam (81% non-believers in God) and Ireland (4-5% non-believers in God). But aside from these two exceptions, the correlation between high rates of individual and societal security/well-being and high rates of non-belief in God remains strong.

Atheism and Societal Health

When recognizing that countries containing high percentages of non-believers are among the healthiest and wealthiest nations on earth (Paul, 2004), we must distinguish between nations where non-belief has been forced upon the society by dictators (“coercive atheism”) and nations wherein non-belief has emerged on its own without governmental coercion (“organic atheism”). Nations marked by coercive atheism -- such as North Korea and former Soviet states -- are marked by all that comes with totalitarianism: poor economic development, censorship, corruption, depression, etc. However, nations marked by high levels of organic atheism -- such as Sweden or the Netherlands -- are among the healthiest, wealthiest, best educated, and freest societies on earth.

Consider the *Human Development Report* (2004), commissioned by The United Nations Development Program. This report ranks 177 nations on a “Human Development Index,” which measures societal health through a weighing of such indicators as life expectancy at birth, adult literacy rate, per capita income, and educational attainment. According to the 2004 Report, the five highest ranked nations in terms of total human development were Norway, Sweden, Australia, Canada, and the Netherlands. All five of these countries are characterized by notably high degrees of organic atheism. Of the top 25 nations ranked on the “Human Development Index,” all but one (Ireland) are top-ranking non-belief nations, containing very high percentages of organic atheism. Conversely, of those countries ranked at the bottom of the “Human Development Index” -- the bottom 50 -- *all* are countries lacking statistically significant percentages of atheism.

Concerning the infant mortality rate (number of deaths per 1,000 live births), irreligious countries have the lowest rates, and religious countries have the highest. According to the *CIA World Factbook* (2004), the top 25 nations with the *lowest* infant mortality rates were all nations containing significantly high percentages of organic atheism. Conversely, the 75 bottom nations with the *highest* infant mortality rates were all nations without any statistically significant levels of organic atheism.

Concerning international poverty rates, the United Nations’ *Report on the World Social Situation* (2003) found that of the 40 poorest nations on earth, all but

one (Vietnam) are highly religious nations with statistically minimal or insignificant levels of atheism. Concerning illiteracy rates, the same report found that of the 35 nations with the highest levels of youth illiteracy rates, all are highly religious nations with statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism.

Concerning homicide rates, Fajnzylber et al (2002) and Fox and Levin (2000) found that the nations with the highest homicide rates are all highly religious nations with minimal or statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism, while nations with the lowest homicide rates tend to be highly secular nations with high levels of atheism.

Concerning suicide rates, religious nations fare better than secular nations. According to the 2003 World Health Organization's report on international male suicides rates, of the top ten nations with the *highest* male suicide rates, all but one (Sri Lanka) are strongly irreligious nations with high levels of atheism. Of the top remaining nine nations leading the world in male suicide rates, *all* are former Soviet/Communist nations, such as Belarus, Ukraine, and Latvia. Of the bottom ten nations with the *lowest* male suicide rates, all are highly religious nations with statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism.

Concerning gender equality, nations marked by high degrees of organic atheism are among the most egalitarian in the world, while highly religious nations are among the most oppressive. According to the 2004 *Human Development Report's* "Gender Empowerment Measure," the top ten nations with the highest degrees of gender equality are *all* strongly organic atheistic nations

with significantly high percentages of non-belief. Conversely, the bottom ten are *all* highly religious nations without any statistically significant percentages of atheists. According to Inglehart (2003), countries with the most female members of parliament tend to be countries characterized by high degrees of organic atheism (such as Sweden and Denmark) and countries with the fewest female members in parliament tend to be highly religious countries (such as Pakistan and Nigeria).

In sum, with the exception of suicide, countries marked by high rates of organic atheism are among the most societally healthy on earth, while societies characterized by non-existent rates of organic atheism are among the most unhealthy. Of course, none of the above correlations demonstrate that high levels of organic atheism *cause* societal health, or that low levels of organic atheism *cause* societal ills. Rather, societal health seems to cause widespread atheism, and societal insecurity seems to cause widespread belief in God, as has been demonstrated by Norris and Inglehart (2004), mentioned above.

Future Trends

Is worldwide atheism growing or declining? This is a difficult question to answer simply. On the one hand, there are more atheists in the world today than ever before. On the other hand, worldwide atheism overall may be in decline, due to the demographic fact that highly religious nations have the highest

birthrates in the world, and highly irreligious nations have the lowest birthrates in the world. As Norris and Inglehart (2004:25) observe, “the world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world’s population.”

Thus, the picture is complicated, making definite predictions of the future growth or decline of atheism difficult. What is clear is that while most people continue to maintain a firm belief in deities (especially in the most populous countries) in certain societies, non-belief in God is definitely increasing. (Bruce, 2002). According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999:121), 30% of Canadians do not believe in God or a “Higher Power,” *up from 23% in 1985*. According to Beyer (1997), 12.5% of Canadians chose “none” when presented with a plethora of religious identity options in 1991, *up from 7% in 1981 – a 90% increase of “none’s” in one decade*. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999:121), 39% of the British do not believe in God or a “Higher Power,” *up from 24% in 1979*. According to Bruce (2002) and Gill et al (1998), survey data from the 1960s found that *79% of the British held a belief in God, but this dropped down to 68% in surveys taken in the 1990s; whereas only 10% answered that they “don’t believe in God” in the 1960s, this percentage had almost tripled to 27% in the 1990s*. According to Bruce (2001), surveys in the 1950s found that only 2% of the British replied they did not believe in God; *that percentage was up to 27% in the 1990s*. According to Palm and Trost (2000), when Swedes were asked in 1947 “Do you believe in God?” 83% said yes, 9% said they didn’t know, and 8% said no. In the early 1990s, in response to the

same question, only 38% said yes, 16% didn't know, and 46% said they did not. According to CUNY's 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, 14% of Americans claim "no religion" in terms of self-identification, up from 8% in 1990. Finally, according to Norris and Inglehart (2004:90), the percentage of people believing in God over the past 50 years has declined by 33% in Sweden, 22% in the Netherlands, 20% in Australia, 19% in Norway, 18% in Denmark, 16.5% in Britain, 12% in Greece, 11% in Belgium, 7% in Canada, and 3% in Japan.

In sum, loss of belief in God has occurred over the course of the 20th century in Canada, Australia, and various European countries (Davie, 2000), including Germany (Shand, 1998; Greeley, 2003), the United Kingdom (Bruce, 2001, 2002), the Netherlands (Grontenhuis and Scheepers, 2001), and Scandinavia (Bruce, 1999). However, secularization is quite limited to specific advanced industrialized nations (with relatively low birth rates), and has not occurred throughout much of the rest of the world.

Atheism and the "Innateness" of Religious Belief

In recent years, a new attempt at explaining religious belief has emerged. Its central tenet is that belief in God is biologically determined, neurologically based, or genetically in-born, growing out of the "natural" processes of the human brain.

Justin Barret (2004) has argued that belief in God is a result of the “way our minds are structured” (p.viii) and is thus “an inevitable consequence of the sorts of minds we are born with” (p.91). David Wilson (2002) suggests that religion is part of humanity’s naturally evolving adaptive strategy, and that religious belief represents “the healthy functioning of the biologically and culturally well-adapted human mind” (p.228). Michael Persinger (1987) has stressed the role of the hippocampus, the amygdala, temporal lobes, and hormonal processes, in explaining religious belief in God. Ashbrook and Albright (1997) focus on the neural workings of the brain in explaining belief in God. Newberg and D-Aquili (2001) argue that religiosity is an evolved “neurological process” (p.9), that the roots of belief in God are to be found in “the wiring of the human brain” (p.129), and that “as long as our brains are arranged the way they are,” belief in God will remain (p.172).

The data presented in this chapter delivers a heavy blow to this new explanation of theism. First of all, the sheer numbers; with between 500,000,000 and 750,000,000 non-theists living on this planet today, any suggestion that belief in God is natural, inborn, or a result of how our brains are wired becomes difficult to sustain. Secondly, innate/neural theories of belief in God cannot explain the dramatically different rates of belief among similar countries.

Consider Britain (31-44% atheist) compared to Ireland (4-5% atheist), the Czech Republic (54-61% atheist) compared to Poland (3-6% atheist), and South Korea (30-52% atheist) compared to the Philippines (less than 1% atheist). It is simply

unsustainable to argue that these glaring differences in rates of atheism among these nations is due to different biological, neurological or other such brain-related properties. Rather, the differences are better explained by taking into account historical, cultural, economic, political, and sociological factors (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Grontenhuis and Scheepers, 2001; Verweij, Ester, and Natua, 1997; Zuckerman, 2003; Bruce, 1999).

Conclusion

Between 500,000,000 and 750,000,000 humans currently do not believe in God. Such figures render any suggestion that theism is innate or neurologically based manifestly untenable. The nations with the highest degrees of organic atheism include most of the nations of Europe, Japan, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Taiwan, and Israel. However, atheism is virtually non-existent in most Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Asia. Most nations characterized by high degrees of individual and societal security have the highest rates of organic atheism, and conversely, nations characterized by low degrees of individual and societal security have the lowest rates of organic atheism and the highest degrees of belief. High levels of organic atheism are strongly correlated with high levels of societal health, such as low poverty rates and strong gender equality. In many societies atheism is growing, however, throughout much of the rest of the world

- particularly among the poorest nations with highest birth rates - atheism is barely discernible.

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ⁱ This BBC study was posted on-line by bbcnews.com (UK edition) under the heading "What the World Thinks of God."

ⁱⁱ The Gallup International Survey Poll data can be obtained from the Gallup International Association or on the web under their "Millennium Survey."

ⁱⁱⁱ Norris and Inglehart (2004) account for the United States' high degree of religious belief on page 108: "The United States...is one of the most unequal postindustrial societies...relatively high levels of economic insecurity are experienced by many sectors of U.S. society...many American families...face risks of unemployment, the dangers of sudden ill health without adequate private medical insurance, vulnerability to becoming a victim of crime..."