

Agnostics' Well-Being Compared to Believers and Atheists: A Study in Europe's Religious-Cultural Zones of Christian Heritage

Moise Karim ^{1,*} , and Vassilis Saroglou ¹ 

¹ Université catholique de Louvain, Psychological Sciences Research Institute, Place du Cardinal Mercier 10, B 1348, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

* Correspondence: moise.karim@uclouvain.be (MK); vassilis.saroglou@uclouvain.be (VS)

Abstract: Past research suggests three distinct major trends regarding the links of religion with well-being. First, religious faith contributes to well-being, with believers showing higher well-being than nonbelievers. Alternatively, it is certainty about one's own worldviews, be they religious or irreligious, that predicts well-being. Finally, secularization moderates the above, making nonbelief normative. We investigated these trends by focusing on agnostics, who comparatively to believers and atheists combine lack of faith and uncertainty about worldviews and should thus be the lowest in well-being. By analyzing European Values Study 2017 data from 29 countries and controlling for personal variables, we found that, in countries of Western Christian heritage, be they religious or secularized, agnostics were the least happy compared to believers and atheists. Religionists, compared to atheists, were happier (countries of Protestant heritage) or equally happy (countries of Catholic heritage). In countries of Eastern Orthodox tradition, believers were happier than nonbelievers, agnostics and atheists alike—but again agnostics were the lowest in the less religious countries. In sum, uncertainty makes agnostics, consistently across religious cultures, to be the lowest in well-being, whereas the effect of religious faith on well-being varies across cultures.

Keywords: agnosticism; atheism; well-being; Catholics; Protestants; Christian Orthodox; secularization; religion; convictional certainty

1. Introduction

Research on religion and well-being has for many decades mostly focused on the role of religiousness and its aspects on well-being, mental health, and their aspects by examining the role of greater religiosity in the population, i.e., in samples including both religious believers and nonbelievers (Koenig 2018). Subsequently, this research most often informs on differences between religious believers and nonbelievers and does so less on differences between types of believers or nonbelievers. More recently, there has been interest in studying well-being and mental health of the nonreligious, be they atheist, agnostic, or simply nonreligious (Hayward et al. 2016; Weber et al. 2012; Zuckerman et al. 2016). However, systematic research focusing specifically on agnostics' well-being is sparse and limited (one country, low number of agnostics; Gremigni and Casu 2019; Hayward et al. 2016). The present work aims to investigate this theoretically intriguing question. It does so in the context of, mostly secularized, European countries, using European Values Survey data from 29 countries of Christian heritage.

2. Agnostics as a Sui Generis Convictional Group

Agnosticism is a sui generis category in the religion-irreligion spectrum. In large surveys, in both Europe and the US, agnostics appear to be of comparable to atheists size in

Citation: To be added by editorial staff during production.

Academic Editor: Firstname Last-name

Received: date

Revised: date

Accepted: date

Published: date



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

the population and together, agnostics and atheists, constitute the two predominant groups among nonbelievers (European Commission 2019; Pew Research Center 2022). No third major group emerges when the possibility to report “other” is offered to participants (Karim and Saroglou 2023; Uzarevic et al. 2017, 2020). In terms of the religion-irreligion continuum, agnostics are implicitly placed midway between the religionists and the atheists (they doubt God’s existence but cannot affirm God’s non-existence for sure). They typically score midway between the two groups on various measures of religiosity and spirituality (Lindeman et al. 2019; Karim and Saroglou 2023). However, from a personality and individual differences perspective, recent research shows that agnostics are rather a sui generis convictional group, with some of their psychological characteristics placing them midway between the religious and the atheists, whereas for others, agnostics tend to be the highest or the lowest compared to the other two groups.

Indeed, in recent studies on individual Western European countries of Christian heritage, Karim and Saroglou (2023, 2024a, 2024b) found that agnostics are midway between Christian religionists and atheists on other-oriented, prosocial dispositions (agreeableness, belief in world’s benevolence) and proximal to religion beliefs related to intuitive thinking, such as paranormal beliefs or non-theistic spirituality. However, compared to Christian religionists and atheists, agnostics seem to be more open-minded, as suggested by their lowest scores on dogmatism and lowest strength of identification with their convictional category, and by their higher disposition, compared to atheists, for openness to experience and curiosity. They seem finally to be low on narcissism, i.e., do not overestimate themselves compared to other people in general, whereas Christians and atheists overestimate themselves on characteristics that are central to their group, i.e., respectively, being prosocial/nice and intelligent/competent.

Other studies found that agnostics and atheists differ with each other regarding motives and sources of meaning. Agnostics are more motivated by self-transcendence (social commitment and generativity), whereas atheists are more motivated by self-actualization (autonomy, achievement, fun, and comfort) (a study in Denmark: Pedersen et al. 2018) and consider money, hobbies, and travel as sources of meaning more than agnostics do (Pew Research Center 2018). Atheists are more convinced of scientism and less convinced of skepticism (Schnell et al. 2023). Finally, distinct characteristics compose the stereotypes people have on agnostics compared to those they have for atheists (Bergstrom et al. 2022).

3. Agnostics’ Well-Being

Are agnostics happier or less happy compared to religionists and atheists? This question will be investigated here in the context of European countries of Christian heritage. These countries have also experienced, to different degrees and for varied reasons, secularization. Before developing our rationale and expectations regarding this question, it is important to briefly remind here the three major trends resulting from previous research, in particular from studies with large multi-country data.

3.1. Religion vs. Irreligion and Well-Being: Three Major Trends

First, religion seems to have an impact, at least some impact, on people’s life satisfaction, well-being, and mental health either by directly providing positivity—in beliefs, affects, and behavior—that amplifies the existing one, or by providing positivity buffering personal and life vulnerabilities and difficulties (Koenig 2018; Rosmarin and Koenig 2020; but see Galen 2023, for questions regarding causality). Following the model of the Big Four religious dimensions, i.e., believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging (Saroglou 2011), we can integrate previous evidence on various psychological mechanisms underlying the religion-well-being association into four dynamics (Saroglou 2021). First, religion provides a series of positive beliefs (God, immortality, world assumptions) and contributes to meaning in life, optimism, and holding some answers to existential questions. Second, it provides private and public rituals that allow for the experience of positive

emotions, attachment security, and regulation of negative emotions. Third, it promotes values and norms that contribute to strengthening, shaping, or orienting morality, values, and norms and thus it consolidates self-control. Finally, through community and tradition, it boosts social self-esteem and offers social support. We call this major trend *the religious faith enhancing believers' well-being hypothesis* (see Figure 1a).

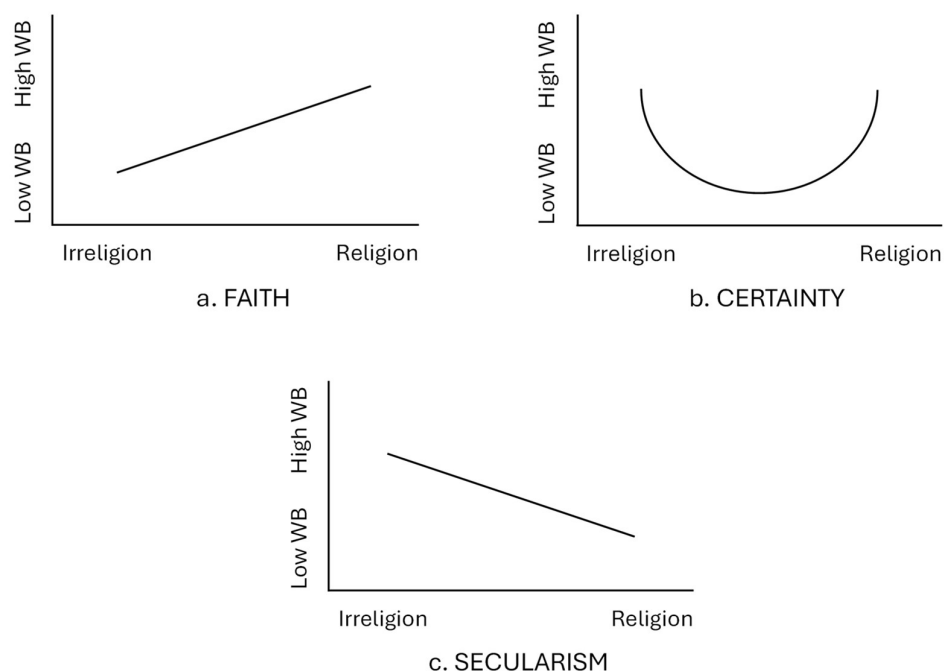


Figure 1. Relationships between religion-irreligion and well-being (WB), depending on the hypothesized cause: faith (a), certainty (b), and secularism (c).

Second, other research has favored an alternative consideration. Rather than religious faith per se and related religious practice and community, it is the certainty about one's own worldviews, convictions, ideas, and values that should be related to and contribute to well-being and happiness. Inversely, doubting about—religious or other—beliefs, values, and worldviews and being weakly religious, thus not really benefiting from the above four Bs, should be related to lower well-being and life satisfaction. There has been evidence in favor of this conception showing that certainly those weakly religious, and occasionally the weakly nonreligious, are indeed lower in well-being, also compared to the clearly nonreligious (Baker et al. 2018; Galen and Kloet 2011; Mochon et al. 2011). (Note that it remains unclear whether doubting results from emotional instability or, inversely, enhances instability). We call this second major trend *the certainty in worldviews enhancing well-being hypothesis* (see Figure 1b).

Third, recent studies, in particular ones analyzing data from a large number of countries suggested that the country's mean level of secularism (or mean level of religiosity) and related factors may importantly moderate the religiosity-well-being relationship (Diener et al. 2011; Gebauer et al. 2017; Lun and Bond 2013; Stavrova et al. 2013). In secular countries, nonbelief became normative and being religious is perceived as belonging to a minority. Religious people are happier than nonbelievers in traditional religious countries, where their religiousness allows them to be well integrated into society. In those countries, nonbelievers are unhappier since they feel marginalized or are even target of anti-atheist prejudice. The opposite seems to be the case in highly secularized countries.

In those societies, nonbelievers are equally happy to religionists or even happier since they live in a way that is normative within society, whereas religious people may feel marginalized and thus be less happy. We call this trend *the secularism enhancing nonbelievers' well-being hypothesis* (see Figure 1c).

These three trends are not necessarily incompatible with each other. For instance, if certainty has a major effect on well-being, and the effect of faith depends on whether a society is very secular or very religious, then, beyond a U-relationship between religion-irreligion and well-being (as in Figure 1b), one can expect a J-relationship in more religious countries (with the weakly religious being the lowest, religionists should be higher on well-being compared to atheists) and an inverted J-relationship in very secularized countries (with the weakly religious again being the lowest, atheists should be higher on well-being compared to religionists).

3.2. Agnostics as Possibly the Lowest on Well-Being

To our knowledge, no research has specifically investigated the well-being of agnostics, compared to religious believers and atheists, and this across religious traditions (but see Baker et al. 2018, and Galen and Koet 2011, for studies in the US). Our rationale in the present study is that, compared to religionists, agnostics miss the benefits of faith on happiness, and that, compared to both atheists and religionists, they miss the benefits of certainty in convictions and worldviews. Therefore, we expected agnostics, combining lack of faith and lack of certainty, to be the lowest, compared to religionists and atheists, on life satisfaction. This expectation departs from the religious faith (alone) hypothesis (Figure 1a) that would have placed agnostics midway on a linear hypothetical line, with religionists being the highest on well-being and atheists being the lowest.

Indirect evidence in favor of this expectation comes from the above-mentioned studies on personality characteristics of agnostics in two secularized European countries (Belgium and the UK: Karim and Saroglou 2023, 2024a, 2024b). These studies showed that, compared to religionists and atheists, agnostics were the highest on neuroticism and indecisiveness, and the lowest on reporting frequent experience of positive affect. Our expectation is also in line with previous research showing that religious doubt usually reflects emotional turmoil (Fisher 2017).

The above hypothesis is though far from being trivial. One could counter-argue that agnostics, because of their higher open-mindedness, flexibility, and curiosity (Karim and Saroglou, 2023, 2024a), should be mature thinkers regarding existential questions. In addition, as being more prosocially oriented, they may be privileged to feel at ease with people from both sides, religionists and atheists, and thus should have more extended social networks and better perspective-taking competencies. For all these reasons, they could be happier, or at least no less unhappy, than believers and atheists.

Personal variables such as higher age, gender (being a woman), lower education level, and lower income are known to have some role in predicting high religiosity, whereas younger age, being a man, and higher education level and income usually predict higher well-being and may impact the relation between religiosity and well-being (Zheng et al. 2020, data from the World Values Study). Consequently, we investigated first whether agnostics differ from the other two groups on these four personal variables, and second whether the hypothesized differences on well-being between agnostics and the other two groups are found when we control for differences on the personal variables.

3.3. Religious-Cultural Civilizational Zones

The above expectations were tested in the large dataset of the European Values Survey (EVS), fifth wave (2017), which includes countries from all parts of Europe (Northern, Western, Southern, Eastern) and varying in religious heritage, i.e., Protestant, Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Muslim. We focused on countries of Christian tradition and did not include the Muslim countries because of their small number to constitute a subgroup

for distinct analyses, with the additional issue of these three countries having a particularly low number of agnostics and nonbelievers, at least as in EVS 2017.

To consider the religious cultural context, we tested our main hypothesis on agnostics' lower well-being distinctly for European countries of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox heritage and expected this hypothesis to hold in all three of them. Previous research has shown the pertinence of distinguishing such religious-cultural "civilizational zones" across the world (Inglehart and Welzel 2023). We also examined possible differences between religionists and atheists on well-being and did it in an exploratory way. This was due to the complexity of factors impacting the many cultural specificities of the European countries in terms of religious heritage, predominant form of religiosity, degree of secularism, natural vs. forced (communist regimes') secularization, socioeconomic development, experience of democracy, and being member or not of European Union.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

We used data from the European Values Survey (EVS), last (fifth) wave 2017 (EVS 2020). We included data from countries of Christian heritage. (As mentioned above, three additional countries of Muslim tradition included very few agnostics and atheists). We did not include Portugal, since the number and proportion of agnostics and atheists in this country, as in this EVS wave, was unusually low, also compared to other Catholic countries. Finally, we did not include Estonia, since this country seems rather atypical with respect to religious heritage—mainly atheism, but also a mixture of Orthodoxy with some Protestantism. This made a total of 29 countries (total $N = 49,013$). Age varied from 18 to 82 years (mean age = 49.95, $SD = 17.68$). There were slightly more women (54.9%) than men (45.1%).

Following Inglehart and Welzel's (2023) World Cultural Map, we considered three broad religious-cultural civilizational zones. The first was composed of nine countries of Protestant heritage, either unique one, i.e., Denmark, Finland, Great Britain (Anglican heritage), Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, or in common with Catholic heritage, i.e., Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands (total $N = 18,037$). The second was composed by 11 countries of Catholic heritage, i.e., Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain, covering Western, Southern, and Central Europe (total $N = 17,119$). The third civilizational zone was composed by nine Eastern European countries of Christian Orthodox heritage, i.e., Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Russia, and Serbia ($N = 13,857$).

From the EVS data, we retained for the purposes of the present study participants who were religionists (16,245), agnostics (6,874), or atheists (7,005) (total $N = 30,124$; mean age = 49.84; women = 53%). The EVS does not propose a self-identification question of religious affiliation that includes "agnostic." However, a classic EVS question distinguishes between four kinds of specific beliefs/ideas regarding the existence of God/transcendence. In answering the question "Which of these statements is closest to your beliefs?", participants are asked to choose one out of four options: (1) "There is a personal God", (2) "There is some kind of spirit or life force", (3) "I don't really know what to think", or (4) "I don't really think there is any kind of spirit, God, or life force". Option 1 corresponds to religionists (in Christianity: belief in a personal God); option 3 corresponds to agnosticism; and option 4 to atheism/clear nonbelief (being nonreligious and nonspiritual). (Option 2 corresponds to being spiritual, not religious, a dimension that was not part of the present study's goals). These four options cover well participants' attitudes, since only 3.4% of additional respondents chose not to answer. Finally, a study that used both this EVS question proposing options 1, 3, and 4 regarding belief in God/transcendence and a self-identification question with a given religion, as agnostic, or as atheist,

confirmed the correspondence between the two ways of measuring these three convictional statuses (Karim and Saroglou 2024a).

4.2. Measures

We used the following four EVS questions to compute a global measure of well-being: (1) “Taking all things together, would you say you are ...” (1 = *very happy* to 4 = *not at all happy*); (2) “All in all, how would you describe your state of health these days? Would you say it is ...” (1 = *very good* to 5 = *very poor*); (3) “Some people feel they have completely free choice and control over their lives, and other people feel that what they do has no real effect on what happens to them. Please use the scale to indicate how much freedom of choice and control you feel you have over the way your life turns out” (1 = *not at all* to 10 = *a great deal*); and (4) “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” (1 = *dissatisfied* to 10 = *satisfied*). Aggregating the four questions contributes to the creation of a global measure that includes psychological and physical aspects of well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction. To compute the final global score for each participant, first the scores on the first two items were reversed. Second, the scores on questions 1, 3, and 4 were adapted to 5-point Likert scales. Subsequently, a mean score was computed by aggregating the four scores (Cronbach’s alpha = .63; all items contributed to the reliability). Finally, we included the following four personal variables as measured in the EVS: age, gender (men = 1, women = 2), education level, and income (for these two variables: 1 = low, 2 = medium, 3 = high).

5. Results

Descriptive statistics of well-being, distinctly by convictional group and religious-cultural zone are presented in Table 1 (see also Figure 2). Distinctly for each religious-cultural zone, we computed univariate ANOVA analyses, i.e., an initial omnibus one and three post-hoc ones, to detect differences in well-being as a function of convictional group, while controlling for four personal variables—age, gender, education level, and income. Results are detailed in Table 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of well-being, by convictional group and religious-cultural zone.

	Religionists	Agnostics	Atheists
Countries of	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Protestant heritage	3.95 (0.62)	3.88 (0.64)	3.94 (0.62)
Catholic heritage	3.71 (0.69)	3.67 (0.68)	3.74 (0.69)
Orthodox heritage	3.58 (0.78)	3.54 (0.74)	3.50 (0.79)

Note. *Ns* for religionists, agnostics, and atheists, are respectively: 3,408, 2,853, and 3,750 (Protestant countries), 5,029, 2,575, and 2,317 (Catholic countries), 7,288, 1,254, and 812 (Orthodox countries).

5.1. Agnostics’ Well-Being Across Religious-Cultural Zones

In all three religious-cultural zones, there was a global effect of the convictional group. Distinct comparisons, each time between two convictional groups, showed that, in both Protestant and Catholic countries, agnostics were lower on well-being compared to both religionists and atheists. In addition, in the Protestant countries, but not in the Catholic ones, religionists were even higher than atheists on well-being. In the Orthodox countries, religionists were higher on well-being compared to both agnostics and atheists, which did not differ with each other. The effect sizes of the differences were low, varying from .001 to .004, with one effect size being higher (.007, the religionists-agnostics difference in Protestant countries). Furthermore, inspection of means distinctly by each of the

four items of the well-being indicator (denoting health, control, life satisfaction, and happiness) confirmed that, in Protestant and Catholic countries, agnostics scored consistently across items lower than atheists.

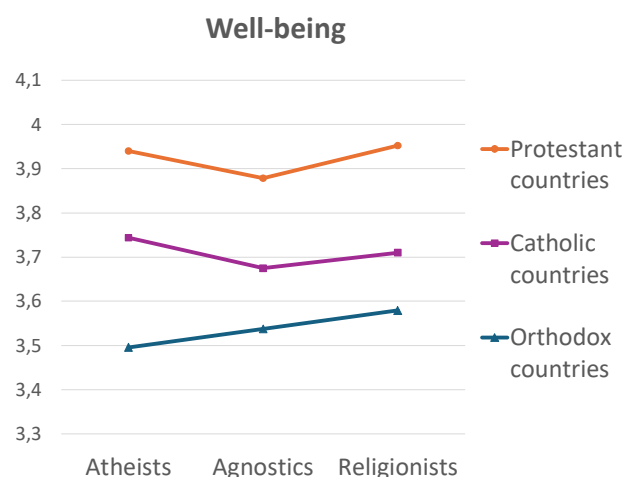


Figure 2. Mean well-being of atheists, agnostics, and religionists, by religious-cultural zone. The range of axis y (1-5) is restricted to allow a better visualization of the between-group differences.

Table 2. Comparisons (Fs) between convictional groups on well-being, by religious-cultural zone.

Personal variables	Omnibus <i>F</i>	Agnostics - Atheists	Agnostics - Religionists	Religionists - Atheists
Protestant heritage countries				
Convict. group	19.74***	6.99**	36.56***	12.39***
Age	18.19***	20.13***	7.36**	10.63***
Gender	9.14**	4.50*	4.89*	9.26**
Education level	0.40	0.24	0.15	0.48
Income	504.05***	388.02***	279.02***	345.11***
Catholic heritage countries				
Convict. group	9.36***	9.95**	19.93***	1.19
Age	517.93***	213.07***	399.16***	418.02***
Gender	0.32	7.02**	3.74*	2.53
Education level	3.62***	8.16**	1.49	2.05
Income	341.40***	161.90***	269.05***	243.84***
Orthodox heritage countries				
Convict. group	17.68***	0.57	17.60***	23.28***
Age	799.46***	115.79***	767.56***	713.92***
Gender	29.33***	0.88	29.55***	33.66***
Education level	19.87***	8.40**	14.33***	16.68***
Income	164.86***	45.77***	138.50***	148.56***

Note. Ns = religionists, agnostics, and atheists in Protestant (2,991, 2,250, 3,492), Catholic (4,132, 2,096, 1,902), and Orthodox (6,370, 1,023, 687) countries.

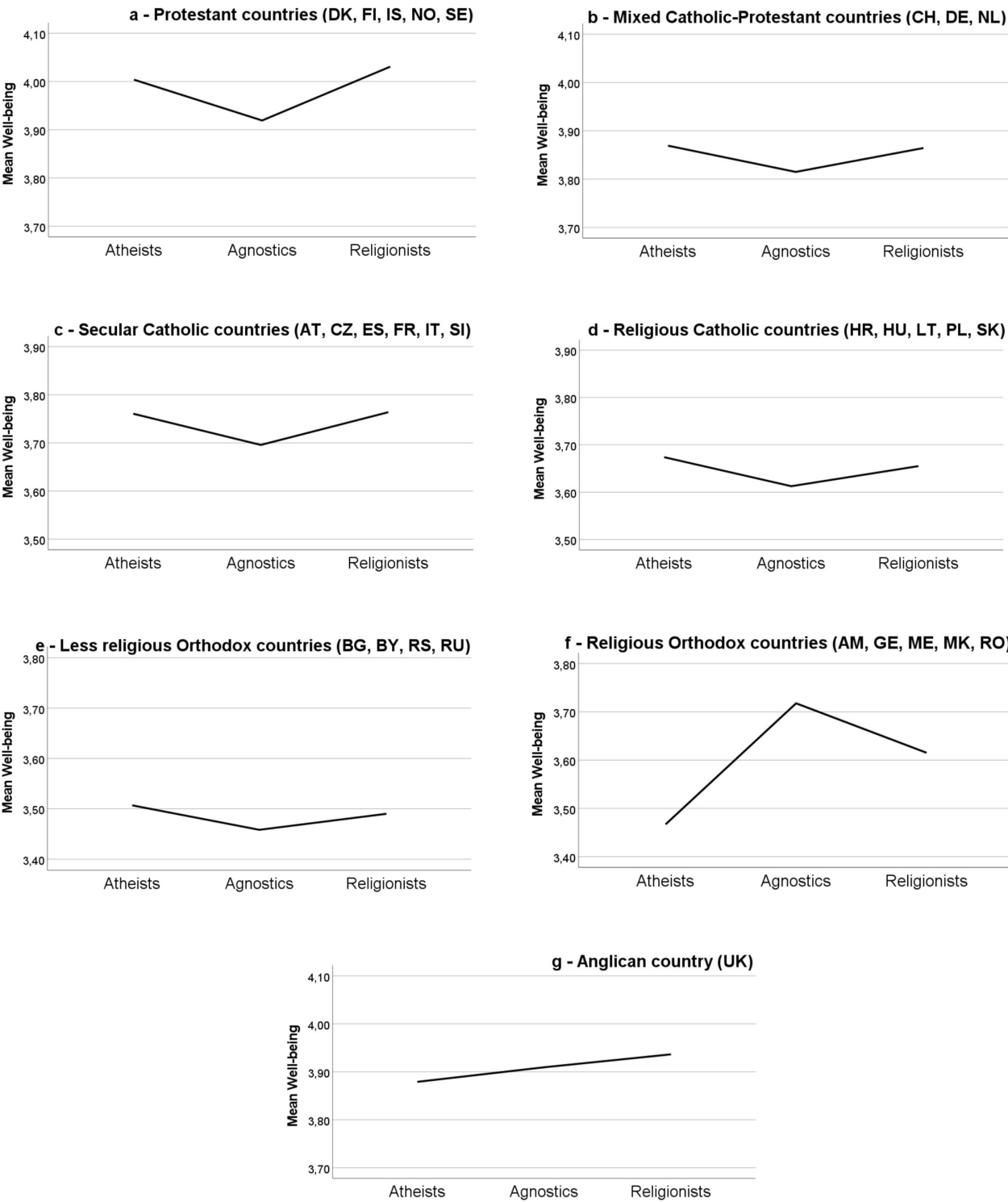
These differences between convictional groups existed beyond the effect of personal variables. Indeed, as also shown in Table 2 (group comparisons) and Table 3 (means by group), across all three religious cultures, there was almost consistently a hierarchy between the three convictional groups on age and income. Atheists were the youngest and the wealthiest, agnostics were in the middle, and religionists were the most aged and the lowest in income. Only in the Orthodox countries agnostics were slightly younger than atheists. There were more women among religionists compared to agnostics (significantly in all cultures) and atheists (significantly in Protestant and Orthodox countries), and even less women among atheists compared to agnostics (significantly in Protestant and Catholic countries). Overall, there were no significant differences in education level between the three convictional groups in Protestant countries, whereas, in the Orthodox countries, atheists were the most educated, agnostic less, and religionists even less. Similarly, in the Catholic countries, atheists had a higher mean education level compared to the two other groups.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of personal variables, by convictional group and religious-cultural zone.

	Religionists	Agnostics	Atheists
Personal variables	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Protestant heritage countries			
Age	54.00 (17.79)	49.31 (18.21)	48.94 (17.42)
Gender	1.58 (0.49)	1.64 (0.48)	1.59 (0.49)
Education level	2.44 (4.29)	2.32 (3.65)	2.58 (3.95)
Income	1.91 (0.81)	1.97 (0.81)	2.13 (0.80)
Catholic heritage countries			
Age	53.17 (18.19)	49.32 (17.60)	48.95 (17.95)
Gender (women)	1.50 (0.50)	1.52 (0.50)	1.51 (0.59)
Education level	1.99 (2.46)	2.01 (1.88)	2.13 (1.47)
Income	1.86 (0.81)	1.96 (0.82)	2.09 (0.81)
Orthodox heritage countries			
Age	47.92 (17.51)	45.66 (16.80)	45.82 (17.75)
Gender (women)	1.36 (0.48)	1.42 (0.49)	1.38 (0.49)
Education level	2.17 (0.69)	2.28 (0.72)	2.35 (0.68)
Income	1.93 (0.81)	2.01 (0.82)	2.08 (0.79)

It was thus important that we controlled for these personal variables when we computed comparisons between convictional groups. Not only between group differences on these variables existed, but well-being was associated with them. Indeed, consistently across the three religious-cultural zones of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox tradition, well-being was associated, weakly but significantly, with younger age ($-.06$, $-.29$, $-.34$, all $ps < .001$), higher education level ($.02$, $p = .017$, $.05$, $.13$, $ps < .001$), and higher income ($.23$, $.26$, $.22$, all $ps < .001$). Finally, there was a small gender effect, with women being lower in well-being in Catholic and Orthodox countries ($-.03$, $p = .002$, $-.07$, $p < .001$).

349



350

351

352

353

Figure 3. Mean well-being of atheists, agnostics, and religionists, by subgroup of countries (a-g). In parentheses: alpha-2 codes of the respective countries.

354

355

356

5.2. Agnostics' Well-Being in Religious and Secular Countries

Going further, we also examined whether the differences between the three groups as documented above were present in subgroups of countries—two relevant ones by each religious-cultural zone. We visually inspected the means (see also corresponding figures in Figure 3) and computed similar to the above univariate ANOVA analyses. For the economy of presentation, we only report here additional results of the tests that nuanced the above results on the global three zones.

First, we split the eight, strictly speaking, Protestant countries, in two subgroups: countries of uniquely Protestant heritage and countries of mixed Protestant-Catholic influence. Both subgroups were highly secularized: the respective percentage of believers in a personal God was 32.3% and 35.4%. Agnostics were the lowest in well-being in both subgroups of countries (Figures 3a and 3b). The UK, a country of Anglican heritage, had its own pattern (Figure 3g). Moreover, the small advantage of the religionists on well-being, compared to atheists, found in the main univariate ANOVA analyses for the Protestant countries as a whole (previous section), is driven in fact by the subgroup of the uniquely Protestant, Nordic (Scandinavian) countries, respective $M_s = 4.04, 4.00$ ($SD_s = 0.61, 0.60$), $F(1,3348) = 9.65, p = .002$.

Second, agnostics were also the lowest in both subgroups of countries, when we split the 11 Catholic countries into the religious (percentage of believers in a personal God = 63.4%) and the secularized ones (same percentage = 40.4%) (Figures 3c and d). Third, we similarly distinguished in the nine Orthodox countries a subgroup of less religious (percentage of believers in a personal God = 59.2%) and a subgroup of very religious (89.3%) countries. The same lowest level of well-being among agnostics, $M = 3.46$ ($SD = 0.70$), compared to religionists, $M = 3.49$ ($SD = 0.77$), and atheists, $M = 3.51$ ($SD = 0.77$), was observed in the less religious Orthodox countries (Figure 3e), $F_s(1,2538) = 16.16$ ($p < .001$), and $(1,1210) = 3.22$ ($p = .073$). In the very religious Orthodox countries, atheists, $M = 3.47$ ($SD = 0.83$), were the lowest in well-being compared to religionists, $M = 3.61$ ($SD = 0.78$), and agnostics, $M = 3.72$ ($SD = 0.80$), $F_s(1,4729) = 9.99$ ($p = .002$), and $(1,500) = 13.73$ ($p < .001$); and the agnostics were higher than religionists, $F(1,5042) = 7.40, p < .001$ (Figure 3f).

6. Discussion

Combing theory and research suggesting that (1) religious faith and/or (2) convictional certainty enhance well-being, and that (3) society's secularism makes atheism normative and atheists not (un)happy, we expected agnostics, lacking both faith and certainty, to be the lowest in well-being, compared to Christian religionists and atheists. This should apply at least in Europe, which has been marked by some or high secularization. This expectation was tested in a total of 29 European countries organized under three major religious-cultural zones, i.e., countries of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox heritage.

6.1. Agnostics in Religious-Cultural Zones of Western Christian Heritage

Our main hypothesis that agnostics, compared to religionists and atheists, would be the lowest in well-being was well confirmed for the European countries of Protestant and Catholic heritage, i.e., most European countries, covering Northern, Western, Southern, and Central Europe, and reflecting the religious heritage of Western Christianity. In addition, this finding seemed to hold for both uniquely Protestant and mixed Protestant-Catholic countries (all rather secular), and for both secular and religious Catholic countries. This suggests that, even in secular countries, agnostics may not benefit from the normativity of non-faith/atheism, very likely because they miss certainty in fully endorsing non-faith—they may even be perceived negatively as not having the strength “to come out” as clearly nonbelievers. (A visual inspection of the UK, a country of Anglican heritage, indicated a different pattern for this country, but we do not draw here conclusions on an individual country, especially one with a religiously unique tradition).

The agnostics' lowest well-being was confirmed in the analyses that controlled for the role of personal variables: age, gender, education level, and income. These variables are known and were found here to have some influence on well-being. In fact, it turned out that, overall, agnostics were in the middle between religionists—including more women and older adults—and atheists—including more educated and wealthy people. Therefore, the between group differences found here on well-being were not an artifact of sociodemographic differences but were due specifically to the convictional status of the agnostics. Interestingly, recent research has consistently shown that agnostics, also in secularized European countries, self-identify less with their agnosticism, compared to the strength of self-identification of religionists and atheists, respectively with their religion and their atheism (Karim and Saroglou 2023, 2024a, 2024b). Agnostics also tend to be the highest on neuroticism and related characteristics such as negative affect and indecisiveness.

6.2. Agnostics in Countries of Orthodox Tradition

The above pattern of differences was not confirmed in the group of countries of Orthodox tradition. These countries, taken as a whole, confirmed the religious faith hypothesis: Orthodox religionists were higher on well-being compared to the non-religious, be they agnostic or atheist. Given that the Orthodox countries overall are more religious/less secular than the Catholic and Protestant European countries, this pattern of results confirmed the idea that religious faith is a positive factor of well-being mostly in religious societies where religion is normative (Diener et al. 2011; Lun and Bond 2016; Gebauer et al. 2017). In addition, in Orthodox countries, religion and ethnic identity are highly interconnected (Pew Research Center 2017), what makes agnostics and atheists to be perceived as placing themselves at the margin of the mainstream ethnic/national community.

Note also that all the Orthodox countries included in the dataset of EVS 2017 (Greece and Cyprus were not included) had a history of communist regimes for an important part of the 20th century. This fact consolidates the idea that religion, especially when it is normative for social inclusion, may benefit the religionists—even if they are marked by a history of atheist and/or antireligious regime. Nevertheless, when inspecting distinctly the two subgroups of Orthodox countries, i.e., those more religious and those less religious, the global pattern that hold for Western Christianity also hold for the less religious Orthodox countries: agnostics again were the lowest in well-being compared to the Orthodox religionists and atheists. In the highly religious Orthodox countries, atheists were the lowest in well-being, but agnostics turned out to be the highest—the only exceptional case in these analyses, possibly due to chance.

6.3. Religionists vs. Atheists

Taken together, the results from Protestant, Catholic, and the less religious Orthodox countries confirm the idea that, in countries rather marked by secularization, being agnostic, thus not holding strong worldviews, is a convictional status that is not the most comfortable one for well-being. Certainty in worldviews, whether religious or atheistic, seems to contribute to well-being. In highly religious and traditional countries with, in addition, strong ties between ethnicity and religion, like Orthodox ones in Eastern Europe, being atheist, seems to be, if we use a causal language, detrimental for well-being. Inversely, being an Orthodox religionist, or simply agnostic but not atheist, seems to offer benefits for well-being.

Beyond the above, does faith or atheism in European countries of Protestant and Catholic heritage have influence on well-being? The analyses computed in these two religious-cultural civilizational zones indicated that religionists were higher in well-being compared to atheists in the Protestant countries. This effect seemed to be driven by the uniquely Protestant countries, i.e., countries of Northern Europe, and not by the mixed

Catholic-Protestant ones. No difference between religionists and atheists was observed in the Catholic countries.

One post-hoc, speculative but meaningful, interpretation could be that, in Northern European countries of Protestant tradition, the relations between religion and irreligion, and the ones between religion and the state, have been more serene. Therefore, Protestant religionists benefit from faith without feeling marginalized in society. Inversely, in Catholic countries, religion and atheism, as well as the Church and the State, have had more tense, even conflictual, relationships. This has been the case both in secular Western European countries of Catholic tradition marked by the ideology of laicity (cantoning religion in the private sphere) or in religious or secular countries of Central and Eastern Europe, also of Catholic tradition, having experienced few decades ago communist regimes' atheism as the State's predominant ideology. In these societies, Catholicism, known to have been more in conflict with secularism (unlike mainstream Protestantism), may imply some sort of perceived marginalization. Alternatively, it may also be that "Catholic" atheists, compared to "Protestant" ones, self-identify more with a self-affirming atheism or secularism, and thus get benefits for well-being similar to the benefits of faith on religionists.

6.4. Limitations and Further Questions

Though original, we think, with respect to existing literature, the present study should not be considered as providing definitive evidence and answers. One limitation is that being agnostic, religious, or atheist, was measured with one strategy (choice among beliefs about God/transcendence) and through one question. Even if the data are large and the findings converging across cultural contexts, other measures (self-identification as agnostic, multi-item questionnaires) may provide more nuanced information. The question regarding the causal direction is also open. This is not only because of the cross-sectional nature of the data, but also because, especially for agnostics, found to be high in neuroticism, the question arises whether it is agnosticism that influences well-being or whether it is neuroticism, as a third factor, that pushes people to both become agnostic and experiencing, independently from agnosticism, low well-being. Finally, the effect sizes were small. Even if the effect size of the religiosity-wellbeing association is typically low in previous research, the small effect sizes in the present study remind us of the need for not overestimating the between group differences.

Future research should examine additional questions. For example, is agnosticism's link to (lower) well-being moderated by past/family, religious or irreligious, secularization? Longitudinal evidence may also help to clarify whether agnosticism denotes a maturation process with respect to the education received, be it religious or irreligious, or whether, especially in secularized societies, it reflects indecisiveness and discomfort with embracing one of the two dominant convictional positions, i.e., faith or non-faith. Furthermore, multilevel analyses can better examine, at least for the European context, the distinct effect of, but also the interaction between, individual level-variables (e.g., personal variables, personality, values, social attitudes) and country-level variables: religious heritage, predominant form of religiosity, degree of secularism, history of natural vs. forced secularization, socioeconomic development, experience of democracy, and being member or not of the European Union. Finally, we focused in this study on the two major categories of the nonreligious, i.e., agnostics and atheists. Ongoing research aims to identify subtler categories among the nonreligious, including those who are spiritual versus nonspiritual (e.g., Schnell and Keenan 2011; Silver et al. 2014), opening thus more questions regarding the well-being of different types of the nonreligious.

To conclude, in the present study, evidence was provided attesting the importance of considering agnostics as a distinct category among the non-religious when investigating the religion-wellbeing association. It appears that investigating this association and presuming a linear or curvilinear relationship, with religion-irreligion as a continuum,

may not be sufficient to capture well the whole picture. Comparing groups of different convictional statuses and worldviews may be at least a complementary but certainly crucial approach.

Author Contributions: The two authors participated equally in all stages of the present work and the writing of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Institutional approvals were obtained for the European Values Study whose data were used in the present study.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study (European Values Study).

Data Availability Statement: Publicly available datasets (European Values Study 2017) were analyzed in this study. This data can be found here: https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA7500.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- (Baker et al. 2018) Baker, Joseph O., Samuel Stroope, and Mark H. Walker. 2018. Secularity, religiosity, and health: Physical and mental health differences between atheists, agnostics, and nonaffiliated theists compared to religiously affiliated individuals. *Social Science Research* 75: 44-57. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.07.003>
- (Bergstrom et al., 2022) Bergstrom, Veronica N. Z., Jason E. Plaks, and Alison L. Chasteen. 2022. To believe or not to believe: Stereotypes about agnostics. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 14: 21-30. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000419>
- (Diener et al. 2011) Diener, Ed, Louis Tay, and David G. Myers. 2011. The religion paradox: If religion makes people happy, why are so many dropping out? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 101: 1278-90. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0024402>
- (European Commission 2019). European Commission. 2019, October. *Special Eurobarometer 493: Discrimination in the EU*. Available online: <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/survey/getsurveydetail/instruments/special/surveyky/2251>
- (EVS 2020) EVS. 2020. *European Values Study 2017: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2017)*. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA7500 Data file Version 4.0.0. Available online: <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13560>
- (Fisher 2017) Fisher, Adam R. 2017. A review and conceptual model of the research on doubt, disaffiliation, and related religious changes. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 9: 358-67. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000088>
- (Galen 2023) Galen, Luke W. 2023. *A Social Cognition Perspective of the Psychology of Religion*. London: Bloomsbury.
- (Galen and Kloet 2011) Galen, Luke W., and James D. Kloet. 2011. Mental well-being in the religious and the non-religious: Evidence for a curvilinear relationship. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 14: 673-89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2010.510829>
- (Gebauer et al. 2017) Gebauer, Jochen E., Constantine Sedikides, Felix D. Schönbrodt, Wiebke Bleidorn, Peter J. Rentfrow, Jeff Potter, and Samuel D. Gosling. 2017. The religiosity as social value hypothesis: A multi-method replication and extension across 65 countries and three levels of spatial aggregation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 113: e18-e39. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000104>
- (Gremigni and Casu 2019). Gremigni, Paola, and Casu, Giulia. 2019. Spirituality and psychological well-being: An attention to the agnostics and the undecided. In Baldwin, Clint (ed.), *Spirituality: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives* (pp. 51-81). New York: Nova.
- (Hayward et al. 2016) Hayward, R. David, Neal Krause, Gail Ironson, Peter C. Hill, and Robert Emmons. 2016. Health and well-being among the non-religious: Atheists, agnostics, and no preference compared with religious group members. *Journal of Religion and Health* 55: 1024-37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-015-0179-2>
- (Inglehart and Welzel 2023) Inglehart, Ronald F., and Christian Welzel. 2023. *The Inglehart-Welzel World Cultural Map: World Values Survey 7*. WVS. Available online: <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>
- (Karim and Saroglou 2023) Karim, Moise, and Vassilis Saroglou. 2023. Being agnostic, not atheist: Personality, cognitive, and ideological differences. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 15: 118-27. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000461>
- (Karim and Saroglou 2024a) Karim, Moise, and Vassilis Saroglou. 2024a. "I am agnostic, not atheist": The role of open-minded, prosocial, and believing dispositions. *Self and Identity* 23: 248-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2024.2357845>.
- (Karim and Saroglou 2024b) Karim, Moise, and Vassilis Saroglou. 2024b. *Agnosticism as a distinct type of nonbelief: The role of indecisiveness, maximization, and low narcissism*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
- (Koenig 2018) Koenig, Harold G. 2018. *Religion and Mental Health: Research and Clinical Applications*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

- (Lindeman et al. 2019) Lindeman, Marjaana, Michiel Van Elk, Jari Lipsanen, Pinja Marin, and Uffe Schjødt. 2019. Religious unbelief in three Western European countries: Identifying and characterizing unbeliever types using latent class analysis. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 29: 184–203. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508619.2019.1591140>
- (Lun and Bond 2013) Lun, Vivian Miu-Chi, and Michael Harris Bond. 2013. Examining the relation of religion and spirituality to subjective well-being across national cultures. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5: 304–15. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0033641>
- (Mochon et al. 2011) Mochon, Daniel, Michael I. Norton, and Dan Ariely. 2011. Who benefits from religion? *Social Indicators Research* 101: 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9637-0>
- (Pew Research Center 2017) Pew Research Center. 2017, May 10. *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*. Available online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>
- (Pew Research Center 2018) Pew Research Center. 2018, November 20. *Where Americans Find Meaning in Life*. Available online: <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/11/20/where-americans-find-meaning-in-life/>
- (Pew Research Center 2019) Pew Research Centre. 2019, October 17. *Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*. Available online: <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>
- (Rosmarin and Koenig 2020) Rosmarin, David H., and Harold G. Koenig. 2020. *Handbook of Spirituality, Religion, and Mental Health*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- (Saroglou 2011) Saroglou, Vassilis. 2011. Believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging: The big four religious dimensions and cultural variation. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42: 1320–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022111412267>
- (Saroglou 2021) Saroglou, Vassilis. 2021. *The Psychology of Religion*. London: Routledge.
- (Schnell et al. 2023) Schnell, Tatjana, Elpene De Boer, and Hans Alma. 2023. Worlds apart? Atheist, agnostic, and humanist worldviews in three European countries. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 15: 83–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000446>
- (Schnell and Keenan 2011). Schnell, Tatjana, and Keenan, William, J. F. 2011. Meaning making in an atheist world. *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 33: 55–78. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157361211X564611>
- (Silver et al. 2014) Silver, Christopher F., Coleman, Thomas J. III, Hood, Ralph W. Jr., and Holcombe, Jenny M. 2014. The six types of nonbelief: A qualitative and quantitative study of type and narrative. *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 17: 990–1001. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13674676.2014.987743>
- (Stavrova et al. 2013) Stavrova, Olga, Detlef Fetchenhauer, and Thomas Schlösser. 2013. Why are religious people happy? The effect of the social norm of religiosity across countries. *Social Science Research* 42: 90–105. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2012.07.002>
- (Uzarevic et al. 2017) Uzarevic, Filip, Vassilis Saroglou, and Magali Clobert. 2017. Are atheists undogmatic? *Personality and Individual Differences* 116: 164–70. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.04.046>
- (Uzarevic et al. 2020) Uzarevic, Filip, Vassilis Saroglou, and Isabelle Pichon. 2020. Rejecting opposite ideologies without discriminating against ideological opponents? Understanding nonbelievers' outgroup attitudes. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 42: 62–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973533.2019.1689980>
- (Weber et al. 2012) Weber, Samuel R., Kenneth I. Pargament, Mark E. Kunik, James W. Lomax, and Melinda A. Stanley. 2012. Psychological distress among religious nonbelievers: A systematic review. *Journal of Religion and Health* 51: 72–86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10943-011-9541-1>
- (Zheng et al. 2020) Zheng, Xiaofang, Mengjiao Song, and Hao Chen. 2020. Could wealth make religiosity less needed for subjective well-being? A dual-path effect hypothesis of religious faith versus practice. *Frontiers in Psychology* 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01636>
- (Zuckerman et al. 2016) Zuckerman, Phil, Luke W. Galen, and Frank L. Pasquale. 2016. *The Nonreligious: Understanding Secular People and Societies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.