



Advances in the Psychology of Agnosticism Editorial

Psychology of religion also studies nonreligion. In this editorial, we will first briefly review how the field evolved in approaching nonreligion as an area of investigation. Second, we will introduce agnosticism as the major type of nonreligion beyond atheism. Third, we will present the major questions that, as psychologists, we could investigate when studying agnosticism, and we will briefly review very recent relevant research. Finally, we will introduce the papers of the present special issue.

From religion and religious belief to nonreligion and nonbelief

For decades, in the psychology of religion, researchers studied “religiosity” in general and often distinguished between various aspects (e.g., belief, practice, identity) or forms of it, such as intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity, or fundamentalism vs. religion-as-quest. Most studies used cross-sectional correlational designs. It was thus implicitly assumed that the psychological reality of the nonreligious was the inverse of the evidence for high religiosity. Note that this implies that correlations were perceived as linear, although in fact this was rarely tested. For instance, if religiosity was related to dogmatism or prosociality, it was, at least implicitly, assumed that nonbelievers tend to be open-minded but low in prosociality.

In surveys, be they sociological or psychological, where people had to select, for their convictional identity/status, one category among those proposed by researchers, beyond various religious affiliations, there most often was only one option for nonbelievers, such as “nonreligious,” “not religiously affiliated,” “atheist,” or “agnostic/atheist” as a unified category. This does not necessarily reflect anti-atheist prejudice: the non-religious simply constituted a thin minority, especially in the United States, where, in the second half of the 20th century, most studies were carried out. Nevertheless, this situation potentially led to the idea that, psychologically speaking, nonbelievers/atheists constitute a rather homogenous group.

The only extended psychological research in irreligion was perhaps work dedicated to those who leave religion and abandon faith (Francis & Katz, 2000) and become “apostates” (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1997) or “de-converted” (Streib et al., 2008). In addition, extensive research by Hutsebaut and collaborators on the Post-Critical Belief model and scale (Fontaine et al., 2003) distinguished not only between literal/orthodox and symbolic religiosity, but also between literal and symbolic nonbelief. Literal disbelief meant anti-religious atheism and full depreciation of religion, and symbolic disbelief (called by Hutsebaut “historical relativism”) denoted nonreligion but still recognized some value to be placed on religion. Nevertheless, when this research team shifted later from the four poles/quadrants model to a two-axis model, i.e., Inclusion/Exclusion of Transcendence and Literal vs. Symbolic Thinking (Fontaine et al., 2005), our knowledge about irreligion was to some degree restricted: the second axis rather reflected low vs. high flexibility in general, for both believers and nonbelievers.

Progressively, in more recent years, distinctions in sociological research have been introduced, among the “religiously unaffiliated,” between those for whom “religious means nothing in particular” and agnostics or atheists (e.g., Pew Research Center surveys); or between “not a religious person” and “a convinced atheist” (e.g., European Values Study-EVS). The distinctions are legitimate and have been useful, but the categories may also partly overlap. For instance, people unaffiliated with an institutional religion may still be religious (in belief, practice) or “spiritual but not religious.” Religious indifference is also an interesting concept (see Quack & Schuh, 2017), but it may be orthogonal with

religion/nonreligion: people may self-identify with a given religion, but with religion meaning nothing in particular for them. Finally, a convinced atheist is also a nonreligious person. 45

Varieties of nonreligion: what beyond atheism?

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Following Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), in psychological research, since the 2010s, there has been increased interest in nonreligion/nonbelief, secularity, atheism, nonreligious spirituality, and the like (see, for reviews: Farias, 2013; Power, 2012; Streib & Klein, 2013; Uzarevic & Coleman, 2021; Zuckerman et al., 2016). Some researchers have specifically investigated the question of how many nonbelievers or nonbelieving experiences there are (e.g., Lindeman et al., 2020; Silver et al., 2014), but it is premature to draw conclusions given the following: conceptual overlaps between categories, non-negligible similarities in respective psychological characteristics, and evidence based on a single or very limited number of countries, thus raising the question of cross-religious/cultural generalizability. 50

An additional caution to keep in mind is that, pragmatically and scientifically, parsimony has advantages. Identifying too many different forms/types of nonbelief may turn out to be nonfunctional in studies in very religious cultures where nonbelievers are a thin minority, like identifying too many different forms/types of religiosity may turn out to be nonfunctional in studies in very secular societies where only a minority of young adults report being religious. More importantly, for conceptual distinctions to have solid psychological relevance and to avoid the jangle fallacy, it is also essential to identify, beyond similarities, clear differences among forms/types of nonbelief with respect to their respective psychological characteristics. 55

We define here as “nonbelievers” those who do not believe in/do not endorse the existence of a personal god or an entity transcending humans (force, spirit); this, of course, does not exclude that they may hold other kinds of belief. “Atheists” are people who endorse the idea that God or another transcendent entity does not exist, and “agnostics” are people affirming *they do not know* (motives may be various), thus endorsing neither the existence nor the nonexistence of God/transcendence. 60

Therefore, for nonbelievers, the second major type/group after atheists seems to be that of agnostics. First, the simple coexistence of the two terms, “agnostics/atheists,” as a unique option in past surveys suggests that these are the two most common categories of nonreligion with which people self-identify rather easily. Second, in large European surveys typically including a high number of secularized societies, being “agnostic” and “atheist” has successfully been used as the two main categories of nonreligion, in addition to religious affiliations, without many people feeling uncomfortable to the point of needing to select the option of “other” (e.g., European Commission, 2019). Finally, these two convictional statuses systematically emerged across studies that tried to investigate the variety of nonbelievers. 65

Toward a psychology of agnosticism

Who are the agnostics? How do they differ from—or resemble—atheists? Are those who identify as agnostics otherwise indistinguishable from atheists in their everyday lives? How much do they differ from religionists—or are they simply religious doubters? Are they located, in terms of various psychological characteristics (correlates, predictors, outcomes), at the midpoint in a linear hierarchy going from the pole of the religious people to the opposite end of atheists? Do agnostics constitute a homogeneous or a heterogeneous group, or, to use a less categorical wording, is their degree of heterogeneity the same as that of religionists and atheists? Is agnosticism a developmental default stance for children, rather than assuming that children tend to be naturally atheists? Is there a developmental trajectory, for instance, from belief, through agnosticism, to atheism (or, inversely, from atheism, to agnosticism, and then conversion)? What are others’ impressions of agnostics? Are they perceived similarly to atheists? Is agnosticism a better convictional status for optimal well-being (since all possibilities are kept open) or does underlying uncertainty undermine happiness? Finally, does being agnostic mean the same across various religious cultures? 70

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As the above questions suggest, there is an avenue for future research in the psychology of agnosticism that can involve many psychological subfields, such as personality (including cognition and emotion), developmental, social, moral, clinical/health, and cross-cultural psychology. In the very last years, emerging research in various labs has started to provide initial evidence regarding some of the above questions. The present special issue aims to make advances in this research area. We will briefly present below the initial scientific knowledge from this recent research, mostly from secularized Europe, but also the United States, and we will afterward introduce the papers of this special issue. 95

Studies on the personality of agnostics (Karim & Saroglou, 2023, 2024a, 2025a) indicate that agnostics, compared to both religionists and atheists, tend to be more neurotic and indecisive in general, weaker identifiers with their own convictional status, and higher maximizers in existential issues. High agnostics also tend not to self-enhance (not feel superior to others) compared to both strong religious identifiers, who self-enhance in niceness/prosociality, and to strong atheist identifiers, who self-enhance on competence/intelligence. Compared to atheists, agnostics are also more prosocially oriented, socially curious, open-minded, and open to experience. 100

Q4 Regarding their beliefs and related cognitive and ideological dispositions, several studies (Howie et al., 2024; Lindeman et al., 2019, 2020; Pedersen et al., 2018; Schnell et al., 2023; see also) show that agnostics are located midway between religionists and atheists on positive attitudes toward religion and spirituality, as well as on intuitive thinking, paranormal belief, non-full trust of science, and acceptance of alternative medicine, and are also marked by higher skepticism and less dogmatism than atheists (but no differences in dogmatism were found in Uzarevic et al., 2017). Atheists are less interested than agnostics not only in theistic and transcendent spiritualities, but also in immanent spiritualities consecrating humanity or nature (Karim & Saroglou, 2024a). 105 110

Possibly because of their higher neuroticism, indecisiveness, and uncertainty, agnostics tend to have lower subjective well-being than religionists and atheists, i.e., people who believe or disbelieve with certainty, and this was found across European religious-cultural zones of Catholic and Protestant heritage and some countries of Orthodox heritage (Karim & Saroglou, 2024b; EVS data from 29 countries). Similarly, in the United States, several studies suggest a curvilinear relationship between well-being and the religion–irreligion continuum, with those who are uncertain about their beliefs and do not strongly identify with either religion or atheism being lower in indicators of mental health and well-being (Baker et al., 2018; Galen & Kloet, 2011; Mochon et al., 2011). Nevertheless, in the UK, offspring of atheist mothers had more depressive symptoms in late adolescence compared to those of agnostic mothers (Halstead et al., 2024). 115 120

Furthermore, agnostics consider to a higher degree than atheists that social commitment and generativity are sources of meaning; atheists perceive more than agnostics that individualism, freedom, and having fun and comfort are sources of meaning (Pedersen et al., 2018). Similarly, in the United States, atheists more than agnostics consider money, hobbies, and travel as sources of meaning (Pew Research Center, 2018). Perhaps, thus not fully surprisingly, people stereotypically perceive agnostics as being less immoral than atheists (Bergstrom et al., 2022; but see Bergstrom & Chasteen, 2024, for no difference between the two). 125

Finally, indirectly addressing the question of whether agnosticism precedes atheism or vice versa, Karim and Saroglou (2025b; EVS data from 17 countries) found that, at least in Western European societies, both cross-sectionally and across 20 years, as societies secularize, among nonbelievers, agnostics diminish in proportion in favor of atheists, as if they, in turn, “come out” as atheist. Nevertheless, an important percentage of nonbelievers remain agnostic, suggesting that agnosticism should also be considered as a sui-generis convictional position and not necessarily as a transitory stage. 130 135

The present special issue

This special issue extends recent research in several ways. We were happy to gather work from various laboratories, having used diverse methodologies (surveys, experiments, multilevel analyses of large

international data), and bringing knowledge from Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world. We warmly thank Editor-in-Chief Heinz Streib, who first got the idea and invited us to take charge of this special issue. 140

Do agnostics resemble atheists on morality? The first work of the special issue (Karim et al., 2026) extends previous research on religion/irreligion and moral attitudes on various domains by focusing on how agnostics differ from or resemble atheists—and religionists—in terms of restrictiveness/conservatism versus permissiveness/liberalism. The authors analyzed European Values Study 2017 (wave 5) data from 33 countries. They computed multilevel analyses with religious-cultural zone (countries of Protestant, Catholic, Christian Orthodox, and Muslim religious heritage) and societies' degree of secularity being the two variables at the collective level. Differences between agnostics, atheists, and religionists across these cultures were investigated distinctly for four types of morality: family, hygienic, sexual, and civic. 145 150

The next two papers in this special issue advance our understanding of agnosticism as specifically experienced in the United States, where being religious is the dominant position. Both papers address the question of whether agnostics are indeed less opposed/more open to religion and spirituality than atheists and whether agnostics differ from atheists on emotional and relational variables that are relevant for well-being. Each paper, though, goes much further through additional questions. 155

Exline et al. (2026) extended previous research on spiritual struggles and their distinct categories, as well as previous research on various reasons for nonbelief (intellectual, emotional, relational) and positive and negative images of God. They compared agnostics with atheists on these constructs. Interestingly, they also examined agnostics' and atheists' reactions to the hypothetical scenario that God really exists and is there, in terms of emotions and willingness for proximity versus distance from God. Exline et al. hypothesized that agnostics, compared to atheists, report more spiritual struggles, especially recent ones, and have more relational reasons for their nonbelief in God, but also have more positive images of God and are more open to approaching God. 160

Velez et al. (2026) build their research on previous work emphasizing mental health issues among people belonging to a minority. After investigating agnostics' differences from atheists on attitudes toward religion and spirituality, New Age beliefs, and illusory beliefs (magical thinking and conflation of thought with action), they compare agnostics to atheists on experienced discrimination, stigma consciousness and internalized stigma, perception of Christian privilege in society, disclosure and concealment of the nonbeliever identity, social support, and psychological variables indicating low well-being or life satisfaction. Based on the rationale they developed, the authors expected atheists to report more discrimination, stigma, and nonbeliever identity concealment, but also that agnostics would report lower mental health. 165 170

The next two papers advance our understanding of agnosticism by dealing with the following question: Do agnostics, compared to atheists, show weaker, equal, or stronger ingroup preference? They treat this question through two different approaches, one focusing on collective narcissism, and the other comparing ingroup with outgroup evaluations. 175

Żemojtel-Piotrowska et al. (2026) extend previous research on religious and nonreligious individuals' identification with their ingroup and research on whether religious and nonreligious individuals, including atheists and agnostics, self-enhance, i.e., feel that, as individuals, they are better than others. The authors shifted the focus from individual to collective narcissism, i.e., an (excessive) appreciation of one's own ingroup as being superior to other groups. They investigated agnostics' and atheists' collective narcissism using data from dozens of countries across the world, varying in religious heritage. Moreover, they distinguished, in collective narcissism, between an agentic form ("my group has a major say to the world and deserves special treatment") and a communal one: "people of my group are the most helpful people." 180 185

Cragun (2026) builds on previous research on stereotypes people have about religious and atheist individuals—the latter typically being negative—as well as on research on ingroup preferences among religious and nonreligious/atheist individuals. In his study conducted in the United States, he investigated how religious, agnostic, and atheist participants evaluate a hypothetical target that 190

could be a religious person, an agnostic, or an atheist, each presented as a protagonist in a video clip. Participants rated the targets in various dimensions denoting niceness, but also morality and trustworthiness. Cragun investigated whether agnostics were evaluated more positively than atheists but less positively than the religious, as well as whether the evaluation also depended on the participants' own convictional status. 195

The final paper (Galen, 2026) aims to deepen and nuance our understanding of the very nature of agnosticism. Is agnosticism a rather personal stance ("I, myself, do not know whether God exists or not") or a general stance ("We, humans, cannot know whether God exists or not")? When people self-identify as agnostic, do they refer mostly to one of these two stances? Therefore, do agnostics compose a homogenous category, or at least is their relative heterogeneity similar to that of atheists and religious people? The author examines these questions in the United States by measuring self-identification (both one and multiple answers), statements on the knowledgeability of deities, belief certainty, and epistemic naturalism, i.e., attachment to knowledge brought by scientific methods and naturalism, as opposed to supernatural beliefs. 200

Together, the papers that compose the special issue offer evidence that increases our understanding of cognitive, emotional, moral, and social dimensions involved in the psychology of agnosticism. Since research in this area is at its beginning, certainly much will come in the proximal future. 205

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