



Are atheists undogmatic?

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ABSTRACT

Previous theory and evidence favor the idea that religious people tend to be dogmatic to some extent whereas non-religious people are undogmatic: the former firmly hold beliefs, some of which are implausible or even contrary to the real world evidence. We conducted a further critical investigation of this idea, distinguishing three aspects of rigidity: (1) self-reported dogmatism, defined as unjustified certainty vs. not standing for any beliefs, (2) intolerance of contradiction, measured through (low) endorsement of contradictory statements, and (3) low readiness to take a different from one's own perspective, measured through the myside bias technique. Non-believers, at least in Western countries where irreligion has become normative, should be lower on the first, but higher on the other two constructs. Data collected from three countries (UK, France, and Spain, total $N = 788$) and comparisons between Christians, atheists, and agnostics confirmed the expectations, with agnostics being overall similar to atheists.

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1. Introduction

Are nonreligious people open-minded, flexible, and undogmatic? Previous research has investigated the links between religiosity, or specific forms of it, and social cognitive tendencies reflecting various aspects of closed-mindedness. The results regarding religious fundamentalism are clear and consistent (Rowatt, Shen, LaBouff, & Gonzalez, 2013). However, even common religiosity, that is being high vs. low on common religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices, often reflects closed-minded ways of thinking to some extent. Indeed, religiosity is, to a modest degree, characterized by *dogmatism*, defined as an inflexibility of ideas, unjustified certainty or denial of evidence contrary to one's own beliefs (Moore & Leach, 2016; Vonk & Pitzten, 2016), the *need for closure*, i.e. the need for structure, order, and answers (Saroglou, 2002), and, in terms of broader personality traits, *low openness to experience*, in particular low openness to values (Saroglou, 2010). Experimental work provides some causal evidence, that religious beliefs increase when people are confronted with disorder, ambiguity, uncertainty, a lack of control, or a threat to self-esteem (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2014).

Not surprisingly thus, religiosity, though to a lesser extent and less consistently than fundamentalism, is often found to predict prejudice. This is certainly the case against moral (e.g., gay persons) and religious

outgroups and atheists, but also against ethnic or racial outgroups, at least in monotheistic religious contexts (see Clobert, Saroglou, & Hwang, 2017, for limitations in the East) and when prejudice against a specific target is not explicitly socially/religiously prohibited (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Ng & Gervais, 2017; Rowatt, Carpenter, & Haggard, 2014).

From this line of research, it is often concluded that non-believers tend to be undogmatic, flexible, open-minded, and unprejudiced, or, to phrase it reversely, express closed-minded tendencies to a lesser degree than religious believers (Streib & Klein, 2013; Zuckerman, Galen, & Pasquale, 2016). Beyond the above mentioned evidence which has typically been derived from analyses in which religiosity is treated as a continuum, thus assuming linearity from the low to the high end of the religiosity continuum, sociological work based on comparisons between groups who provide self-identification in terms of conviction/affiliation also suggests that atheists are indeed the lowest in the above-mentioned kinds of prejudice (Norris & Inglehart, 2004).

Can psychological research thus clearly and unambiguously affirm that atheists are undogmatic and flexible, at least to a greater degree than their religious peers? We argue that such a conclusion is premature. In the present work, we investigate specific domains of cognition where non-believers may show higher inflexibility in thinking, at least in secularized cultural contexts like those in Western Europe. We also examine whether the above holds for all non-religious persons (for brevity hereafter: non-believers) or only for the subtype who self-identify as atheists. Finally, we will examine the above questions using both self-reported and implicit measures of closed-mindedness. Below, we will first develop our rationale and then detail the study expectations.

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1.1. Irreligiosity and closed-mindedness: a plausible relationship

It is possible to suspect that non-believers, in particular atheists, may, like the very religious, be closed-minded. It has been argued that irreligion and unbelief in general, and atheism in particular, implies attitudes, opinions, values, and possibly beliefs and worldviews, with regard to existential, moral, and societal issues (Streib & Klein, 2013; Zuckerman et al., 2016). In our view, this does not necessarily mean holding “answers” to the “big questions”, but it means holding strong ideas regarding the way these issues should be dealt with from a non-religious perspective. It can also be argued that, though irreligion and unbelief differ from religion in that beliefs and values are not solidified, amplified, or rigidified by corresponding rituals, emotions, and communities with glorious narratives as it is the case in religion (Saroglou, 2014), they still imply some organization of attitudes, beliefs, and values into a system with some coherence, and in some cases, into a well-structured ideology.

Going further, one can argue that even if religion is typically tempted by some kind of “integralism”, with other, possibly all, domains of life being subordinate to the central belief system (see Rokeach's, 1960, definition of dogmatism), irreligion is not fully exempt from the “integralist” temptation. For instance, irreligion in general, and atheism in particular, often emphasizes human rationality and science as the only valuable means to access truth (Farias, 2013), placing it just one step away from dogmatic scientism. Interestingly, just as religious beliefs increase when believers are confronted with adversity (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2014, for review), the belief in science has been found to increase when non-believers are experimentally confronted with adversity (Farias, Newheiser, Kahane, & de Toledo, 2013). Similarly, an irreligious attitude in life may extend to the endorsement, sometimes in a militant way, of a societal vision (in communist regimes or in France's “laïcité”), where religious expressions may be prohibited from the public sphere (Bayart, 2016).

Together, the above theoretical arguments and pieces of evidence suggest that positions held by non-believers may not be pure opinions and isolated cognitions. Some or many of these positions may be better considered as beliefs, that is firm positions without clear evidence that have a motivational dimension, can be organized into a set of worldviews, and that have the possibility to shape the way irreligious people think and behave in domains beyond than the existential and moral ones. In sum, non-believers may also be dogmatic.

1.2. Specific aspects of closed-mindedness and cultural context

Going even further, in the present work we argue that at least in some cultural contexts and for some aspects of closed-mindedness, but not others, irreligious people may be even more dogmatic/inflexible than their religionist peers. As we will explain below, we argue that this may be the case in highly secularized Western countries with regard to two aspects of closed-minded cognition: *tolerance and integration of contradictions* and *readiness to consider and appreciate others' perspective* in general—not limited to religious-moral issues. However, as far as *certainty in one's own existential and moral beliefs* is concerned, religious people may be more dogmatic than their nonreligious peers.

With regard to the latter construct, we make the hypothesis of stronger dogmatism among religious believers compared to non-believers given the very nature of religious beliefs. The latter are typically impossible to demonstrate; and though in principle not fully implausible, they are often, from a logical point of view, very implausible (Woolley, 2000). The most striking among them are often also counter-intuitive, not respecting naïve physics, biology, and psychology (Boyer, 2001). Nevertheless, religious beliefs have typically been “validated” throughout history by sources of religious authority (exemplary figures, sacred texts, or simply tradition). Thus, dogmatism, defined as unjustified certainty (Altemeyer, 2002), should be more present among the religious, especially if this refers to cognitions relative to the existential and moral domains. The same should be the case if dogmatism implies the

unwillingness to question and change one's own basic beliefs: indeed, across the life-span, people remain relatively stable in their religious attitudes (Koenig, 2015), at least more stable in comparison to positions related to other domains such as political preferences (Abrahamson, Baker, & Caspi, 2002).

Being certain of one's own beliefs relative to the existential and moral domains, and thus unwilling to change them is one thing; being open to imagine, listen to, consider, understand, and appreciate others' perspective is, to some extent, something different. We argue that, in highly secularized religious contexts, non-believers, compared to their religionist peers, would be less prone to be interested in, consider, understand, and appreciate perspectives that oppose their own. In fact, living in highly secularized societies that socially and/or politically value irreligion, or at least show a societal indifference with regard to religion, contemporary religious believers are faced with opinions, values, norms, and practices in their daily life that may significantly differ from their own. Thus, these individuals may be more prone to imagine and understand these alternative positions, and possibly to integrate them into their own in a complex way. This integration should imply a higher tolerance of contradictions. On the contrary, non-believers, often raised in non-religious families, have been socialized in a predominantly secular culture where indifference to, rather an interest in, religion is the norm. They thus have fewer opportunities to be faced with ideas that challenge their own.

Indirect evidence in favor of these expectations comes from a recent analyses of large international data by Gebauer et al. (2014). These authors found that the somewhat negative association between religiosity and openness to experience decreases, disappears, and may even be slightly reversed, when one shifts from religious to secular countries. They interpret this finding as reflecting the fact that, in the latter societies, religious believers “swim against the stream”, whereas non-believers “swim along the stream”. Additional indirect evidence comes from recent studies showing that those very low in religious fundamentalism, or very high in antireligious sentiments, have their own prejudices with regard to specific targets, that is religious people and moral conservatives (Brandt & Van Tongeren, 2017; Kossowska, Czernatowicz-Kukuczka, & Sekerdej, 2017).

In sum, we expected non-believers, compared to religious believers, to show, at least in a secular cultural context, a lower intolerance of contradiction as well as less readiness for perspective taking for positions alternative to their own. This should be the case even if religious believers score higher on dogmatism, defined as an unjustified certainty in one's own beliefs.

1.3. Additional advances of the present study

With regard to previous research, we made additional methodological advances in the present study. First, in order to ensure that the results could not be attributable to the particular historical and sociocultural conditions of one specific country, we gathered data from three Western European countries, that is the United Kingdom, France, and Spain. All three are significantly secularized, though they differ for their history and present situation regarding the dominant religion, state-Church relations, atheist movements, and their societal management of religious and cultural diversity.

Moreover, previous research in this area has been predominantly based on self-reported measures. Though these are not invalid, they present important limitations, especially with regard to the constructs under study, that is dogmatism, intolerance of contradiction, and low cognitive perspective taking. Given the importance of human rationality and scientific truth among atheists when perceiving the world and human existence, one can reasonably suspect that atheists perceive low dogmatism and open-mindedness to be highly desirable, as well as stereotypically characteristic of themselves—and the opposite for religious believers. Indeed, believers and non-believers share the stereotype and meta-stereotype of being, respectively, high vs. low on dogmatism (Saroglou, Yzerbyt, & Kaschten, 2011). Thus, while we measured

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