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Cross-national variation in the social origins and religious consequences of religious non-affiliation

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ABSTRACT

I argue that the social implications of religious non-affiliation vary across cultural contexts, leading to differences across nations in both who is likely to be unaffiliated and the religious consequences of such non-affiliation. I test these propositions by examining cross-national variation in associations with non-affiliation using multilevel models and cross-sectional survey data from almost 70,000 respondents in 52 nations. The results indicate that: 1) both individual characteristics (gender, age, and marital status) and nation-level attributes (GDP, communism, and regulation of religion) strongly predict religious non-affiliation; 2) differences in non-affiliation by individual-level attributes—women vs. men, old vs. young, and married vs. single—are greatest in nations with low levels of religious regulation and high levels of economic development; and 3) the effect of religious non-affiliation on religiosity varies considerably by the political and religious context, and to a lesser extent by the level of economic development in each nation. These results highlight cultural variation in what it means to be religiously unaffiliated.

1. Introduction

A feature article in the April 2016 issue of *National Geographic* declared in its title: “The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion” (Bullard, 2016). Growth in religious non-affiliation¹ does indeed appear to be the most profound change in global religiosity in recent decades. As of 2010, there were 1.1 billion people with no religious affiliation, accounting for 16% of the world’s population (Hackett et al., 2012). In the United States alone, the unaffiliated grew from about 7% of the population at the end of the 1980s to 20% in 2012 (Hout and Fischer, 2014). The religiously unaffiliated or “nones” are the second largest religious group in 112 countries, or 48% of all nations on the Earth (Hackett and Huynh, 2015). Thus far, research on the social antecedents and religious implications of the growing phenomenon of non-affiliation has been largely limited to the US population, with a few researchers examining other, primarily Western nations (e.g. Bowen, 2004; Hayes, 2000; Stark et al., 2005; Voas and Crockett, 2005; Voas and McAndrew, 2012).

The social significance of religion, however, differs from nation to nation (Schwartz, 2007; Weber, 1948). Social acceptance of secularism in particular varies geographically (Ribberink et al., 2013). The effects of industrialization and modernization on religion differ across nations (Casanova, 1994), producing what Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012: 904) refer to as multiple secularities: “[T]he recognition that the notions of the secular, of secularism and secularity are charged with highly divergent meanings that are

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¹ I use the terms unaffiliated, non-affiliated, no religion, and apostate interchangeably throughout this article. These terms are intended to convey lack of affiliation with a specific organized religion, not necessarily lack of religious belief or behavior. Indeed, as the text discusses, it is not uncommon for the unaffiliated to hold standard religious beliefs. For instance, the results in Table 3 indicate that more than one-half of the unaffiliated believe in God.

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linked to different political and cultural contexts and histories of social conflict.” The context-specific nature of the cultural relevance of non-affiliation suggests that the demographic antecedents and religious implications of non-affiliation vary across nations. While factors such as gender and age may predict non-affiliation in the US (Baker and Smith, 2009; Baker and Whitehead, 2016), it is unclear how these associations play out cross-nationally. Similarly, while the religiously unaffiliated in a few highly developed nations report surprisingly high levels of religiosity (Stark et al., 2005), it is unclear how the effects of non-affiliation on religiosity differ across populations.

This article advances understanding of both the social origins and religious consequences of religious non-affiliation. I examine cross-national variation in associations with non-affiliation using multilevel models and cross-sectional survey data from almost 70,000 respondents in 52 nations. I address two primary research questions. First, do the individual-level factors that predict religious non-affiliation vary across nations; and if so, what national attributes are associated with that variation? Specifically, I examine how the effects of gender, age, marital status, and education on religious non-affiliation vary by the economic, political, and religious regulation context in each nation. Second, do the effects of religious non-affiliation on religiosity vary across nations; and if so, what are the factors associated with that variation? Specifically, I model how the effects of religious affiliation on religiosity vary by the economic, political, religious regulation, and religious affiliation context in each nation. The results indicate that: 1) both individual and nation-level attributes strongly predict religious non-affiliation; 2) differences in non-affiliation by individual-level attributes—women vs. men, old vs. young, and married vs. single—are greatest in nations with low levels of religious regulation and high levels of economic development; and 3) the effect of religious non-affiliation on religiosity varies considerably by the political and religious context, and to a lesser extent by the level of economic development in each nation. Ancillary models expand on and provide additional nuance to these findings by examining the interaction between communism and state regulation of religion, alternative measures of religious regulation, and more specific measures of the religious context in each nation. I conclude by discussing cultural variation in what it means to be religiously unaffiliated, and by providing suggestions for future research.

1.1. The social origins of religious non-affiliation

Just as some demographic groups are relatively likely to hold religious beliefs or participate in religious activities, people with certain attributes are relatively likely to have no religious affiliation. In particular, age, gender, family formation, and education appear to be the primary characteristics associated with being religiously unaffiliated. “The observation that women are more religious than men,” notes Hoffmann (2009: 232), “may be closer to sociology’s ‘one law’ than Durkheim’s famous proposition about religious faiths and suicide.” Following the general pattern of higher female religiosity, women are less likely than men to be unaffiliated (Baker and Smith, 2009). The strong, positive association between age and religion is another well-established social fact (Wink and Dillon, 2002). Thus, age should negatively affect non-affiliation (Schwadel, 2010). As Heaton and Goodman (1985:343) conclude, “Perhaps no other social institution has a closer link with religion than does the family.” Indeed, marriage is seen as a key factor protecting against apostasy (Baker and Smith, 2015). Finally, higher education may “erode” religion (Johnson, 1997). Consequently, education is assumed to have a positive association with various forms of secularity (Baker and Smith, 2015).

I expect the relationships between these individual-level characteristics and religious non-affiliation to vary across nations. The social and cultural implications of gender (Inglehart and Norris, 2003), age (Ayalon et al., 2014), marital status (Cooke and Baxter, 2010), and education (Schwadel, 2015) differ across nations. What it means to be old or young, a man or woman, college or not college educated, and married or single are context specific. These are socially constructed identities that are influenced by local cultures (Jenkins, 2008). Consequently, the impact of these demographic factors on the decision to not affiliate with organized religion is likely to be influenced by the national context. I draw on theories of modernization and economic development, conformity in highly regulated societies, and the impact of political systems to develop hypotheses regarding the nation-level attributes that moderate the effects of individual-level characteristics on religious non-affiliation.

I focus on three nation-level factors that may be related to variation in the association between individual-level attributes and religious non-affiliation. First, economic development, and modernity more broadly, affect social relations and norms in various ways (including religious behaviors, which I take up in more detail in the next section). The social and cultural significance of demographic attributes in particular appears to be tied to economic development. For instance, gender roles vary by the level of economic development in a nation (Dollar and Gatti, 1999; Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Economic development is associated with reductions in the disparity between men’s and women’s roles in societies, which suggests that the effect of gender on religious non-affiliation should be reduced in highly developed nations. The effects of other demographic attributes on religious non-affiliation may similarly be attenuated in more prosperous nations. How we view the elderly, for example, varies across nations, apparently in tandem with economic development (Sokolovsky, 2009). The social structures and institutions of more developed nations provide stability in expectations that lead to enduring influences of early life experiences (Dannefer, 2003), thereby potentially diminishing the effects of age on attributes such as religious non-affiliation. Social change research suggests a similar pattern with education, where the association between education and apostasy declined in both the US (Schwadel, 2014) and Great Britain (Voas and McAndrew, 2012) as those nations became some of the most developed nations in the world. The *first hypothesis* reflects this potential impact of economic development: *The effects of demographic attributes on religious non-affiliation will be minimized in nations with higher per capita GDP.*

The second relevant nation-level attribute is religious regulation, which generally pertains to laws and institutions that favor one religion over others (Grim and Finke, 2006). The regulation of religion appears to have a robust influence on many religious beliefs and behaviors (McCleary and Barro, 2006; Ruiter and Tubergen, 2009), including religious non-affiliation (Gill and Lundsgaarde, 2004). In most societies, being religiously unaffiliated is an innovative and even deviant identity, which, as Tamney and colleagues

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