

3 Atheism

Contemporary Numbers and Patterns

Determining what percentage of a given society believes in God – or doesn't – is fraught with methodological hurdles. First: low response rates; most people do not respond to surveys, and response rates of lower than 50 percent cannot be generalized to the wider society. Second: nonrandom samples. If the sample is not randomly selected – that is, every member of the given population has an equal chance of being chosen – it is nongeneralizable. Third: adverse political/cultural climates. In totalitarian countries where atheism is governmentally promulgated and risks are present for citizens viewed as disloyal, individuals will be reluctant to admit that they do believe in God. Conversely, in societies where religion is enforced by the government and risks are present for citizens viewed as nonbelievers, individuals will be reluctant to admit that they don't believe in Allah, regardless of whether anonymity is "guaranteed." Even in democratic societies without governmental coercion, individuals often feel that it is necessary to say that are religious, simply because such a response is socially desirable or culturally appropriate. For example, the designation "atheist" is stigmatized in many societies; even when people directly claim to *not* believe in God, they still eschew the self-designation of "atheist." Greeley (2003) found that 41 percent of Norwegians, 48 percent of the French, and 54 percent of Czechs claimed to not believe in God, but only 10 percent, 19 percent, and 20 percent of those respondents self-identified as "atheist," respectively. A final methodological problem: terminology. Definitions of specific words seldom translate well cross-culturally. Signifiers such as "religious" or "God" have different meanings in different cultures (Beyer 2003), making cross-national comparisons of beliefs among markedly different societies tenuous. Despite the above methodological limitations, we *can* make reliable estimates. Though methodological flaws persist, in the words of Robert Putnam (2000: 23): "[W]e must make do

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with the imperfect evidence that we can find, not merely lament its deficiencies.”

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

AUSTRALIA, CANADA, NEW ZEALAND, AND THE UNITED STATES

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

Guth and Fraser (2001) found that 28 percent of Canadians “show no evidence of religious salience or activity.” According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 22 percent of those in Canada do not believe in God. According to Bibby (2002), when asked, “Do you believe that God exists?” 6 percent of Canadians answered, “No, I definitely do not,” and another 13 percent answered, “No, I don’t think so,” for a total of 19 percent classifiable as either atheist or agnostic. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999: 121), 30 percent of Canadians do not believe in God or a “Higher Power.”

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

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 6 percent of those in the United States do not believe in God. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC,¹ 9 percent of Americans do not believe in God. Rice (2003) found that 3.8 percent of Americans don’t believe in God or “a spirit or life force.” According to Hout and Fischer (2002), between 3 percent and 4.5 percent of Americans are either atheist or agnostic; Marwell and Demerath (2003) suggest an estimate of 7 percent. According to Froese (2001), 8 percent of Americans are atheist or agnostic. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999: 99), 5 percent of Americans do not believe in God or a “Higher Power.”

LATIN AMERICA

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

The 1999 Gallup International Poll² found that nearly 7 percent of Argentineans chose “none” as their religion. According to Inglehart et al. (2004), 4 percent of those in Argentina do not believe in God.

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

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

EUROPE

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

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

Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that 64 percent of Swedes do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 74 percent of Swedes said that they did not believe in "a personal God." According to Greeley (2003), 46 percent of Swedes do not believe in God, although only 17 percent self-identify as "atheist." According to Froese (2001), 69 percent of Swedes are either atheist or agnostic. According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2000), 82 percent of Swedes do not believe in a "personal God." According to Davie (1999), 85 percent of Swedes do not believe in God.

According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), 48 percent of Danes do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 49 percent of Danes do not believe in "a personal God." According to Greeley (2003), 43 percent of Danes do not believe in God, although only 15 percent self-identify as "atheist." According to Froese (2001), 45 percent of Danes

are either atheist or agnostic. According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2000), 80 percent of Danes do not believe in a "personal God."

According to Inglehart et al. (2004), 31 percent of Norwegians do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 54 percent of Norwegians said that they did not believe in a "personal God." According to Greeley (2003), 41 percent of Norwegians do not believe in God, although only 10 percent self-identify as "atheist." According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2000), 72 percent of Norwegians do not believe in a "personal God." According to Froese (2001), 45 percent of Norwegians are either atheist or agnostic.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) found that 28 percent of those in Finland do not believe in God. According to Bondeson (2003), 33 percent of Finns do not believe in "a personal God." According to Gustafsson and Pettersson (2000), 60 percent of Finns do not believe in a "personal God." According to Froese (2001), 41 percent of Finns are either atheist or agnostic.

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

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

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

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

Ingelhart et al. (2004) found that 6 percent of Italians do not believe in God. According to Greeley (2003), 14 percent of Italians do not believe in God. According to Froese (2001), 15 percent of Italians are either atheist or agnostic. According to Davis and Robinson (1999), 23 percent of

Italians disagreed (some strongly) that a God exists who concerns himself with every human being personally.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

RUSSIA AND FORMER SOVIET STATES

A 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC found that 24 percent of Russians do not believe in God. According to Inglehart et al. (2004),

30 percent of Russians do not believe in God, but only 5 percent self-identify as "atheist" (Froese 2004). According to Greeley (2003), 48 percent of Russians do not believe in God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

ASIA

Survey data of religious belief in China is extremely unreliable (Demerath 2001: 154; Guest 2003). Estimates of high degrees of atheism are most probably exaggerations (Overmyer 2003). Only recently has sound scholarship begun to emerge (Yang 2004). That said, according to Barrett et al. (2001), 8 percent of the Chinese are atheist. According

to O'Brien and Palmer (1993), between 10 percent and 14 percent of those in China are "avowed atheists."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AFRICA

According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the BBC, Hiorth (2003), Inglehart et al. (1998, 2004), Barrett et al. (2001), the 1999 Gallup International Poll, and Johnstone (1993), less than 1 percent of those in Algeria, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad,

Cote D'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Zambia are atheist, agnostic, or nonreligious.

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

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

THE MIDDLE EAST

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

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

According to Barrett et al. (2001) less than 1 percent of those in Syria, Oman, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen are secular. According to Johnstone (1993), less than 2 percent of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen, and Kuwait are nonreligious. According to Johnstone (1993), less than 1 percent of those in Iraq are nonreligious.

THE WEST INDIES

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

According to Inglehart et al. (2004), 7 percent of those in the Dominican Republic do not believe in God, and the 1999 Gallup International

Poll found that almost 10 percent of those in the Dominican Republic chose “none” as their religion.

THE TOP 50

Table 3.1 presents the top fifty countries containing the largest percentage of people who identify as atheist, agnostic, or nonbeliever in a “personal God.”

We can also include Mexico (2%–7% do not believe in God), Poland (3%–6%), Moldova (6%), Romania, Georgia, and Uzbekistan (4%), India (2%–6%), Ireland (4%–5%), and Chile (3%). From the fifty-plus countries above, the total worldwide number of atheists, agnostics, and nonbelievers in God is somewhere between 505 million and 749 million. These numbers are conservative; were one to factor in a mere 0.25 percent of such highly populated countries as Egypt, Brazil, Indonesia, Nigeria, Burma, Tanzania, and Iran as nonbelievers in God, estimates would be significantly larger.

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

EXPLAINING HIGH RATES OF NONBELIEF

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

TABLE 3.1. *Top fifty countries containing the largest percentage of people who identify as atheist, agnostic, or nonbeliever in God*

Country	Total population (2004)	Percentage atheist/agnostic/nonbeliever in "personal" God
1. Sweden	8,986,000	46–85
2. Vietnam	82,690,000	81
3. Denmark	5,413,000	43–80
4. Norway	4,575,000	31–72
5. Japan	127,333,000	64–65
6. Czech Rep.	10,246,100	54–61
7. Finland	5,215,000	28–60
8. France	60,424,000	43–54
9. South Korea	48,598,000	30–52
10. Estonia	1,342,000	49
11. Germany	82,425,000	41–49
12. Russia	143,782,000	24–48
13. Hungary	10,032,000	32–46
14. Netherlands	16,318,000	39–44
15. Britain	60,271,000	31–44
16. Belgium	10,348,000	42–43
17. Bulgaria	7,518,000	34–40
18. Slovenia	2,011,000	35–38
19. Israel	6,199,000	15–37
20. Canada	32,508,000	19–30
21. Latvia	2,306,000	20–29
22. Slovakia	5,424,000	10–28
23. Switzerland	7,451,000	17–27
24. Austria	8,175,000	18–26
25. Australia	19,913,000	24–25
26. Taiwan	22,750,000	24
27. Spain	40,281,000	15–24
28. Iceland	294,000	16–23
29. New Zealand	3,994,000	20–22
30. Ukraine	47,732,000	20
31. Belarus	10,311,000	17
32. Greece	10,648,000	16
33. North Korea	22,698,000	15 ^a
34. Italy	58,057,000	6–15
35. Armenia	2,991,000	14
36. China	1,298,848,000	8–14 ^a

Country	Total population (2004)	Percentage atheist/ agnostic/nonbeliever in "personal" God
37. Lithuania	3,608,000	13
38. Singapore	4,354,000	13
39. Uruguay	3,399,000	12
40. Kazakhstan	15,144,00	11–12
41. Estonia	1,342,000	11
42. Mongolia	2,751,000	9
43. Portugal	10,524,000	4–9
44. United States	293,028,000	3–9
45. Albania	3,545,000	8
46. Argentina	39,145,000	4–8
47. Kyrgyzstan	5,081,000	7
48. Dominican Rep.	8,834,000	7
49. Cuba	11,309,000	7 ^a
50. Croatia	4,497,000	7

^a Certainty/validity on these figures is relatively low.

different rates of religiosity worldwide, "the levels of societal and individual security in any society seem to provide the most persuasive and parsimonious explanation" (p. 109).³ Of course, there are anomalies, such as Vietnam (81% nonbelievers in God) and Ireland (4%–5% nonbelievers in God). But aside from these two exceptions, the correlation between high rates of individual and societal security/well-being and high rates of nonbelief in God remains strong.

ATHEISM AND SOCIETAL HEALTH

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

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

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

Concerning international poverty rates, the United Nations' *Report on the World Social Situation* (2003) found that of the forty poorest nations on earth, all but one (Vietnam) are highly religious nations with statistically minimal or insignificant levels of atheism. Concerning illiteracy rates, the same report found that of the thirty-five nations with the highest levels of youth illiteracy rates, all are highly religious nations with statistically insignificant levels of organic atheism.

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

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

Concerning gender equality, nations marked by high degrees of organic atheism are among the most egalitarian in the world, while highly religious nations are among the most oppressive. According to the 2004 *Human Development Report's* "Gender Empowerment Measure," the top ten nations with the highest degrees of gender equality are *all* strongly organic atheistic nations with significantly high percentages of nonbelief. Conversely, the bottom ten are *all* highly religious nations without any statistically significant percentages of atheists. According to Inglehart (2003), countries with the most female members of Parliament tend to be countries characterized by high degrees of organic atheism (such as Sweden and Denmark), and countries with the fewest female members in Parliament tend to be highly religious countries (such as Pakistan and Nigeria).

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

FUTURE TRENDS

Is worldwide atheism growing or declining? This is a difficult question to answer simply. On the one hand, there are more atheists in the world today than ever before. On the other hand, worldwide atheism overall may be in decline, due to the demographic fact that highly religious nations have the highest birth rates in the world, and highly irreligious nations have the lowest birth rates in the world. As Norris and Inglehart (2004: 25) observe, "the world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before – and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population."

Thus, the picture is complicated, making definite predictions of the future growth or decline of atheism difficult. What is clear is that while most people continue to maintain a firm belief in deities (especially in the most populous countries) in certain societies, nonbelief in God is definitely increasing (Bruce 2002). According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999: 121), 30 percent of Canadians do not believe in God or a "Higher Power," *up from 23 percent in 1985*. According to Beyer (1997), 12.5 percent of Canadians chose "none" when presented with a plethora of religious identity options in 1991, *up from 7 percent in 1981 – a*

90 percent increase in one decade. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999: 121), 39 percent of the British do not believe in God or a "Higher Power," up from 24 percent in 1979. According to Bruce (2002) and Gill et al. (1998), survey data from the 1960s found that 79 percent of the British held a belief in God, but this dropped down to 68 percent in surveys taken in the 1990s; whereas only 10 percent answered that they "don't believe in God" in the 1960s, this percentage had almost tripled to 27 percent in the 1990s. According to Bruce (2001), surveys in the 1950s found that only 2 percent of the British replied they did not believe in God; that percentage was up to 27 percent in the 1990s. According to Palm and Trost (2000), when Swedes were asked in 1947, "Do you believe in God?" 83 percent said yes, 9 percent said they didn't know, and 8 percent said no. In the early 1990s, in response to the same question, only 38 percent said yes, 16 percent didn't know, and 46 percent said they did not. According to CUNY's 2001 American Religious Identification Survey, 14 percent of Americans claim "no religion" in terms of self-identification, up from 8 percent in 1990. Finally, according to Norris and Inglehart (2004: 90), the percentage of people believing in God over the past fifty years has declined by 33 percent in Sweden, 22 percent in the Netherlands, 20 percent in Australia, 19 percent in Norway, 18 percent in Denmark, 16.5 percent in Britain, 12 percent in Greece, 11 percent in Belgium, 7 percent in Canada, and 3 percent in Japan.

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

ATHEISM AND THE "INNATENESS" OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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

Justin Barret (2004) has argued that belief in God is a result of the "way our minds are structured" (p. viii) and is thus "an inevitable consequence of the sorts of minds we are born with" (p. 91). David Wilson (2002) suggests that religion is part of humanity's naturally evolving adaptive strategy and that religious belief represents "the healthy functioning of the

biologically and culturally well-adapted human mind" (p. 228). Michael Persinger (1987) has stressed the role of the hippocampus, the amygdala, temporal lobes, and hormonal processes in explaining religious belief in God. Ashbrook and Albright (1997) focus on the neural workings of the brain in explaining belief in God. Newberg and D'Aquili (2001) argue that religiosity is an evolved "neurological process" (p. 9), that the roots of belief in God are to be found in "the wiring of the human brain" (p. 129), and that "as long as our brains are arranged the way they are," belief in God will remain (p. 172).

The data presented in this chapter deliver a heavy blow to this new explanation of theism. First of all, the sheer numbers; with between 500 million and 750 million nontheists living on this planet today, any suggestion that belief in God is natural, inborn, or a result of how our brains are wired becomes difficult to sustain. Second, innate/neural theories of belief in God cannot explain the dramatically different rates of belief among similar countries. Consider Britain (31%–44% atheist) compared with Ireland (4%–5% atheist), the Czech Republic (54%–61% atheist) compared with Poland (3%–6% atheist), and South Korea (30%–52% atheist) compared with the Philippines (less than 1% atheist). It is simply unsustainable to argue that these glaring differences in rates of atheism among these nations is due to different biological, neurological, or other such brain-related properties. Rather, the differences are better explained by taking into account historical, cultural, economic, political, and sociological factors (Verweij et al. 1997; Bruce 1999; Grotenhuis and Scheepers 2001; Zuckerman 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2004).

CONCLUSION

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

NOTES

1. This BBC study was posted online by bbcnews.com (U.K. edition) under the heading "What the World Thinks of God."
2. The Gallup International Survey Poll data can be obtained from the Gallup International Association or on the web under their "Millennium Survey."
3. Norris and Inglehart (2004) account for the United States' high degree of religious belief on page 108: "The United States... is one of the most unequal postindustrial societies... relatively high levels of economic insecurity are experienced by many sectors of U.S. society... Many American families... face risks of unemployment, the dangers of sudden ill health without adequate private medical insurance, vulnerability to becoming a victim of crime..."

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