

HOW THE NONRELIGIOUS LIVE

A TALK BY JOE SAMPSON TO THE ATHEIST SOCIETY DECEMBER 2025

Some years ago I met somebody with whom I went to Catholic secondary school. We had not seen each other for decades but still we recognised each other. I told him that I no longer believed in God to which he replied “You believe in nothing”.

In this talk I wish to show that, contrary to what my school mate said, a life lived without religion is not based on a belief in nothing, not a nihilistic life.

In this talk I am going to draw heavily on the book “Living The Secular Life” by Phil Zuckerman, Professor of Sociology and Secular Studies at Pfitzer College, California. In 2011 he founded and currently chairs the Secular Studies program. The first student to graduate from Pfitzer College with a degree in secular studies was the first student in the United States with such a major.

Zuckerman had a similar experience to mine with my former school colleague. Zuckerman recounts how Jill, a mother of two young children, and a nonbeliever in God (as is her husband), told Zuckerman that she wanted to send her children to a Catholic school to get some morals. She felt that without religion her children would be nothing. Zuckerman replied to her that her children could get a healthy, durable morality without religion. Zuckerman once met a religious woman named Beverley who asked him what he studied at Pfitzer College. He replied “secular people” to which she replied that “without religion you’ve got nothing”.

Zuckerman said that many people associate secularity with nothingness. They seem to think that one cannot cope with everyday problems without religion, one cannot cope with death, cannot be moral, cannot develop morals, cannot find community. He says that the idea that religion is the best and/or only option out there when dealing with such matters is untenable. He points out that millions of people live well without religion and are not living nihilistic aimless lives.

Jill, the nonreligious person mentioned before, who did not want her children to be nothing, actually has a secular lifestyle that is moral. The ways that she interacts with others on a daily basis as a mother, wife, neighbour, businesswoman and citizen involve being an empathetic person.

In the 1966 Australian census only 0.85% of the population were nonreligious (versus 88.2% Christian). By 1991 the nonreligious had jumped to 12.9% (versus 74.0% Christian). In 2021 the nonreligious had jumped to 38.9% (versus 43.9% Christian). This means that in the last 55 years the number of nonreligious had increased by about 4500 per cent. In the 2021 census amongst people 40 and over Christians outnumbered the nonreligious, whereas amongst people under 40 the nonreligious outnumbered the Christians. If current trends continue the nonreligious will outnumber the Christians eventually.

In the UK 2021 census 47% were Christian and 38% nonreligious.

How The Nonreligious Live

In research undertaken by the World Economic Forum, in 2018, it was discovered that young people - aged 16 to 29 at the time of the survey - are far less religious than their older countrymen. That poll found that young people in the Czech Republic are the least religious in all Europe; some 91% of 16 to 29 year olds say they have no religion, followed by Estonia's youths (80%), Sweden (75%) and the UK, where 70% have no religion, 10% Catholic, 7% Anglican and 6% Muslim.

In the USA in 1957 3% were nonreligious versus 8% in 1990, 14% in 2001, 16% in 2010, 30% in 2014 and 29% in 2022. In the 1950s over 90% of US citizens were Christian versus 62% in 2024. In the early 1970s only 9% of Americans said that they never attended religious services whereas approximately 31% of Americans say they never attend religious services, according to a 2024 Gallup poll.

Zuckerman has done detailed studies of secular peoples' approaches to life to probe the ramifications of their worldviews and perspectives and to shine a light on their experiences, joys and challenges.

His "primary investigative method has been to conduct in-depth interviews with nonreligious people all over the US and from all walks of life, representing a variety of races, ethnic groups, ages, occupations, sexualities, and class backgrounds". He deliberately sought out people exhibiting a wide array of secular orientations, from the staunchly atheist to the indifferent.

He found that while secular Americans are not religious they do not live lives of despair. "To the contrary they live civil, reasonably rational, and admirably meaningful lives predicated upon sound ethical principles".

Zuckerman found that while secular Americans are a diverse lot with a wide range of beliefs "most do share certain key traits and values, such as self-reliance, freedom of thought, intellectual inquiry, cultivating autonomy in children, pursuing truth, basing morality on the empathetic reciprocity embedded in the Golden Rule, accepting the inevitability of eventual death."

Zuckerman says that for most nonreligious people to be secular means "living in the here and now – with exuberance, relish, passion, and tenacity – because this is the only existence we'll ever have". It also means being committed to making the world a better place because this is all we've got."

The U.S. secular humanist philosopher, Paul Kurtz, said, in his book "Forbidden Fruit: The Ethics of Humanism" that a society or person can be moral without religion. Kurtz believed that "education and scientific discovery have the potential to enhance life, that democracy and respect for human rights are essential elements of a good society." Kurtz rejected secular atheist communist societies such as the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao Tse Tung or Kampuchea under Pol Pot. Such societies while secular were not democratic, but rather totalitarian. Secularism without democracy does not provide a happy society.

How The Nonreligious Live

Zuckerman points out in “Living The Secular Life”, (published in 2014) “that a lot of religious Americans don’t like or trust people who don’t believe in God because they assume that atheism is the same thing as being without morals. In surveys when Americans are asked which group they wouldn’t vote for as president atheists are in the worst place; a recent poll found 43% would not vote for an atheist as president, versus 40% for Moslems and 30% for homosexuals”. A Gallup poll in 2020 showed 60% would vote for an atheist.

Zuckerman said that “many studies in recent years have shown just how disliked the nonreligious are. For example, legal scholar Eugene Volokh has documented the degree to which atheist parents in the US have been denied custody rights in the wake of a divorce; psychologist Marcel Harper has found that many Americans consider secular people to be selfish and immoral; psychology professor Will Gervais found that many Americans consider atheists to be untrustworthy; and finally sociologist Penny Edgell found that nearly half of all Americans would disapprove of their child wanting to marry an atheist.”

Zuckerman said that one of his goals in writing his book on the secular life was to show that dislike of nonreligious people is unjustified. He said that people who don’t believe in God are not immoral; most have very sound ethical orientations and, in fact, on certain measures, secular people appear more tolerant, more law abiding, less prejudiced, less vengeful and less violent than their religious peers.

Zuckerman found that for secular people, being good is following the Golden Rule, i.e. treating others as you would like to be treated. The Golden Rule predates Christianity. For example, Confucius (551-479 BCE) taught “do not impose on others what you do not desire others to impose on you” and “what you would require of your friend first apply in your treatment of him.” While the Golden Rule is found in many of the world’s religions it does not require a God. “All that is required is basic, fundamental human empathy” says Zuckerman. He goes on to say that empathy is learnt by actual experience. He says that children who are raised by considerate, fair and empathetic people grow up to be considerate, fair and empathetic themselves.

Zuckerman has spoken “to many secular people about their morality, specifically questioning them about where it comes from and how it works.” He said that he had a lot of interesting answers but two stood out: one from a person named Milton and another from a person named Sonja. Milton said that people who think that morality comes from God are not prepared to make decisions based on what they consider to be right but rather on what some external authority says.. Sonja spoke of a “hypothetical situation... to illustrate what she thinks reveal the superiority of secular over God-based morality. She imagined a room in which there is an intricate piece of art. Two nine year old children are allowed in the room each for ten minutes. One is told that there is a valuable piece of art in the room but not to touch it as it is very fragile...and the only one in existence...If you touch it, and break it, we won’t punish you – but we’d be quite sad.” The child comes in the room “looks but does not touch it and comes out”. The second one is told not to touch the valuable piece of art and that there is a hole in the ceiling through which the principal can see the room and if the child breaks the art work the principal will know and the child will be severely punished but if he

How The Nonreligious Live

does not touch it he will be substantially rewarded. The second child goes in the room, looks but does not touch it and comes out. The first scenario represents secular morality, the second religious morality. In the first case the child has made a decision based on what are considered the consequences of their actions, whereas the second child has made a decision to avoid punishment and obtain personal reward. We do not need to rely on thought experiments to see the real world benefits of secular morality in action.

A number of recent studies are available that show that secular men and women have ideals that “evidence a deep valuing of life, empathy for the suffering, desire for fairness, and hatred of injustice and cruelty.” For example, an article published in the journal “Trends in Cognitive Sciences” showed that “atheists are just as ethical and have as strong a moral compass as churchgoers. People who have no religion know right from wrong just as well as regular worshippers” according to the study. The team behind the research found that most religions were similar and had a moral code that helped to organize society. But people who did not have a religious background still appeared to have intuitive judgments of right and wrong in common with believers. The authors of the article looked at several psychological studies designed to test an individual’s morality. Dr. Marc Hauser from Harvard University, one of the article’s authors, said that “the research indicates that intuitive judgments of right and wrong operate independently of religious commitments”. In a paper published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Review* in 2000 by then Duke University Professor Deborah Hall and associates, fifty five separate studies were carefully analysed to reveal the relationship between religion, irreligion and racism. A finding of this meta-analysis was that strongly religious Americans tend to be the most racist, moderately religious Americans tend to be less racist, and the least racist of all are secular Americans, particularly those espousing an agnostic orientation. Zuckerman says that “in a US additional survey in 2009 it was found that those Americans most supportive of the George W. Bush government’s use of torture were the most strongly religious, while those who were most opposed to the government use of torture were the most secular. The same holds true for support of the death penalty: the more religious tend to be the most supportive of it, favouring vengeance over forgiveness, while the more secular tend to be the most against it, manifesting a more merciful orientation”.

Zuckerman says that “the more religious among us tend to be more in favour of attacking other countries such as Iraq...while the most secular of us are the least supportive...” Secular people are also much more tolerant on all fronts than their religious peers, being more likely to support the civil liberties of people they strongly disagree with or even oppose politically. And as for protecting the environment, religious Americans (especially the most strongly religious) tend to be least in favour, while atheists and agnostics are the most supportive, and secular Americans are more likely to understand and take seriously the threat of global warming than religious Americans. They are also more likely to support women’s equality...[and]gay rights...” “Religious people are, on average, much more supportive of corporal punishment. The secular are more concerned with the suffering of animals than religious.”

How The Nonreligious Live

Zuckerman goes on to say “secular people do not outshine their religious peers in every way. For example, when it comes to generosity, volunteering and charitable giving, secular men and women fall short, with religious people being more likely to divide both time and their money.”

“However, as for what is perhaps the ultimate indicator of moral behaviour (or lack thereof), namely violent crime, atheists are underrepresented in (U.S.) prisons today”. There are 155,174 people in the U.S. federal prison system as of May 2025, and exactly 113 of them identify as atheists. Those self-described atheists make up a mere 0.073% of the U.S. prison population. That’s according to a Freedom of Information Act request earlier this year with the Federal Bureau of Prisons by “Friendly Atheist” newsletter. Self-identified atheists now represent about 5% of the U.S. population. A similar underrepresentation of secular people in prisons is found in the United Kingdom. Professor of Psychology Benjamin Beit-Hallami said “ever since the field of criminology started and data were collected of the religious affiliations of criminal offenders, the fact that the unaffiliated and the nonreligious had the lowest crime rates has been noted”.

Zuckerman says that people who were raised without any religion develop their morality, what compels them to be good as the Golden Rule. According to Zuckerman “Secular morality hinges on little else than not harming others, and helping those in need, both of which flow easily and directly from the Golden Rule’s basic simple logic of empathetic reciprocity”.

According to the Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Study, in 2025 13% of U.S. adults say that as children, they were not raised in any religion. Zuckerman asked whether children raised in secular homes are disproportionately immoral, unethical or violent. In reply he said that no study exists which says that children raised in secular homes are disproportionately immoral, unethical or violent. On the contrary Psychology Professor Beit-Hallami said having no religious affiliation is the best predictor of law-abiding behaviour and life-long atheists have been found to be well-socialised and nonviolent. The British psychologist Margaret Knight, in her book “Morals Without Religion” had this to say on a secular basis for morality: “Why should I consider others? These ultimate moral questions, like all ultimate questions, can be desperately difficult to answer, as every philosophy student knows. Myself, I think that the only possible answer to this question is the humanist one – because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier, and fuller, and richer if the members are friendly and cooperative than if they are hostile and resentful”.

Zuckerman interviewed a 22 year old, whose parents were nonreligious. He asked her how she felt “about the idea that people need faith in God to be moral”. Her reply was “I think that completely misses the point. You can easily teach children moral rules independent of such things. And I think that the moral impulses are just pretty intuitive. Even if you aren’t taught, you’ll figure it out by simply acting immorally – and soon everyone will hate you. Kids can pretty much figure out that they shouldn’t steal or lie. You don’t need God to make those things obvious.”

How The Nonreligious Live

Some people have argued that a society cannot be moral if it does not believe in God. For example, U.S. talk show host Dennis Prager recently said “No god, no moral society”. Newt Gingrich, a former US Republican congressional leader, said that a secular country would be “frankly a nightmare.” Gingrich argued that secularism is as dangerous to society as Nazism. In his 1790 book “reflections on the French Revolution”, Edmund Burke said that “religion is the underlying basis of civil social order”. Voltaire, the Enlightenment philosopher, said that “without theism society could not function”, that “it is necessary for people to have profoundly engraved on their minds the idea of a supreme being and creator, in order to maintain a moral social order.” Alex de Tocqueville, in his book “Democracy in America” said that “religious faith is indispensable for a well-functioning society, that irreligion is a dangerous and pernicious threat to societal well-being”. Bill O’Reilly, in 2011m during a televised debate with British atheist Richard Dawkins, made the traditional argument that an absence of religion results in social depravity. In his best selling books he has said that a society without religion would be anarchic, chaotic, weak and lawless. Tammy Bruce said that “Christianity is the last bastion of morality, values, and decency and that without it society will be vague, empty and lost”. Larry Alex Taunton said that a nation lacking Christian faith is a nation in decay. He has said that societies strong in religious faith are content, humane, peaceful and moral while societies without religious faith are corrupt, harsh, degraded and immoral. George Washington believed that national morality could not prevail without religious principles. Dostoyevsky had Ivan Karamazov, a character in one of his novels, say that “without God all things are permitted”.

So, a number of theists have said that a society without God will be dysfunctional. But, says Zuckerman “the current state of the world reveals a very different picture. Indeed, it is actually among the more secular societies on Earth that we find the greatest levels of societal harmony, civility, freedom, equality, peacefulness and prosperity, while it is among the most religious societies that we find the greatest levels of destitution, chaos, insecurity, inequality, oppression, immorality and poverty”.

“These results fly in the face of those who say that we need faith in God in order to have a well-functioning society, or that secularism is intrinsically bad for society. Both of these claims are demonstrably false.”

“To prove it, consider which countries today are the most and least God-fearing. Drawing on numerous international surveys that reveal what percentage of the population in various countries believes in God, has faith in God, prays to God, we are able to get a widely agreed upon list of the most and least God-worshipping nations in the world, The most faithful nations in the world – those highest in theism – include Nigeria, Uganda, Philippines, Pakistan, Morocco, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Colombia, Senegal, Malawi, Indonesia, Brazil, Peru, Jordan, Algeria, Ghana, Venezuela, Mexico and Sierra Leone. And as for the least faithful, most secular nations on earth – those with the highest rates of atheism, agnosticism, or theological indifference – we can include Sweden, Denmark, Czechia, Japan, Canada, Norway, Finland, China, New Zealand, South Korea, Estonia, France, Vietnam, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Slovenia, Germany, Hungary, Great Britain, Australia and Belgium.

How The Nonreligious Live

A Gallup International Global survey in 2025 conducted across 42 countries with nearly 43,000 respondents shows that while religion remains a powerful marker of identity in many regions, levels of belief differ significantly depending on geography, gender, age, education, and employment status. Globally, 55 % of respondents identified themselves as religious, while 30 % said they were not religious, and 10 % declared themselves convinced atheists. This global average, however, masks striking regional variations. In Africa (represented by Kenya), 93 % of respondents identified as religious—the highest of any region surveyed. Similarly high levels were observed in the Arab World (92 %) and South Asia (88 %), underscoring the strong role religion continues to play in personal and societal identity in these areas. In contrast, Western Europe emerged as the most secular region, with only 37 % identifying as religious. A substantial 44 % of respondents in this region stated they were not religious – the highest among all regions and 14 % identified as atheists. Northeast Asia followed closely, where just 24 % said they were religious, 34 % said not religious, while 35 % considered themselves atheists—highlighting a significant cultural divide between East Asia and much of the rest of the world. The United States, representing North America in the survey, showed a more moderate picture with 54 % identifying as religious, 30 % as not religious, and 7 % as atheists. The key findings from the survey data are the following: the top five religious nations included Pakistan (94 %), Kenya (93 %), Georgia (93 %), Iraq (92 %), and Armenia (84 %). Meanwhile, Sweden (59 %), Estonia (59 %), Denmark (56 %), Norway (55 %), and United Kingdom (50 %) featured prominently among the most non-religious nations. The top five atheist countries are China (58 %), Japan (31 %), South Korea (23 %), Spain (22 %) and Finland (20 %).

Zuckerman went on to say “Which set of countries is faring the best, on average? According to the claims of many Americans, it should be the most God-loving nations. But such is not the case. Rather, it is those countries with the lowest rates of God belief that tend to be the healthiest in terms of prosperity, equality, freedom, democracy, women’s rights, human rights, vocational attainment, crime rates, life expectancy (though not all, to be sure, such as Vietnam or China) and it is those nations with the highest rate of God belief that tend to be relatively unsuccessful in terms of standard sociological measures of societal health – from having high infant mortality rates to high poverty rates, from entrenched inequality to a stubborn degree of corruption, from lack of clean water to absence of democracy. For example, take motherhood, something that just about everyone can agree on as being supremely important. Which countries are best for mothers? The Save The Children Foundation, a nonprofit organisation, publishes an annual Mother’s Index, wherein they rank the best and worst places on earth in which to be a mother. They take into account a host of factors, such as the percentage of births attended to by skilled personnel, maternity leave benefits, infant mortality rates and other measures. And, according to their most recent annual reports, of the top ten best nations in which to be a mother, all are highly secularised nations. Of the bottom ten worst nations in which to be a mother, all are highly religious, such as Yemen, Mali and Niger.”

“Consider peacefulness, yet another phenomenon that almost everyone can agree is a societal good. The nonprofit organisation called Vision Of Humanity publishes an annual Global Peace Index. They calculate numerous variables, such as levels of safety and security in a given society, levels of violent crime, warfare, and ease of access to dangerous weapons, when compiling their index. In the 2025 Global Peace Index the least theistic nations are mainly peaceful, contrary to what some theists believe. Some religious countries are very peaceful. The most peaceful country was Iceland, followed by Ireland, New Zealand, Austria, Switzerland, Singapore, Portugal, Denmark, Slovenia and Finland. The least

How The Nonreligious Live

peaceful country was Russia, followed by Ukraine, Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen, Afghanistan, Syria, South Sudan, Israel and Mali. According to IEP (the Institute For Economics And Peace) report entitled “Five Key Questions Answered On The Link Between Peace And Religion”, “There is no clear statistical relationship between either the presence or the absence of religious belief and conflict. Even at the extremes, the least peaceful countries are not necessarily the most religious and vice versa. For example, when looking at the ten most peaceful countries three would be described as highly religious, and when looking at the ten least peaceful nations two would be described as the least religious. Conversely, the absence of religious belief, as manifested by atheism, also sees no significant link to broader societal peacefulness.” The IEP report found that full democracies are peaceful regardless of the levels of religious belief.

According to Zuckerman “If there is one single, widely agreed upon pathological element in society, it is murder.” So which countries have the highest murder rates? According to the Wikipedia article on List of Countries By Homicide Rate (based on data from the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime Report) the nations with the highest murder rates are all very religious e.g. Jamaica (49.3 per 100,000) Ecuador (45.7), South Africa (45.5), Haiti (41.1). There are no secular nations with high murder rates. The secular nations all have low murder rates e.g. Japan (0.21), China (0.5), Norway (0.7). There are some religious states with low murder rates, e.g. Indonesia (0.71), Poland (0.8), Ireland (0.7).

Zuckerman says that “Additional research by sociologists and criminologists such as James Fox, Jack Levin and Pablo Fajnzylber shows that murder rates are significantly lower in the more secular nations on earth, where atheism and agnosticism are more common, and higher in the more religious nations, where faith in God is widespread. Robert Brennenman is a sociologist who studies gangs in Central America, and based on his extensive fieldwork, he notes that among the most violent, brutal neighbourhoods of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, atheism and agnosticism are virtually non-existent.”

In the U.S.A. the rates of theism vary greatly from state to state, e.g. Zuckerman says “91% of people in Mississippi and 86% of people in South Carolina claim to believe in God” with absolute certainty but only 54% of people in Vermont and 59% of people in Maine do so. And only 1% of people in Kentucky explicitly claim to not believe in God, compared to 9% in Oregon. The ten states that report the highest levels of belief in God are Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee and Oklahoma (tied with Utah). The ten states with the lowest levels of belief in God are Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Alaska, Oregon and California.”

Zuckerman says “when it comes to nearly all standard measures of societal health, such as homicide rates, violent crime rates, poverty rates, domestic abuse rates, teen pregnancy cases, rates of sexually transmitted diseases, unemployment rates, domestic violence, the least theistic states tend to fare much better than the most theistic, e.g. on average the rates of children being beaten to death by their own parents are markedly higher among the most God-fearing states and significantly lower among the God-indifferent. For example, the child abuse fatality rate in Mississippi is twice that of New Hampshire, and Kentucky’s is four times that of Oregon’s.”

How The Nonreligious Live

One scholar who extensively researched the correlation of religion with wellbeing is Gregory S. Paul in an article entitled “The Chronic Dependence of Popular Religiosity upon Dysfunctional Psychosociological Conditions” in 2009 in the *Evolutionary Psychology* journal. He has created a “Successful Societies Scale” in which he tries to objectively measure a whole array of variables that are indicative of societal goodness and wellbeing. The nations sampled are limited to prosperous first world democracies (per capita income at least \$23,000 around 2000) that have not recently experienced systematic violence. The nations studied were (listed from most religious to least religious):: USA, Ireland, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Netherlands, Norway, England, Germany, France, Denmark, Japan and Sweden. When he measured such factors as incarceration rates, fertility rates, alcohol consumption rates, per capita income, inequality and correlated them with religiosity/secularity, his findings are that except for suicide the less religious nations fare markedly better than the more religious nations.

Zuckerman says that the data above reveals that high rates of secularity or unbelief do not result in communal decay or contribute to societal degradation. And conversely high rates of faith do not produce impressive levels of societal wellbeing.

A criticism that can be made of what has been said before is to point to the extremely violent atheist regimes in the twentieth century like the Soviet Union under Stalin or China under Mao or Kampuchea under Pol Pot. Zuckerman says that such societies are not dysfunctional primarily because they are atheist but because they are totalitarian. He says that some of the most tyrannical nations have been religious, e.g. Iran under the Ayatollahs, Uganda under Idi Amin, Germany under Hitler, who continually spoke about God.

Zuckerman said that when state power is held undemocratically, the results will always be deleterious, regardless of whether run by atheist dictators or theistic dictators. Zuckerman said that Secular societies function well when democratic but not well when undemocratic and that when you’ve got a democratic situation in which millions of individuals live their lives without faith in God and when such secular societies emerge freely the result is very positive.

Nonreligionism is not new. Zuckerman said “there have always been people who were not trusting of priests, rabbis, gurus and imams.” For example, “a group of philosophers called the Carvaka lived in India in the 7th Century B.C. The Carvaka were materialist thinkers who rejected the supernaturalism of the ancient Hindu religion. They were essentially atheists”.

“Xanxi, who lived in China in 3rd Century B.C. taught that there is no heaven other than the natural world and that morality is not divinely established but humanly constructed.”

“The ancient Roman philosopher Lucretius argued that the gods did not exist, that there is no life after death and that everything that we experience is natural. A number of ancient Greek philosophers were sceptical about religion. For example, Epicurus said that death is nothingness that no one need fear. While Epicurus believed in gods, he believed that they were not interested in humans. The philosopher Democritus was a materialist, believing everything to be made up of atoms. Hence he rejected the idea of gods. He said that doing right is based most of all on respecting another person. The philosopher was an agnostic, saying ‘Concerning the gods, I have no means of knowing whether they exist or not’. The philosopher Carneades criticised arguments for theism and divine creation”.

How The Nonreligious Live

In the Islamic world there were critics of religion including Muhammad al-Warraq of the ninth century who doubted the existence of God. The poet Al-Ma'arri, who lived in the 10th and 11th centuries, was opposed to religion as a fable. The poet and mathematician Omar Khayyam, who lived from 1048 to 1131, said “Men talk of heaven, yet there is no heaven but here”.

There are now hundreds of millions of people without religious faith, who have a naturalistic worldview. For example, in Canada one hundred years ago only 2% of Canadians claimed to have no religion but today 35% of Canadians claim as much. In Australia one hundred years ago fewer than 1% claimed no religion whereas in the 2021 census they were 39%. In the Netherlands a century ago 10% of the population were nonreligious whereas in 2024 the figure was 56%. In the England and Wales 2021 census 37% identified as nonreligious. In Sweden in 2021 38% identified as nonreligious.

An Ipsos poll in 26 countries in 2023 showed that on average surveyed, 40% say they believe in God as described in holy scriptures, 20% believe in a higher spirit but not as described in holy scriptures, another 21% believe in neither God nor any higher spirit, while 19% are not sure or will not say. Majorities in 11 countries believe in God as described in holy scriptures – most notably Brazil, South Africa, Turkey, and India. In Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and eight of the 10 European countries, no more than half believe in God or a higher power. Such levels of irreligion are unprecedented.

According to Gallup Polls “In the late 1940s and 1950s, when Gallup began regularly measuring religious identity, over nine in 10 American adults identified as Christian -- either Protestant or Catholic -- with most of the rest saying they were Jewish. The most significant trend in Americans' religiosity in recent decades has been the growing shift away from formal or official religion. About one in five U.S. adults (22%) as of 2023 don't have a formal religious identity. This represents a major change from the late 1940s and 1950s when only 2% to 3% of Americans did not report a formal religious identity when asked about it in Gallup surveys. The increase in those claiming no religious identity began in the 1970s, with the percentage crossing the 10% threshold in 1990 and climbing into the teens in the 2000s.” Between one third and one half of all nonreligious are atheist or agnostic, about a quarter believe in a “higher power”, while only about 20% believe in a “personal God. In the early 1970s more than 90% of Americans said identified with a Christian religion. That steadily declined to 68% in 2023.

Zuckerman goes on to say “ Not everyone fits into a perfect little box labelled ‘atheist’ or ‘Christian’ or secular’ or ‘religious’. For example, sociologist David Voas speaks of ‘fuzzy fidelists’ – people who are not adherents of a given religious tradition and yet do maintain a variety of supernatural beliefs. These might be people who were raised secular, and still consider themselves secular, and yet believe in karma as an actual spiritual cosmic reality pervading the universe. In other words they are not religious in a traditional sense yet they are not absolute empiricist sceptical atheists either.” Robert Fuller, in his book “Spiritual But Not Religious” said that about 20% of U.S. citizens identify as “Spiritual But Not Religious”.

Zuckerman goes on to say “Robert Putnam talks about ‘liminals’ – people who are between a religious and secular identity. They occupy that ‘grey’ space, not feeling religious or self-identifying as a believer, and yet not feeling wholly secular or identifying as a bona fide agnostic or convinced atheist. Similar to liminals are pantheists, who say that they believe in God but by “God” mean the Universe, so that in a traditional sense they are atheists without

How The Nonreligious Live

admitting to be so. The theologian Paul Tillich denied that God is a person, but rather “Being-Itself”, which seems to me to be a pantheist view, although Tillich denied it. Tillich’s views were popularised in the Book “Honest To God” by Anglican theologian John Robinson; Robinson, was a bishop of Woolwich in the Church of England. The book sold over a million copies in the early 1960s, showing that it resonated with a lot of people but it also generated calls for Robinson's resignation, as many conservative Christians thought that Robinson and Tillich were atheists, although many Christian theologians welcomed the book..

Zuckerman says that sociologist Grace Davie has recognised people who say that they are not religious and do not go to church but say that they believe in God; some of these people believe in the biblical God and some are deists, i.e. believe in God not because of revelation but for some reason not to do with the Bible.

Zuckerman says “So the simple binary divide of religious versus secular is not accurate. The anthropologist Frank Pasquale considers religiosity and secularity as existing on a continuum represented by a ten point scale. At one end of the scale (at number 1) are people who are intensely religious. e.g. a pious nun who does little else than pray, fast, study the Bible and tend to the tasks of the convent. At the other end of the spectrum (at number 10) are people who are totally, thoroughly and completely secular in all conceivable aspects, e.g. somebody who works as an electronic engineer, plays in a rock band, has lots of friends, is active in atheist and humanist groups and has never a religious impulse or experienced a religious ritual or pondered a religious thought in his lifetime”.

What is evident from the statistics given earlier is that more and more people are now more closely towards the secular end of the spectrum than before. The social psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer (in their book “Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study Of American Nonbelievers”) said that the nonreligious are swelling faster than religious groups.

How do secular parents raise their children? In recent years there have been a few studies on secular parenting. According to studies in the 1980s by sociology professor Hart Nielsen 85% of children of secular parents grew up to be secular. Scottish sociologists Steve Bruce and Tony Glendinning got a figure of 95%.

Zuckerman goes on to say that there are studies that focus on religious family life but also include some nonreligious people in their sample. For example, in his study of sex and religion in the lives of American teens, Mark Regnerus, a US Professor of sociology and religion, found that secular parents are generally more comfortable talking about sex with their teenage children, and end up providing them with better information about sex and safe sex practices than religious parents. Vern Bengtson, a professor of gerontology, has studied religion and family life including secular families. He reports that secular families exhibit high levels of solidarity and emotional closeness and that parents are quite articulate about their values, with many being more coherent and passionate about their ethical principles than some of the religious parents in our study. US sociologists Brian Starks and Robert Robinson found that nonreligious parents are more likely to value and seek to cultivate autonomy in their children, rather than obedience. According to various national US surveys, when asked what characteristic they would like their children to exhibit, secular parents are far less likely to list ‘obey parents’ and more likely to list ‘think for oneself’ than religious parents. Another study, by US social psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, found that atheist parents were reluctant to impose their atheism on their children. Atheist

How The Nonreligious Live

parents were much more likely to want their children to make up their own minds about what they believed. This was in contrast to believing Christian parents, who were far more likely to consciously and deliberately attempt to pass their religious beliefs on to their children. Christel Manning, a US professor of religious studies, is the author of various articles and books on how secular parents raise their children. For more than a decade Professor Manning has interviewed secular parents from all over the US. She has shown that there is a discernibly wide variety of types of secular parents – the spectrum including convinced atheists who are quite antireligious, agnostics who are not sure just what they believe, and those who are indifferent; they do not reject religion – they ignore it. Manning’s research shows that secular parents are not amoral; they do not raise their children religiously, but that does not mean that they raise them without values. Some common, consistent moral principles that secular parents import to their children including valuing and obeying the Golden Rule, being environmentally conscious, developing empathy, cultivating independent thinking, and relying upon rational problem solving.

How do nonreligious people face adversity? Zuckerman says that he has sought out and interviewed many nonreligious people who have experienced traumas tragedies and all-round tough times. He said “ I’ve interviewed those who are battling cancer, parents who have lost children, children who have lost parents, siblings who have lost siblings, spouses who have lost spouses, people who have gone through nasty divorces, endured prison, disease – and I have even talked to quite a few atheists who have spent a good amount of time in foxholes, from Normanby to Da Nang to Baghdad. I have spoken to atheists who have experienced spinal cord injuries, agnostics who survived the Holocaust, and nonbelievers who have battled severe drug addiction. Their experiences and insights reveal that while it may not be as easy to endure trying times without the comfort of religion, it still can be done. In fact, it is done – every day all the time.”

Zuckerman said “What do professionals whose work involves helping nonreligious people to deal with physical or emotional challenges have to say? Hilary Wells is the founder of Secular Therapies of Chicago, an association of counselling psychologists who offer ‘nonreligious counselling and therapy’. She says that when secular people find life hard and they had difficulty coping they turn to other people to help them through their difficulties. And when social connections aren’t there, they must look to themselves and become more self-reliant. Another expert on secular coping is Karen Hwang, a professor of counselling psychology, who has worked for several years with people who have suffered a spinal cord injury (SPT). In her research Professor Hwang has found that when comparing nonbelievers who have experienced SPI with believers, there are no significant differences in self-ratings of personal happiness. Luke Galen is a psychology professor in a Michigan university, who has for several years been one of a handful of U.S. academics who specifically study the psychology of secular people. In comparing and contrasting nonreligious people who are involved with secular organisations to demographically similar religious people who are members of churches, he has found that on most measures the two groups aren’t all that different emotionally or psychologically.”

What views do secular people (i.e. atheists and agnostics) have of death? An Age poll taken in Australia in 1986 in which 2000 people were asked “Do you believe in some form of life after death?”, and as well asked their religious beliefs, found that in the Atheists and Agnostics group 53% said “No”, 34% said “yes” and 13% said “Don’t Know”. A similar result was obtained in a US survey in 2014 by the Austin Institute of Family and Culture, which found that 32% of Americans who identified as atheists or agnostics believe in an

How The Nonreligious Live

afterlife. A 2021 U.S. Pew Poll found that 3% of Atheists and 26% of Agnostics believe in an afterlife. A 2012 UK survey by Sullivan, Voas and Brown from the University of London found that 15% of atheists and 28% of agnostics believe in an afterlife. A 2017 BBC-commissioned UK poll found that one-fifth (20%) of people with "no religion" believed in life after death. So while the majority of secular people do not believe in an afterlife a minority do believe in an afterlife.

U.S. Sociology professor Phil Zuckerman has interviewed a number of secular people on mortality. He said that “most secular people articulate certain basic themes: (1) this life is miraculous, rich and fleeting – is the only life, (2) we must seize it, savour it, and be open to it, and (3) there is nothing to fear when it comes to the end”.

While atheists and agnostics do not believe in God, it is accurate to say that, in democratic countries they are also humanists – i.e. they believe in science, reason, democracy, tolerance, open debate and human rights. They believe that a society based on cooperation is a happy one.

In conclusion, I summarise by saying that in my talk I have shown, largely using the material provided by Sociology Professor Phil Zuckerman in his book “Living The Secular Life” that people who live their lives without religion are not less normal, human or humane than their religious fellow citizens. It is not true that they are “nothings”, without values, without meaning, without purpose; on the contrary- people who have a secular humanist worldview live life fully with ethical values, based on human need.

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