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Pages 760-766. Entry by Frank L. Pasquale

UNBELIEF AND IRRELIGION, EMPIRICAL STUDY AND NEGLECT OF. There have been countless conceptual, theoretical, historical, apologetic, critical, and philosophical treatments of unbelief, irreligion, and related topics. Direct empirical studies, however, are comparatively few. There are numerous reviews of empirical research on religion, the religious, and religiosity, but there is no comprehensive summary of what available data do and do not reveal about the nature, antecedents, and correlates of affirmative unbelief and irreligion.

In his 1985 *Encyclopedia of Unbelief* entry “The Geography of Unbelief,” William M. Newman observed that “unbelief has rarely been the direct focus of empirical studies in the social sciences” and that “information [on unbelief] typically is gleaned as a residual from studies of religious belief, identity, and affiliation.” This remains true to the present. Findings can be culled from research on religiosity, the “unchurched,” “nones” (those who declare no religious preference), “apostates,” and religious doubt, among others. But what these tell us about the affirmatively irreligious varies greatly and must be carefully qualified. The aim here is to provide a map of the terrain where pertinent data may be found. Following this, some reasons for the general absence of direct research on irreligion and directions for future research are considered.

“Unbelief” and “Irreligion.” Imprecise and inconsistent use of terminology is an obstacle to meaningful accumulation of knowledge on these topics. Reflecting a substantive definition of “religion,” primary interest here lies with individuals who substantially or affirmatively (1) eschew theistic, transcendent, or supernatural worldviews; (2) consider such matters unknown, unknowable, or meaningless; and (3) do not identify with “traditions” or affiliate with institutions that embrace such worldviews. “Unbelief” and “unbelievers” reflect the first two of these criteria; “irreligion” and “irreligious” reflect all three (see EUPRAXSOPHY).

As in these definitions, language and long intellectual tradition in the West frame these subjects in terms of

“religion” and its negation. It is useful to bear in mind, however, that what we wish to understand is not merely the absence or rejection of something called religion. We also wish to understand ways of conceptualizing and approaching human life that represent positive *alternatives* to those that involve theism, transcendentalism, or supernaturalism.

Religion Research. The fact that “religion” represents both a general field of inquiry concerning existential worldviews, and also very particular *kinds* of worldviews, has long been problematic. Empirical research bearing on alternatives to substantively religious approaches is largely to be found in religion research, the scientific study of religion, and the anthropology, sociology, or psychology of religion, among others. Since the primary focus in these fields is religion—variously defined—unbelief, irreligion, and related topics receive limited attention as direct subjects of inquiry. For example, the first twenty-year index (1961–81) of the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* listed only 9 of 562 titles relevant to the affirmatively irreligious, such as “apostates” or “religious defectors,” “nones” or “nonaffiliates,” the “unchurched” and “secularists.” Apart from “secularization,” no summary categories on irreligion or related concepts appeared. Rather, most of these studies appeared under categories such as “religiosity,” “religious behavior,” and “socioeconomic status and religion.”

There has been some increase in attention to topics such as “the unchurched,” “apostates” (or religious “defection,” “disaffiliation, and “switching”), “nones,” and religious doubt in the past two decades. But there is still little direct focus on the affirmatively irreligious, whether “unlabeled” or “labeled” (as atheists, agnostics, religious skeptics, rationalists, humanists, freethinkers, and so on). For example, of some 150 articles that appeared from 1989 to 2004 in the annual publication, *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, one title referred to “religious doubt” and another to “belief and unbelief.” Additionally, one longitudinal study, five articles on secularization, and twelve on religiosity provided data of widely varying relevance to irreligion. Among the latter were articles on religiosity and secularization in Europe that indicate greater attention to atheist, agnostic, scientific, and other nonreligious worldviews among European social scientists. Yet in two articles concerning future directions for religion research, no mention

is made of irreligion or any related topic.

The Unchurched and Apostates. The “unchurched” include all who report that they do not affiliate with religious institutions or have not regularly attended formal services for a period of time (such as six months or a year), regardless of beliefs. The category is therefore quite broad, including both religious believers and unbelievers. Depending upon definitions, year of study, and sampling techniques, estimates of the unchurched range from 35 to 50 percent of the US population.

Typologies of the unchurched may reflect constituent unbelievers, as in J. Russell Hale’s “true unbelievers” category (subdivided into “atheists/agnostics,” “deists/rationalists,” and “humanists/secularists”). But little attention is typically devoted to the irreligious subset. Aggregate data on the unchurched provide general indications about those who are relatively less religious (for example, with respect to geographical distribution or population changes in general religiosity over time). But they do not provide an accurate picture of the irreligious. A substantial majority of the unchurched in the United States, for example, pray, believe that Jesus Christ was the son of God, and desire religious training for their children.

Apostasy (or “religious defection” or “disaffiliation”) refers to the abandonment of prior religious beliefs, affiliation, or identity at some point in life. Loss of apostates’ religious participation is of concern to the churches they have left regardless of the stances they have adopted. With respect to understanding the irreligious, however, the relevance of data on apostates depends upon the orientation they have adopted by the time they are studied (such as unaffiliated religious belief, no stated religious preference, or affirmative irreligion). Among apostates who simply report no religious preference, several types have been identified that vary widely in religious beliefs and behavior, moral views, and lifestyles. In general, such individuals tend to be more often male than female, young, unmarried, well educated, and morally or politically liberal.

Psychologist Bruce Hunsberger and his colleagues have provided more relevant data in a series of studies of Canadian high school and college students who adopt substantially irreligious stances. They tend to measure low in authoritarianism, high in complexity of thinking, and they exhibit a more gradual process of attitude change that begins earlier in life than among religious

converts. Weak or inconsistent findings emerge concerning psychological and social adjustment (such as reported happiness, optimism, or self-esteem). Earlier findings that suggested poor relations between young apostates with no religious preference and parents or other authority figures are not borne out by Hunsberger's data on irreligious apostates.

Survey Research—of “Nones” and “Nots.” Survey research has become a valuable tool for mapping the nature, prevalence, temporal shifts, and geographical or cultural distribution of religious beliefs, affiliation, and related variables. Data on unbelief and irreligion are residuals of this work. Further, in survey research, findings follow form (of the questions put to respondents). For example, a widely cited Gallup “yes-no” measure has pegged US believers in God (or a higher power) in the mid–90 percent range for decades. But as George Bishop has illustrated, more detailed questions produce very different results.

When Gallup offered more options in three separate surveys, 8 to 10 percent of respondents said, “Don't really think there is a God,” “Don't really know what to think,” or “Don't know.” When the Barna Group put even more nuanced questions to respondents about “God” in 1994, 67 percent subscribed to a traditional theistic conception (with an additional 3 percent endorsing polytheism), 10 percent thought of God as “a state of higher consciousness that people can reach,” 8 percent endorsed “the total realization of personal human potential” (with an additional 3 percent feeling that “everyone is God”), 8 percent professed ignorance on the matter, and 2 percent said “no such thing.” Religiosity and irreligiosity are better viewed as complex and continuous rather than as unidimensional or categorical variables. This said, finer-grained methods, analysis, *and* reporting are required to more meaningfully ascertain the prevalence of substantially nonreligious worldviews.

The most prevalent survey category relevant to the irreligious is known as “nones,” a term that indicates that this is a function of survey method rather than a self-description. It refers to respondents who do not choose or volunteer a specific religious affiliation or identification, or who state “no religious preference” or “no religion.” Included are the unaffiliated religious or “unchurched believers,” atheists, and many gradations of belief and behavior in between. Data from sources such as the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey indicate that substantial percentages of

“nones” hold religious beliefs, pray, or express confidence in the value of organized religion despite their lack of religious preference. As with the unchurched, data on “nones” supply suggestive findings about the relatively less religious, but not a detailed picture of the attitudes or behavior of those who are affirmatively irreligious. In other words, “nones” include, but are not equivalent to, “nots” (the affirmatively irreligious).

In a review of research from the 1950s to 1984, Norvall Glenn found that “nones” gradually increased from roughly 2 to 7 or 8 percent of the US population. In the 1990s a more rapid rise was observed from 7–8 to 14–15 percent in several sources, such as the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and the General Social Survey (GSS). Michael Hout and Claude Fischer have offered evidence that the more recent increase may be attributable, in part, to a political alienation effect: as religious conservatism has grown in public prominence and political activity in the United States, some religious liberals may be distancing themselves from the phenomenon by relinquishing public religious identity or affiliation.

With respect to the incidence of “nots,” analysis of specific survey items on religious beliefs, behavior, and identification yields useful but inconclusive results. Based on ARIS data, Keysar, Mayer, and Kosmin found that 3 percent of Americans profess “no religion,” disagree that “God exists,” and consider themselves secular rather than religious. GSS data indicate that from 1988 to 2002, an average of 6.5 percent of Americans said that they either “don’t believe in God” or “don’t know . . . and don’t believe there is any way to find out.” The Barna Group found that in annual surveys from 1995 to 2004, 7 to 13 percent of respondents were “atheist,” “agnostic,” or held “no religious faith.” However, as many as 2 percent of these attended churches, 13 percent believed in the accuracy of the Bible, and 19 percent prayed. Work is clearly needed to consistently differentiate and accurately map the incidence of distinguishable forms of irreligion with respect to beliefs, behavior, and self-descriptions.

National surveys are perhaps not the most efficient method for studying the irreligious in depth, particularly in the United States. It is equally true, however, that organized irreligious populations (e.g., atheists, agnostics, religious skeptics, and secular humanists, among others) remain notably underresearched.

Direct studies of affirmatively irreligious populations

in the United States are so rare that one of the most frequently cited is a report on members of an atheist organization—published in 1932. The finding for which this study is most often cited is that an unreported number of respondents under twenty years of age indicated a greater incidence of parental loss than in the general population at that time. Whether this is representative of other atheist or irreligious populations is unknown. It is not supported by Altemeyer and Hunsberger's data on young irreligious apostates. (It should be noted, too, that Vetter and Green's young atheist cohort would have spent their formative years in the World War I era—a time of pervasive cultural doubt and family loss in the West. Historical and cultural factors have powerful generational effects on religious and irreligious beliefs.)

One of the most valuable populations may be American scientists (especially behavioral and social scientists). James H. LEUBA's pioneering surveys of belief and disbelief in a personal God and immortality among US scientists suggested that the scientific community holds one of the largest concentrations of substantially irreligious individuals (see SCIENTISTS, UNBELIEF AMONG). Leuba's findings in 1914 and 1933 that a majority of the American scientists he surveyed did not affirm beliefs in a personal God or immortality, and that such beliefs were substantially rarer among "elite" than "lesser" scientists, were generally replicated in the 1990s. The methodology employed, however, was admittedly narrow in scope.

Subsequent research has addressed some aspects of academicians' (ir)religiosity. In general, academicians tend to be less religious than the general American population. Those who are more eminent or productive, committed to critical thought, intellectualism, or a "scholarly perspective" of open-ended inquiry, tend to be less religious. Consonant with Leuba's findings, disciplines in which religion is studied as a natural phenomenon (e.g., the behavioral and social sciences) tend more to attract and reinforce irreligious individuals (than the natural sciences).

Many questions remain, however, about the variety, content, correlates, and consequences of scientists' worldviews. In most of this research, (ir)religiosity is narrowly defined as the presence or absence of "Judeo-Christian" beliefs and behaviors (such as ideology, experience, ritual observance, and doctrinal knowledge). There has been limited differentiation of scientists' worldviews—religious, spiritual, or irreligious. Also,

beyond general assessments of scientists' (Judeo-Christian) religiosity and selected antecedents, this population has not been closely scrutinized with respect to health, mental health, and other correlates of religious or irreligious worldviews.

International survey research suggests that culture may play a part in shaping social scientific approaches to religion and irreligion. Sources such as the World Values Survey, International Social Survey, and Pew Global Attitudes Survey consistently place the United States highest among economically developed and Western nations on measures of religious belief, behavior, and importance (with Ireland and Poland close by). Belgium, the Czech Republic, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands and Scandinavian countries are among the lowest. This may account for a greater willingness among European researchers to speak of atheist, agnostic, or "scientific" alternatives to religious worldviews.

Sociology of Religion and Irreligion. Given the theoretical importance of the concept of secularization, more direct attention to the irreligious might be expected in sociology. This has, however, proven to be the case only to a limited extent. This may be attributable to three central sociological preoccupations: functionalism, institutionalism, and—paradoxically—secularization.

There has been intermittent theoretical and empirical attention to irreligion in sociology, particularly in the mid- to late twentieth century, when the secularization of "modernizing" societies seemed inevitable and well on its way (see DEMOGRAPHY OF UNBELIEF). Despite several promising starts, however, this never developed into a continuing line of sociological inquiry. Perhaps most notable was the work of Colin Campbell and N. J. Demerath III. Both sought to frame a sociology of irreligion and offered organizational analyses of irreligious movements. The substance of Campbell's *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* was an analysis of secularist, humanist, and rationalist movements in the United States and England in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Contemporary empirical analyses of irreligion "on the ground" have been more rare. Demerath and Thiessen analyzed philosophical and organizational challenges contributing to the demise of a Wisconsin freethought community, for example.

Campbell's greater contribution was his analysis of possible reasons for sociological neglect of irreligion, which he attributed largely to the dominance of a functionalist

view of religion as a universal feature of societies. Under the functionalist view “the religious” or “the sacred” are defined so broadly that substantially nonreligious worldviews tend to be overlooked or reconceptualized in such terms. This finds expression in such concepts as “invisible religion,” “implicit religion,” or “*homo religiosus*.” Such expansion of the scope of *religion* tends to deny the epistemological legitimacy of unbelief or irreligion. In turn, this fosters a selective focus on “secular” features of society that lend themselves to analysis as though they were substantively religious (e.g., Marxism, psychoanalysis, environmentalism, or sporting events as “civil religious ceremonies”). This approach produces valuable insights, but it also tends to ignore alternative worldviews, social behavior, and affiliative patterns that are nonreligious or irreligious in meaningful senses. This tendency continues to be evident.

Paradoxically, the sociological view of the secular may discourage research on the irreligious by blurring distinctions between the mere absence of religion (as in purely economic or political activity) and deliberate avoidance or rejection of the religious, sacred, or transcendental. Concern has been, on a grand theoretical scale, with whether modernizing societies inexorably become less religious. In this context, the irreligious become a “deviant” minority footnote among many secular aspects of society.

At present, while European sociologists unavoidably attend to signs of “secularization” in their midst, resumption of an American sociology of irreligion is uncertain. Attention has been drawn to signs of religious resurgence and the challenges this presents to secularization theory. “Rational choice” and economic or market theories of religion stress the prevalence and benefits of religious belief and affiliation. While there are intermittent signs of scholarly attention to secularism, atheists, and related topics, increased focus on the “sacred” or “spiritual” has generally tended to push the “profane” into the background.

The societal and institutional focus of sociology may also work against substantial attention to the irreligious. The minority status and limited, shifting organization of the irreligious may render them too dispersed to be picked up by sociological radar. As a result, research on the irreligious tends to be displaced toward the study of individuals—in psychology. Even there, however, this

tends to be more a residual aspect of the “psychology of religion” than a direct subject of empirical inquiry.

Psychology of Religion, Religiosity, Doubt, and Unbelief. Inadequate conceptualization and empirical study of unbelief or irreligion in psychology has repeatedly been acknowledged. For example, Paul Pruyser suggested that framing the field in terms of unbelief or irreligion tends toward exclusion rather than recognition of “describable alternatives to a religious point of view.” David Wulff questioned the belief/unbelief dichotomy, suggesting that this masks a rich range of belief systems and associated behavior. He also noted that prevalent use of fixed-item questionnaires tends to mask the range of individual differences and types, suggesting greater use of idiographic techniques. This is found in Altemeyer and Hunsberger’s study of young apostates or European work on atheists and other unbelievers. These are, however, exceptions rather than the norm. Major texts in psychology and the psychology of religion typically provide few, if any, references or index entries pertaining to unbelief or the irreligious.

“Religious doubt” figured prominently in the early history of the field. However, this reflected a prevalent view of such doubt as a natural, but transient, aspect of human development that, in normal circumstances, gives way to more mature religious commitment. This perspective continues to be evident today. Indeed, most psychological research on religious doubt or apostasy has focused on adolescents and young adults. Longitudinal research provides evidence of both stability and change in religious and irreligious orientations. And yet virtually no in-depth research with substantial samples of stable, long-term irreligious adults has been done.

The greatest vein of relevant information may be found in the large and rapidly growing literature on antecedents, correlates, and consequences of religiosity. This is, however, as much a minefield as a mine for data on the irreligious. Religiosity (assessed in various ways) has been correlated with measures of mental and physical health, coping styles, social behavior, life satisfaction, altruism, authoritarianism, prejudice, and so on. Findings present a positive-trending, but complex and inconsistent, picture of the relationship between varying forms or levels of religiosity and such variables.

As in survey research on “nones,” while suggestive data about the relatively less religious can be culled from this work, relevance to the affirmatively irreligious is variable.

Samples typically represent the general population, religious affiliates, college students, or special classes of individuals (e.g., medical patients). “Nonreligious” samples or control groups are frequently tantamount to “nones,” with limited representation of substantially or affirmatively irreligious individuals. “Low religiosity” is a relative measure based on self-reports or scalar assessments of religious beliefs, behavior, and affiliation. Its meaning shifts with the nature of the underlying sample: low religiosity among religious affiliates is something apart from affirmative irreligion. Here as elsewhere, substantial samples of self-described atheists, agnostics, religious skeptics, secular humanists, or philosophical naturalists are rare. What is required is a painstaking analysis of studies and findings that are and are not pertinent to the irreligious.

The study of “mature” religion is pertinent. Gordon Allport provided an impetus for research on the topic by contrasting mature with immature forms of religiosity. These were further developed as “intrinsic” (“ends”) and “extrinsic” (“means”) religion. Batson added a third—“quest”—form of religiosity that is more searching and skeptical in nature. It is notable, however, that a parallel notion of “mature” unbelief or irreligion has never emerged. In fact, there is a noticeable tendency in some quarters to characterize secular, skeptical, scientific, naturalistic, or irreligious worldviews as puerile, myopic, pathological, or intrinsically inferior to the religious. Frank Barron suggested a distinction between “fundamentalist” and “enlightened” belief *and* unbelief. He offered a self-report scale and limited data employing it, but this has never been developed further.

Explaining the Neglect. The comparative size and cultural or political significance of the irreligious population may provide part of the explanation for empirical neglect (particularly in the United States). However, as Campbell observed, in absolute terms, the numbers of the irreligious are not negligible, whether in the United States or in countries with less religious populations.

Relatively weak organization of the irreligious may play a part. However, while specific irreligious movements and organizations have shifted over time, some have always existed since the emergence of the behavioral and social sciences (e.g., atheist, humanist, rationalist, secularist groups and organizations). They have been notably under-researched. Further, one of the largest accessible populations, that of irreligious scientists, has been studied only superficially.

Methodological lethargy may play a part. College students are quite possibly the most researched population, in part because they are conveniently at hand in the academy. Fieldwork is more demanding, especially with dispersed target populations. Yet researchers in many disciplines do go into the field or collaborate with a variety of institutions outside the academy (e.g., hospitals, clinics, churches) to study religiosity, religious organizations, and even small-scale sects, “cults,” and new religious movements. There is more involved.

Campbell has suggested that the irreligiosity of many scientists may have rendered the phenomenon “too close to see.” There are signs that naturalistic or other nonreligious worldviews are diminished or trivialized by some scholars—even “secular” ones. Boredom may be involved: newly emerging religious sects or “cults” are perhaps more novel and intriguing than “Enlightenment-style” worldviews, widely considered *passé* in “postmodern” intellectual circles. However, it has been in both periods of apparent secularization and religious resurgence that we find little direct empirical focus on the irreligious.

Cultural factors may be at work. A noticeable propensity for European researchers to focus more theoretical and empirical attention on irreligious individuals and worldviews may reflect differences in the prevalence and historical salience of such views. However, the volume and nature of empirical attention to the irreligious on both sides of the Atlantic has been limited.

Linguistic convention and intellectual heritage in the West concerning religion may tend to skew thinking about substantively nonreligious alternatives. As previously noted, there is a tendency in some quarters to define religiosity in such broad functional terms that to be human is unavoidably to be “religious.” There is a need for a revised framework and lexicon that accords *positive* epistemological legitimacy to forms of substantive irreligion and allows for finer, yet consistent, discrimination among types of worldviews and associated behavior.

What Is to Be Learned? Whatever the explanations, limited research attention to the irreligious cannot be attributed to the possession of sufficient knowledge. Innumerable questions remain wholly or partially unanswered, such as:

- Why, when religiosity is so prevalent and the psychological rewards are widely promoted, do many individuals adopt and remain committed to irreligious

worldviews?

- What distinguishable nonreligious or irreligious worldviews can be identified? What are their shared and differentiating attributes? How widely is each held?
- Is it meaningful to distinguish between “mature” or “immature,” “positive” or “negative,” “enlightened” or “fundamentalist” forms of unbelief or irreligion? If so, what are the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of such orientations (such as family background, prior religious experience, physical and mental health, personality characteristics, life satisfaction, social adjustment, or moral/ethical ideas and behavior)?
- What are the types, contents, antecedents, and correlates of scientists’ worldviews?
- What are the patterns of social behavior and organizational affiliation among the irreligious? To what extent is there evidence of reduced social need among such individuals? Alternatively, to what extent do patterns of affiliation reflect philosophy, with social needs met by involvement in groups, organizations, or affiliative formats other than explicitly religious or irreligious ones?
- Are there identifiable differences between unbelievers who affiliate with organizations pertinent to their worldviews and those who do not?

Conclusion. There is need for change in the ways we conceptualize, categorize, and study those who hold positive alternatives to religious worldviews, or who affirmatively eschew worldviews and associated institutions concerned with the sacred, divine, transcendent, or supernatural. This call has been made repeatedly since the emergence of the behavioral and social sciences. It will continue to be made given the persistence of such alternatives, the people who affirm them, and the value of better understanding both.

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