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Have faith in atheists

Those who discriminate against non-believers should know that atheists are healthy, intelligent and well adjusted



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Atheists have an image problem. According to a study led by University of Minnesota sociologist [Penny Edgell](#), published in 2006, Americans have a lower opinion of them than homosexuals, Jews, Muslims and African-Americans. They can't get elected to political office, and most people view them as outsiders. Yet the disdain is comparatively quiet and abstract, rarely erupting into palpable conflict. Part of the reason may be that nobody seems to know who atheists are, including atheists themselves.

This year's [North American Religious Identification Survey \(ARIS\)](#) reported that 2% of US adults don't believe in God, while another 10% aren't sure. Only 0.7%, however, called themselves atheist and only 0.9% agnostic. In all, 15% said they don't have a religious affiliation, and 27% that they won't have a religious funeral. Even apparent atheists, it seems, sense a stigma around the label. But is it deserved? "People who truly have no religion," says David Yamane, editor of the journal [Sociology of Religion](#), "are not very well understood."

Thanks to an emerging community of researchers focusing their attention on the non-religious, that is beginning to change. The ARIS, for instance, is based out of a new centre at Trinity College in Connecticut, the [Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture \(ISSSC\)](#), the only one of its kind in a country full of academic centres for the study of religiosity. Its fellows produce demographic studies and curriculum materials about the history and development of non-belief.

Younger researchers have begun to take a lead in the field. ISSSC fellow Ryan Cragun's dissertation identifies "risk factors" for people who are likely to leave religious communities, including relocation, education, youth and marrying outside the faith. Cragun is an atheist himself, but he doesn't advertise this among his colleagues and research subjects for fear that negative stereotypes might get the better of them. Neither does Joseph Hammer, a psychology graduate student at the University of Missouri, who has been eagerly forming networks with others studying the non-religious. "We're all looking to support each other in this," he says. Hammer is particularly concerned about discrimination that atheists and otherwise non-religious people suffer, and he has been investigating how clinical psychologists can be more attentive to their needs.

Others are driven to the field more by academic interest than personal inclination. "I had never considered myself particularly interested in religion or non-religion," recalls Lois Lee, a graduate student in sociology at the University of Cambridge who founded the [Non-Religion and Secularity Research Network](#) last year. She came to it by accident in the course of studying other things. "My historical and sociological analyses of various secular phenomena often led me to these topics," she says. She soon discovered irreligion to be "an obvious lacuna in our sociological understanding".

It should go without saying that what these researchers are finding doesn't lend much support to discrimination against non-believers. Irreligious people are, on the whole, healthy, intelligent and well adjusted. They tend to be less prejudiced and less authoritarian than fervent believers, says a study by Canadian psychologists Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer. What they lack in traditional religious belief they sometimes make up for with the occult or paranormal. But they are also more sensitive than most to intellectual consistency, according to ISSSC fellow Frank Pasquale's work on secularist groups in the Pacific Northwest since 2001.

Eager to show Americans what a less religious society can look like, Pitzer College sociologist Phil Zuckerman spent a year conducting interviews in Denmark and Sweden, two of the least religious countries in the world. In his book, *Society without God*, he portrays people living meaningful lives amid low crime, plentiful bike lanes and accessible healthcare. "Society without God is not only possible," he writes, "but can be quite civil and pleasant."

Of all that Zuckerman and his colleagues are learning, perhaps the most important lesson, for now at least, is the simplest: by and large, non-religious people are just fine.