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Finding a New Home

Agnostics May Be Less Emotionally Stable Than Atheists

Research suggests agnostics are psychologically distinct from atheists.

Posted July 17, 2022 | Reviewed by Jessica Schrader

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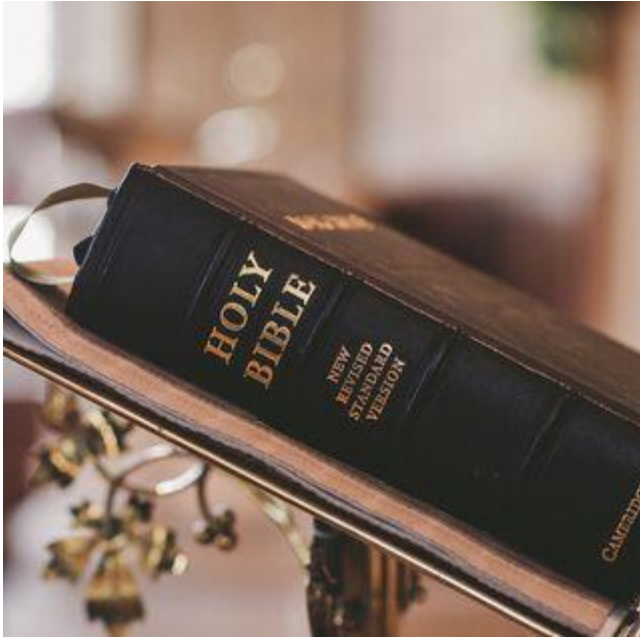
Agnostics May Be Less Emotionally Stable Than Atheists

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Key points

- A new study compared believers, atheists, and agnostics.
- Agnostics (vs. atheists) tend to be more curious about others and open to their views but also more neurotic.
- Atheists (vs. agnostics) may be more emotionally stable and rigorous thinkers but less flexible about their ideas or interested in others' views.



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Agnostic, atheist, antireligious, [spiritual but not religious](#), and non-believer are some of the terms used to refer to people who are not religious or do not believe in God.

Perhaps the most well-known of these terms are *atheist* (people who believe God does not exist) and *agnostic* (those who claim that *they* do not or *people* cannot know the truth of God's existence).

Published in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, a recent [study](#) by Karim and Saroglou suggests people who self-identify as agnostic differ in important ways from those who self-identify as atheist. The findings of this research are described below.

Investigating atheism, agnosticism, and theism

Sample: 551 Belgian residents; 70% women; average age of 37 years old (18-94 range). Most were atheists (248); the rest, Christians (178, mainly Catholic) and agnostics (125).

Measures

- Neuroticism. Assessed using the neuroticism items of the [Big Five](#) Inventory. Example: “I see myself as someone who worries a lot.”
- Prosocial orientation. Measured by assessing three indicators: [agreeableness](#) (Big Five Inventory), [sincerity](#) ([HEXACO Personality](#) Inventory-Revised-100), and *overt social curiosity* (Revised Five-Dimensional Curiosity Scale). Example (agreeableness): “I see myself as someone who is considerate and kind to almost everyone.”
- Closed- vs. open-mindedness. Three indicators were assessed: *need for closure* ([motivation](#) to seek certainty), measured using the Need for Closure Scale-brief form; *dogmatism* (unswerving certainty in one's own beliefs in the face of significant contradictory evidence), with the Dogmatism Scale; and *joyous explorative curiosity* (the joy of finding the world fascinating), with the Joyous Exploration subscale of the Revised Five-Dimensional Curiosity Scale. Here is a sample item (joyous exploration): “I enjoy learning about subjects that are unfamiliar to me.”

- Cognitive reflection. Analytic thinking was evaluated using questions from the cognitive reflection test and the revised version of the cognitive reflection test. Sample item: “If you run a race and overtake the person in second place, where do you stand?”
- Religion and spirituality. *Religiosity* was evaluated using questions about prayer frequency and the importance of God and religion in one’s life; *spirituality* was assessed with a one-item index; *religious trajectory* was determined by asking participants to select from four options (e.g., “I did not grow up in a family with religious [education](#), but today I believe in God”); and *preference for religion/spirituality* was similarly determined by asking participants to select from four options (e.g., “I self-identify as ... religious rather than spiritual”).

Agnostics compared to atheists and believers

The results showed the following:

One, agnostics, compared to Christians and atheists, showed “lower closed-mindedness in general, and dogmatism and need for closure in particular, but also higher neuroticism.”

Two, agnostics “fell midway between religious believers (high end) and atheists (low end) in current spiritual inclinations, past religious upbringing, and prosocial tendencies.” And regarding the “latter, depending on the specific construct, they seemed closer either to the more prosocial and higher in social curiosity religious believers or to the lower in agreeableness atheists.”

Three, compared to Christians, agnostics and atheists were “higher in cognitive reflection (analytic thinking) in the numerical domain and joyous explorative curiosity.”

In short, agnostics resembled atheists in terms of curiosity and logical reasoning, but were less dogmatic and more neurotic, prosocial, and spiritual.

Four, “it was the strength of atheistic self-identification but not the strength of agnostic self-identification that was positively related to analytic thinking and [emotional stability](#), but also dogmatism.”

Agnostics compared to atheists

The data showed that compared to atheists, agnostics tend to be:

- “More [anxious](#) and hesitant about the best answer to give to the fundamental existential questions.”
- “More interested in, and respectful of, people from opposite sides and their (un)beliefs and values.”
- “Less certain and more flexible regarding their own beliefs and worldviews.”
- “More religiously socialized and...more valuing (nonreligious) spirituality,” and as a result able “not to throw the baby [spirituality] out with the bathwater [religion]”.
- Less likely to consider themselves high analytic thinkers.

Furthermore, the [regression](#) analysis showed neuroticism, prosocial orientation, open-mindedness, spirituality, and religious upbringing contributed to agnostic but not atheist [identity](#). Thus, being agnostic (vs. atheist) is not just a “residue of religious education or

current spirituality but corresponds to deeper personality dispositions among certain nonbelievers.”



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Two ways of conceptualizing agnosticism

Based on the data, there are two ways of conceptualizing agnosticism:

One possibility is that some agnostics possess *most* of the above characteristics and thus have a particular *profile*.

The other possibility is that there are different *motives* for becoming agnostic—or there exists different *forms* of agnosticism. What motives/forms? For instance: neurotic agnosticism, spiritual agnosticism, religious residue agnosticism, intellectual explorative agnosticism, etc.

Of course, we should be careful not to get carried away with creating too many types of agnostics and nonbelievers. After all, agnostics and atheists are more similar to each other than to believers.

Indeed, agnostics resemble atheists in being lower in agreeableness, dogmatism, and spirituality; and higher in analytic thinking, joyous exploration, and social curiosity.

Takeaway

Compared to atheists, agnostics tend to be:

- More curious about others.
- Less certain and more flexible about their views.
- More open to other people’s ideas.
- Not as emotionally stable.
- Less rigorous in thinking and reasoning.

Nevertheless, atheists and agnostics are more similar to each other than to theists. Specifically, agnostics resemble atheists in being lower in agreeableness, dogmatism, and spirituality; and higher in analytic thinking, joyous exploration, and social curiosity.

About the Author



[Arash Emamzadeh](#) attended the [University of British Columbia in Canada](#), where he studied [genetics and psychology](#). He has also done graduate work in [clinical psychology and neuropsychology in U.S.](#)