

Chapter 4. Who are those guys?

Who are those guys? Screenplay, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*

*“Agnostic” is but “Atheist” writ respectable and “Atheist” is only “Agnostic” writ aggressive.*¹ Edward Aveling

Let us start by looking at a few statistics about American atheists. First, they are more likely to be guys, by a ratio of 70% male to 30% female.² Second, they tend to be younger, 37% of atheists are under age 30 and 73% are under 50.³ Although atheists in the general population are younger, those who join atheist organizations tend to be older.⁴ Perhaps older people have more time, perhaps years of bearing with religious falsehoods spur them to action, or perhaps young people who are working their way up the career ladder are nervous about being identified as atheists.

The reason that the percentage of male atheists is larger than the percentage of males in the general population (70% of atheists are male, while 48% of the general population is male)⁵ is open to speculation. A similar trend is found among those with no religious affiliation, 59% of “nones” are male and 41% are female.⁶ It is possible that women are more inclined to be religious because of some physical or cultural difference. It is also possible that prejudice against atheists and the somewhat negative and confrontational nature of atheism in America today makes men more likely to say they are atheists.

The racial group with the highest proportion of atheists is Asians, followed by Whites. Blacks have the lowest proportion, followed by Latinos.⁷ Oddly, 33% of the people responding they had no religion in the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008) study claim Irish ancestry, even though they comprise 10% of the U.S. population.⁸

Atheists tend to have more education and higher income than the general population.⁹ Atheists are less likely than the general population to be married, and more likely to live with a partner.¹⁰ However, if married, atheists are less likely than the religious population to divorce.¹¹ Gays and lesbians are more likely to be atheists than the heterosexual population.¹²

The states with the largest number of nonreligious people are in the East and the West. The most religious states are located in the Southeast, commonly called the “Bible belt.” Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas

and Georgia are the most religious states.¹³ Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Massachusetts, Alaska, Washington and Oregon are the least religious states.

Contrary to the saying there are no atheists in foxholes, nonbelievers comprise 21% of the active duty American military.¹⁴ However, atheists are only .08% of the federal prison population.¹⁵

Scientists seem to be the group with the largest number of atheists. A 1996 study of U.S. scientists found only 7% expressed belief in a personal god, while 72.2% reported disbelief and 20.8% reported doubt or agnosticism. The 1996 study updated one from 1914 that found a 58% rate of disbelief or doubt in the existence of god among all scientists and a 70% rate of disbelief or doubt among top tier scientists.¹⁶ Disbelief in the scientific community has a long history.

In summary of the statistical profile so far, if you find yourself a young, male, Asian, gay, scientist from the East or West coast, you will most likely be dealing with an atheist.

Looking at some of the political and social characteristics of atheists, only 13% would like to see abortion be illegal and only 14% disapprove of gays and lesbians,¹⁷ making atheists appear more liberal than the general population. Fifty percent of atheists label their political ideology “liberal,” while only 14% call themselves “conservative.”¹⁸ One study showed the greatest personality distinction between atheists and religionists is that atheists are more open to new experiences and that atheists are a bit less agreeable than religionists.¹⁹ Not surprisingly, nonreligious people are more likely to have a nonreligious spouse and a nonreligious peer group.²⁰

Keeping in mind that the sole definitive factor of atheism is having no belief in religion, generalizations can still be made. Hunsberger and Altemeyer note that atheists typically score low on a right-wing authoritarianism scale and predict atheists will have the traits listed in Figure 1.²¹ As I read the list, it seems a pretty fair description of the atheists I know.

Many atheists cite polls showing the number of people in the United States with “no religion” has increased to 16% of the U.S. population.²² Such numbers are impressive, but ignore the core statistic that self-identified atheists are only .7 to 1.6% of the population.²³ Though low, these figures still show there are more atheists in the U.S. than Muslims, and that the number of atheists is roughly equal to the number of Jews or Mormons.²⁴ And if the question is asked differently, “do you believe in god,” from

3% to 10% of respondents say “no,” depending on which survey you choose.²⁵

Part of the problem may be the negative view of atheism, polls show the general public rates atheists below Muslims in approval.²⁶ Some nonbelievers may wish to avoid the negative connotations of “atheist.” Another part may be the lack of a clear atheist identity. When I was a teen, I was unsure of the difference between an atheist and an agnostic and I applied both terms to myself indiscriminately. I knew I did not believe in a god or scripture, I was just not sure what to call myself. Later chapters contain thoughts about improving the public’s perception of atheists.

Atheists are likely to:

1. Condemn unfair and illegal abuses of power by government authorities.
2. Distrust leaders who are untrustworthy.
3. Defend constitutional guarantees of liberty, such as the Bill of Rights.
4. Punish the crime when sentencing criminals; administer justice fairly, regardless of who the criminal is.
5. Hold authorities who commit crimes and people who attack minorities responsible for their acts.
6. Not rely on physical punishment as a way to correct behavior.
7. Resist government pressure to help persecute target groups.
8. Be understanding of those who have made mistakes and suffered.
9. Have well-integrated, non-compartmentalized minds.
10. Avoid using double standards in their judgments.
11. Not be hypocrites.
12. Be unprejudiced toward racial, ethnic, nationalistic, and linguistic minorities.
13. Accept homosexuals as people like anyone else and condemn “gay-bashing.”
14. Support feminism.
15. Be less conforming to the opinions of others, and not be a yea-sayer, nor believe strongly in group cohesiveness and “group loyalty.”
16. Be aware of themselves. Realize their personal failings and be open to feedback about such failings.
17. Not trust someone merely because he tells them what they want to hear.
18. Not feel the world is a dangerous place nor be self-righteous.
19. Be non-dogmatic and non-zealous.
20. Support “liberal” or “left-wing” political parties and movements.

The religiousness continuum.

Instead of picturing exclusive blocks of religiousness, it helps me to picture the various categories of belief on a continuum. If you will imagine a line, with one end being complete atheism and the other end being radical fundamentalist religionism, you can place all the other groups along the line (see Figure 2). The scale on this

continuum runs from 0 to 100, representing the cumulative percentage of the U.S. population.

On the left side of the chart are the self-identified atheists. Following them are the “nones,” who, when added with atheists and agnostics, form about 16% of the U.S. population. Instead of labeling themselves atheists or agnostics, “nones” simply say they have no religion. “Nones” are the largest group of nonreligious people. Some “nones” believe in god, while others do not. On either side of the “nones,” I put the agnostics. “Agnostic” comes from the Greek word “gnosis,” to know. Agnostic means without knowledge, or without the ability to know. Thomas Huxley invented the term in 1869 to represent his position that it is impossible to know if god does or does not exist. I have split the agnostic group to fit like slices of bread on either side of the nones. Agnostics who lean toward atheism are on the left side of the graph next to the atheists, agnostics who lean toward religion are on the right, next to the deists.

Another 12% of the chart is covered by what ARIS 2008 calls “deists.”²⁷ Like the founding fathers, deists reject the idea of a “personal god.” They do not believe there is a bearded man in the sky who answers their prayers. They do not believe in the scriptures. I think of them as people who say, “god is nature and nature is god.” Perhaps, similar to their agnostic brothers, they feel it is easier to acknowledge the possibility of there being a god, even to call themselves Christian, and then be let alone to get on with their lives.

If you add together the atheists, agnostics, nones and deists, almost one in three Americans has no belief in a personal god, no belief in the infallibility of the

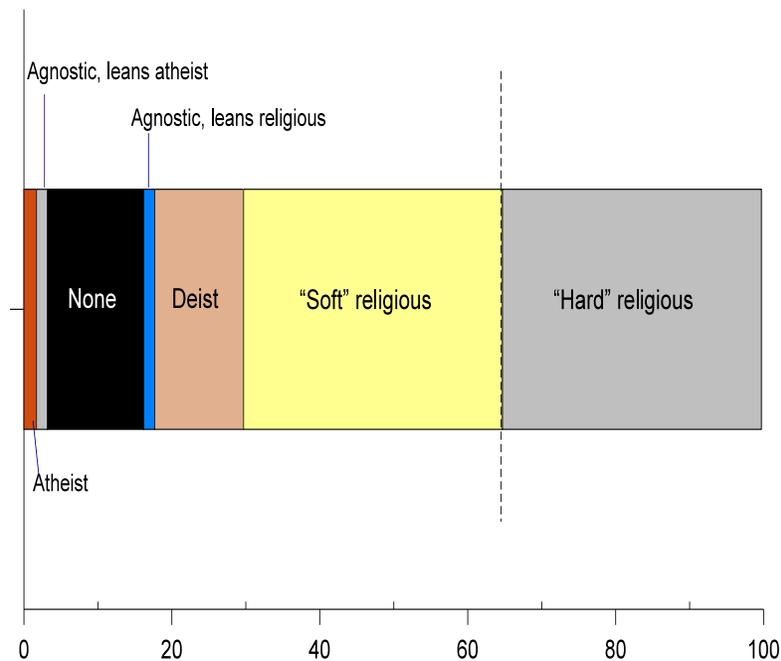


Figure 2. Religiousness on a continuum, with the scale representing the cumulative percentage of the U.S. population.

scriptures and is likely to make decisions based on facts instead of ancient traditions. Suddenly the religious block no longer looks like an inapproachable monolith.

The remaining 70% of the graph²⁸ is dedicated to those who say they believe in god. But not all people believe equally. A number of religious people reject the scriptures as the word of god and favor the general philosophy of their religion. For example, only 31% of the American people think the Bible is the word of god,²⁹ only about 42% of religious Americans report attending church over the last seven days, 36% do not belong to a church or religious organization and 70% believe that religion is losing its influence on American life.³⁰

I think it is safe to say that at least half of the religious block is “soft” in its belief (see Chapter 23 for a more extensive discussion of the depth of belief). That leaves less than 35% of the American population as strong believers—a statistic that provides

some encouraging balance to the scant percentage who call themselves atheists.

At first glance, the situation for atheists is bleak. Only a tiny minority of Americans call themselves atheists and the bulk of the American public calls themselves religionists. But on further examination a substantial number of people reject the notion of a bearded man in the sky. Looking at the ARIS 2008 data, atheists, agnostics and deists, plus those who do not know or refuse to answer, combined make up more than 30% of the U.S. population. Added to this significant number are the “soft” religionists, probably about 35% of the U.S. population, leaving only 35% or less of the population feeling strongly about religion.

Looking at these statistics takes me back to why I have written this book. First, I want to support the strong few who are willing to swim against the current and declare themselves atheists. Second, I want to encourage the agnostics and deists to closely examine their beliefs, I would like them to stop agreeing with the religionists just because it is easier and instead to acknowledge the truth, and move toward atheism.

Third, I cannot believe that 70% of Americans, or even 35% of Americans, truly believe the religious doctrine they claim to follow. Perhaps like Daniel Dennett says, they believe in belief, that is they think it would be good to believe so they say they do.³¹ Or, perhaps as I see it, they go to church to get along, to get business, to please their parents or please their spouse or because they always have. But they do not really believe. They are like the crowd in the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* (see Chapter 24). They know the emperor is naked, but the whispers have not spread and they do not yet feel comfortable acknowledging that religion is a lie. I hope to reach a few of them and to encourage them to say what they know in their hearts is true. With small steps the tide of atheism will rise and the influence of religion will decline.

The next chapter continues the look at atheists. It examines some of the labels atheists apply to themselves, some of the groups they join, and some of the symbols they have adopted.

1. Parentheticals and ellipses omitted, as quoted in *The autobiography of Charles Darwin and selected letters*, edited by Francis Darwin, 1958, at 60.

2. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Affiliation: Diverse and Dynamic*, February 2008, The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (hereinafter, Pew 2008), at 93, <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>. Luke Galen's study found that 74% were male. Galen, Luke, “Profiles of the Godless,” *Free Inquiry*,

August/September 2009, at 43,
http://www.centerforinquiry.net/uploads/attachments/Profiles_of_the_Godless_FI_AugSept_Vol_29_No_5_pps_41-45.pdf. Hunsberger and Altemeyer found that 69% were male. Hunsberger, Bruce and Altemeyer, Bob, *Atheists*, 2006, at 25.

3. Pew 2008 at 81.

4. Hunsberger and Altemeyer found an average age of 60. Hunsberger, Bruce and Altemeyer, Bob, *Atheists*, 2006, at 25. Galen found an average age of 48. Galen, Luke, “Profiles of the Godless,” *Free Inquiry*, August/September 2009, at 43,
http://www.centerforinquiry.net/uploads/attachments/Profiles_of_the_Godless_FI_AugSept_Vol_29_No_5_pps_41-45.pdf

5. Id.

6. Id at 93. Another large survey shows similar results, with 60% of nones being male and 40% being female. Kosmin, Barry, and Keysar, Ariela, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population, A Report Based on the American Religious Identification Survey 2008*, 2008, http://www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org/reports/NONES_08.pdf

7. Pew 2008 at 75.

8. “People with ‘no religion’ gain on major denominations,” *USA Today*, September 22, 2009,
http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-09-22-no-religion_N.htm

9. Pew 2008 at 78, 84.

10. Id at 72.

11. “U.S. divorce rates for various faith groups, age groups, & geographic areas,” *Religious Tolerance .org*, (reporting on a no longer available survey from Barna Research Group), July 20, 2009, http://www.religioustolerance.org/chr_dira.htm

12. “Spiritual Profile of Homosexual Adults Provides Surprising Insights,” *Barna Group*, June 20, 2009,
<http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/13-culture/282-spiritual-profile-of-homosexual-adults-provides-surprising-insights?q=homosexual>

13. “State of the States: Importance of Religion,” *Gallup News*, January 28, 2009,
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/114022/state-states-importance-religion.aspx>

14. Segal, David and Wechsler Segal, Mady, *Population Bulletin: America’s Military Population*, December 2004, at 25, <http://www.prb.org/Source/ACF1396.pdf>; see also, “Military Chaplain Support: Demographics study of Defense Manpower Data Agency data,” *Military Association of Atheists & Freethinkers*, February 2010,
<http://www.maaf.info/resources/MAAF%20DoD%20Demo%202010.pdf>

15. Religious Affiliations of Inmates, data as of January 30, 2010, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons, data provided in response to a freedom of information act request by the author. In March, 1997, a freedom of information act request by Rod Swift resulted in a response of .2% of federal prison inmates identified as atheist. "The results of the Christians vs. atheists in prison investigation," Holysmoke.org, undated, <http://www.holysmoke.org/icr-pri.htm>. For additional discussion of this topic, see Chapter 7.
16. "Leading scientists still reject God," *Nature*, Vol. 394, No. 6691, 1998, at 313, <http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/news/file002.html>
17. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant*, June 2008 (hereinafter Pew Social 2008), at 90, 92. <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>
18. Pew Social 2008 at 83.
19. Galen, Luke, "Profiles of the Godless," *Free Inquiry*, August/September 2009, at 42, http://www.centerforinquiry.net/uploads/attachments/Profiles_of_the_Godless_FI_AugSept_Vol_29_No_5_pps_41-45.pdf
20. Baker, Joseph and Smith, Buster, "The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated," *Social Forces* 87(3), March 2009, http://www.isreligion.org/publications/recent/documents/smith_nones.pdf
21. From Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Nonbelievers* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006), p. 110. Copyright © 2006 by the estate of Bruce E. Hunsberger and by Bob Altemeyer. All rights reserved. Used with permission of the publisher; www.prometheusbooks.com.
22. The Pew 2008 poll puts atheists at 1.6%, but "unaffiliated" at 16.1%. ARIS 2008 puts "nones" at 15% of the population.
23. Pew 2008 reports 1.6% (Pew 2008 at 5), while ARIS 2008 comes up with a figure less than half that, .7% (ARIS 2008 at 5).
24. Pew 2008 at 5.
25. Pew 2008 finds 5% of Americans do not believe in god, <http://pewforum.org/Not-All-Nonbelievers-Call-Themselves-Atheists.aspx>; a Harris poll found that 10% did not believe in god and 9% were not sure; "More Americans Believe in the Devil, Hell and Angels than in Darwin's Theory of Evolution," December 10, 2008, <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/Harris-Interactive-Poll-Research-Religious-Beliefs-2008-12.pdf>;
26. See Chapter 25.
27. ARIS 2008 at 8.

28. The numbers on the graph do not equal a perfect 100% because some survey respondents refused to answer the question or responded, "I don't know." This number was 5.2% in ARIS 2008 and .8% in Pew 2008.

29. "One-Third of Americans Believe the Bible is Literally True," Gallup News, May 25, 2007, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/27682/onethird-americans-believe-bible-literally-true.aspx>

30. "Religion," Gallup News, undated, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1690/Religion.aspx>

31. Dennett, Daniel, *Breaking the Spell*, 2006, at 200-246.