



In Godlessness We Distrust: Using Social Psychology to Solve the Puzzle of Anti-atheist Prejudice

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Abstract

Most people believe in a god of some sort. Nonetheless, there are hundreds of millions of atheists in the world, and they face considerable discrimination and prejudice. This is a puzzling form of prejudice: Atheists do not form a coherent group, they are individually inconspicuous, and they are not, in general, oppositional or threatening. Recent research in social, evolutionary, and cultural psychology, however, offers suggestions for solving the puzzle of anti-atheist prejudice, in terms of both uncovering its psychological causes and also suggesting interventions for reducing it. Antipathy towards atheists derives specifically from moral distrust – to many people, belief in a watchful, moralizing god is seen as a uniquely powerful and perhaps necessary component of morality. Without religious belief, atheists are viewed as moral wildcards who cannot be trusted. This unique basis in turn implies specific ways in which distrust of atheists might be ameliorated.

Article 1, Section 4 of the Texas Constitution states that

“No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this state nor shall any one ever be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, *provided he [sic] acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being*”

In total, language banning atheists from office currently exists in six US state constitutions. Far from being anachronistic relics of bygone religious prejudices, current bans on atheists reflect attitudes that are widespread today.

Anti-atheist Prejudice

To gauge cultural tolerance, Gallup routinely polls people about whether they would vote for a well-qualified member of their own preferred political party if the candidate happened to belong to various groups. Most prejudices – at least as indexed by this sort of poll – declined in recent decades. Atheists, however, remain an exception to this trend (Edgell, Gerteis & Hartmann, 2006). People were more than 200% as likely to vote for a gay candidate in 1999 than in 1978, for example, but atheists experienced only an 8% boost in support during the same time span. As a result, a 2007 Gallup poll found that only atheists (45%) could not garner a majority vote, and support for atheist candidates trailed well behind support for gay (55%), elderly (57%), thrice married (67%), Mormon (72%), Hispanic (87%), female (88%), Jewish (92%), African American (94%), and Catholic (95%) candidates.

Edgell and colleagues (2006) conducted additional large-scale polls and found similar patterns outside of politics. For example, when asked which groups of people do not at all share one's own vision of America, 40% of respondents chose atheists. This made atheists the least accepted group, followed distantly by Muslims (26%) and gays (23%). Exclusion of atheists is also evident in more intimate domains, as nearly half (48%) of participants would

disapprove of their child marrying an atheist, making atheists once again the least accepted group by a wide margin. Only Muslims and African Americans were in the same ballpark on this measure, scoring 34% and 27% disapproval ratings, respectively. Aside from skepticism regarding atheists' suitability as marriage partners, they are also viewed as questionable parents. A 2002 Pew poll found that 60% of Americans feel that a religious upbringing plants the early seeds for a moral life, and nearly half responded that belief in a god is a necessary prerequisite for morality.

Edgell and colleagues (2006, p. 211) concluded, "atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups". And atheists actually feel this exclusion: In a nationally representative sample, nearly half of the atheists polled reported recent experiences of prejudice (Hammer, Cragun, Hwang & Smith, 2012). This antipathy appears to truly center on atheists' religious disbelief, rather than on a kneejerk reaction to the term "atheist" (which might itself be viewed negatively due to Cold War era associations with the godless communists), as merely finding out that an individual disbelieves in the existence of God or gods is sufficient to trigger prejudice (Swan & Heesacker, 2012). Can current research in social psychology illuminate the causes of anti-atheist prejudice?

The Puzzle of Anti-atheist Prejudice

Atheists are not conspicuous, cohesive, homogenous (e.g., Norenzayan & Gervais, 2013), or powerful, and knowing that someone is an atheist tells you little about what else they might be like. As Ricky Gervais (December 22, 2010) puts it, "Saying atheism is a belief system is like saying not going skiing is a hobby". Given these peculiar properties of atheists, how might different social psychological models explain anti-atheist prejudice?

First, prejudice has historically been viewed as unidimensional. We like folks who seem in some way similar to us, and we dislike folks who seem dissimilar in some regard (Brewer & Brown, 1998 review this approach). Superficially, this framework might make some sense of anti-atheist prejudice. After all, most people on earth are religious (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2004), and it would not be terribly surprising if Christian majorities in the US disliked people who are not religious. Such an approach would predict broad and domain-general antipathy towards atheists among religious people.

Second, many approaches stress the role of intergroup conflict in prejudice (e.g., Allport, 1954; Esses, Jackson, Dovidio & Hodson, 2005). Different groups often find themselves in conflict over either tangible (e.g., jobs) or intangible – but nonetheless psychologically relevant – resources (e.g., status and values). As religions serve as both belief systems and potent reminders of group identity (Hunsberger & Jackson, 2005; Ysseldyk, Matheson & Anisman, 2010), this view might make sense of anti-atheist prejudice, a phenomenon classically characterized by negative evaluations of atheists by people who belong to various religious groups (e.g., Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). A conflict-based approach to anti-atheist prejudice specifically predicts that anti-atheist prejudice 1) manifests only among individuals who belong to a specifically religious ingroup in conflict with atheists, 2) is associated with symmetrical prejudice against religionists among atheists, and 3) consistent with other types of intergroup rivalry and conflict, is expressed in terms of fear, anxiety, or perceived lack of warmth (see, e.g., Esses, et al., 2005).

Third, it is possible that atheists are seen to pose a more specific threat to ingroup values. People tend to view their ingroups in moralistic terms (e.g., Leach, Ellemers & Barreto, 2007), and religious majorities might view atheists as directly threatening to their own perceived group morality. After all, a key component of the atheist worldview is that religions are not true – a message likely threatening to any ingroup that coheres around a religious worldview. This approach, like the aforementioned frameworks, predicts that

religious groups would dislike atheists. However, it goes further and predicts that, since atheists threaten the moral basis of the ingroup, antipathy towards atheists should be reflected in judgments of morality, rather than general antipathy. Also, like intergroup conflict approaches, it predicts that anti-atheist prejudice should be exclusive to individuals who actually identify with a religious ingroup.

Finally, anti-atheist prejudice might have more to do with the contents of the stereotypes surrounding atheists. The stereotype content model and its subsequent refinements (e.g., Cuddy, Fiske & Glick, 2007; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002) partition perceptions of outgroups into perceived warmth and perceived competence. Different combinations of warmth and competence trigger specific reactions. For example, participants tend to pity folks perceived to be warm but not competent (e.g., people with mental handicaps), but envy folks perceived to be competent but not warm (e.g., rich people; Cuddy, et al., 2007). In addition, the warmth dimension indexes both perceived friendliness and also a moralistic element (e.g., Wojciszke, 1994). Perhaps some unique combination of perceived warmth and competence might explain why atheists routinely score at the bottom of cultural acceptance polls. According to this approach, any groups seen as comparably warm and competent, relative to atheists, should fare similarly on acceptance polls.

All four of these approaches have yielded impressive insights regarding the nature of prejudice and stereotyping. All might be able to explain some facets of anti-atheist prejudice, and all make specific, testable predictions about the expression of anti-atheist prejudice. In subsequent sections, these predictions will be evaluated against available evidence. To foreshadow, recent research suggests that none of these frameworks sufficiently explains the details of anti-atheist prejudice. Instead, in order to understand anti-atheist prejudice, one needs to first take a deeper look at both the evolutionary bases of distinct prejudices and also the cultural evolutionary functions of religious belief.

The Evolution of Prejudices

Building on the core insight that stereotyping and prejudice against different targets might be expressed in specific and nuanced ways, researchers began to consider prejudice and stereotyping in light of evolutionary theory. In this view, in order to understand given forms of stigma, researchers need to first consider the distinct adaptive goals that organisms have and the possible ways that different individuals and groups might threaten those goals (Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Schaller & Neuberg, 2012). Human sociality and group living provide a bevy of benefits, but also impose a number of potential costs, leading people to see others as both potential resources and potential threats in distinct domains. Importantly, an evolutionary perspective views prejudice as potentially arising both at the intergroup level (like conflict models) and also at the level of inferences about individuals. For instance, group living can provide cooperative support, but also gives individuals increased exposure to transmittable pathogens. As a result, people have developed a number of specific psychological and behavioral adaptations for negotiating potential disease risks, including avoidance of individuals who are heuristically judged to be more likely carriers of exotic pathogens (e.g., Schaller, 2011; Schaller & Park, 2011). In this case, prejudicial reactions arise not from any perceived group-level attributes (if indeed “people displaying heuristic disease cues” can even be sensibly thought of as a group) or intergroup conflict but rather from the inferences people make about specific individual others.

People have different distinct reactions to different individuals and groups, commensurate with the adaptive threats that the individuals or groups are seen to pose (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Schaller & Neuberg, 2012). It might make sense to dub these various reactions

“prejudice”, broadly construed, but such an approach likely obscures the nuanced reactions that actually characterize peoples’ reactions to others (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Researchers might make more headway by instead focusing on the specific threats that given individuals or groups are perceived to pose and forming hypotheses about potential reactions to those individuals or groups (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Schaller & Neuberg, 2012). In this light, what specific threat are atheists perceived to pose? The answer to this question may lie in the psychological, cultural, and evolutionary functions of religious belief.

Watchful Gods and the Cultural Evolution of Religions

Most people have believed in the existence of gods of one sort or another. Though debate surrounds the possible adaptive functions of religion, and the related question of whether the capacity for religious cognition is a byproduct or an adaptation (see, e.g., Kirkpatrick, 2005), many researchers now view religions as “social glue” that can bind communities together, and the promotion of ingroup cooperation might be a central adaptive challenge that religions helped solve at the cultural level (e.g., Gervais & Norenzayan, in press ; Johnson & Krueger, 2004; Norenzayan & Gervais, 2012; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Sosis & Alcorta, 2003).

People represent their gods as intentional agents with whom they can interact (e.g., Atran & Norenzayan, 2004; Gervais, in press). As a result, belief in morally concerned gods is psychologically similar to the perceived presence of other humans (e.g., Dijksterhuis, Preston, Wegner & Aarts, 2008; Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012a). Just as people are more cooperative when they feel like other people are watching (e.g., Bateson, Nettle & Roberts, 2006; Haley & Fessler, 2005), they might also behave better when they think about a watchful, moralizing god. In the lab, reminders of gods, religion, and novel supernatural agents promote a variety of prosocial and cooperative ends (e.g., Bering, McLeod & Shackelford, 2005; Piazza, Bering & Ingram, 2011; Pichon, Boccato & Saroglou, 2007; Randolph-Seng & Nielsen, 2007; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007). Outside the lab, belief in moralizing gods predicts cooperative success across world cultures (e.g., Henrich, et al., 2010; Roes & Raymond, 2003). One mechanism that could explain these patterns is that belief in – and reminders of – gods makes people feel that their behavior is being monitored, even when no other people are around. If people feel like a god is watching, they may inhibit their selfish urges.

Belief in watchful, moralizing gods may produce the same behavioral consequences as does a credible threat of corporeal punishment among believers, but not everybody believes that any gods are watching or even real. Thus, to a believer, atheists might be perceived as a potential cooperative threat. In other words, cooperative systems based in part on religious prosociality could lead people to use the religious beliefs of others as cues to who can be trusted. Therefore, to the extent that people use religiosity as a cue of trustworthiness (e.g., Tan & Vogel, 2008), anti-atheist prejudice should be primarily evident in the domain of trust, rather than in general antipathy or other specific appraisals.

The Bad News for Atheists: Acute Distrust

Is anti-atheist prejudice primarily about distrust? One particularly useful way to answer this question is to compare attitudes to atheists with attitudes towards groups that share some similarities with atheists. In many ways, comparing attitudes to atheists to attitudes to gays is an ideal comparison. Both atheists and gays have long scored near the bottom of large-scale cultural acceptance polls (e.g., Edgell, et al., 2006) and are especially disliked by certain religious groups. In addition, both atheism and homosexuality are concealable stigmas (e.g., Goffman, 1963), and neither irreligion nor sexual orientation can be easily inferred based on

a quick glance. Although perceptions of atheists and gays share a number of similarities, an evolutionary approach to prejudice predicts distinct profiles for both prejudices. Previous research indicates that disgust is a primary driver of antigay prejudice (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Inbar, Pizarro, Knobe & Bloom, 2009), but this paper's framework predicts instead that distrust would be more central to anti-atheist prejudice. Supporting this hypothesis, one study exploring disgust and distrust for both atheists and gays among a large and broadly representative sample of Americans (Gervais, Shariff & Norenzayan, 2011, Study 1) found a striking divergence. Participants rated gay men as disgusting, but more or less trustworthy. In contrast, participants rated atheists as untrustworthy, but not particularly disgusting. Subsequent analyses revealed that distrust was a potent mediator of the relationship between belief in God and anti-atheist prejudice, but not antigay prejudice. In addition, and contrary to the predictions made by a framework focused on intergroup conflict or perceived ingroup morality (e.g., Leach, et al., 2007), distrust of atheists was even evident among religiously unaffiliated participants (that is, people who believe in God, but do not belong to a specific religious ingroup). This study highlights the centrality of distrust to anti-atheist prejudice, but faces a number of challenges. First, it relied on a self-report measure of people's reactions to both targets. Second, it targeted a highly religious participant pool and might therefore have ended up with inflated estimates of atheist distrust. Subsequent studies, however, find convergent results when 1) utilizing an indirect measure of distrust and 2) sampling participants from a university setting in Vancouver, Canada, which is perhaps the most liberal and secular location in North America.

To create an indirect measure of distrust, I turned to classic work on the representativeness heuristic (Tversky & Kahnemann, 1983). In a paradigmatic example, participants are given a description of Linda, a single, politically active, educated woman and asked whether it is more probable that she is 1) a bank teller or 2) a bank teller who is active in the feminist movement. Given these options, most participants choose Option 2, even though it is necessarily less probable, assuming that there are any nonfeminist bank tellers in the world. People commit this conjunction fallacy because, at an intuitive level, the description of Linda just *sounds* like a description of an active feminist. If a different group membership were offered that did not seem to fit the description – say if Option 2 was “Linda is a bank teller who is also a big game hunter” – then people would likely not be intuitively led astray. In other words, the proportion of people who pick Option 2 can be used to form inferences about the degree to which people intuitively think that a given description characterizes a given group.

Across a number of studies (Gervais, et al., 2011, Studies 2–4), my colleagues and I capitalized on this finding by giving participants the following description of an untrustworthy individual:

Richard¹ is 31 years old. On his way to work one day, he accidentally backed his car into a parked van. Because pedestrians were watching, he got out of his car. He pretended to write down his insurance information. He then tucked the blank note into the van's window before getting back into his car and driving away. Later the same day, Richard found a wallet on the sidewalk. Nobody was looking, so he took all of the money out of the wallet. He then threw the wallet in a trash can.

After reading this description, participants were asked whether it is more probable that Richard is either 1) a teacher or 2) a teacher and [insert group]. By varying the target groups to which Richard might belong to between subjects, we were able to indirectly assess the degree to which participants viewed the description of an untrustworthy individual as representative of the group in question. In the first study (Gervais, et al., 2011, Study 2), we included two targets to ensure that participants' responses could distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy targets. Participants were incredibly unlikely to commit the

conjunction fallacy when Option 2 provided a majority religious ingroup target (e.g., Richard could be a Christian), but quite likely to commit the conjunction fallacy when Option 2 included an unambiguously untrustworthy target (Richard might have also been a rapist). We included the rapist target to, in a sense, calibrate the measure and provide a benchmark for what a whole lot of distrust might look like. In this study, we also had two additional conditions that included a potential atheist target and a potential Muslim target. Conjunction errors did not significantly differ between the Christian target and the Muslim target, indicating that participants did not intuitively judge the description representative of religious targets, be they Christian or Muslim. The crucial test then was for atheists: Would they be perceived more like Christians and Muslims or more like rapists? Atheists scored significantly higher than both Christians and Muslims, but did not significantly differ from rapists.

Subsequent studies provided additional evidence of specificity. First, participants once again rated a description of an untrustworthy individual as representative of atheists, but did not rate a description of a generally unpleasant target as representative of atheists (Gervais et al., 2011, Study 3). Second, both feminists and Jewish people were perceived to be similar to atheists in terms of both warmth and competence. However, conjunction errors given a “distrust” description were again high for a potential atheist target, but low for both feminist and Jewish targets (Gervais, et al., 2011, Study 4). Combined, these studies indirectly revealed more distrust of atheists than of Christians, Muslims, gay men, feminists, and Jewish people (Figure 1). Additionally, belief in God was a stronger predictor of atheist distrust than of generally negative perceptions of atheists (Gervais, et al., 2011, Study 5) – an effect not explained by factors typically related to outgroup derogation and intergroup conflict, such as authoritarian attitudes. Across studies, belief in God was a persistent positive predictor of distrust of atheists, and, crucially, this relationship was fully and significantly mediated by people’s supernatural monitoring concerns (Gervais, et al., 2011, Study 4). People who feel that belief in a watchful god enables cooperative behavior strongly distrust atheists.

Evaluating alternative explanations

How well do general ingroup–outgroup dynamics, intergroup conflict, perceived ingroup morality, and stereotype content explain the details of anti-atheist prejudice? These approaches do not obviously predict that Muslim, Jewish, and gay targets should be trusted

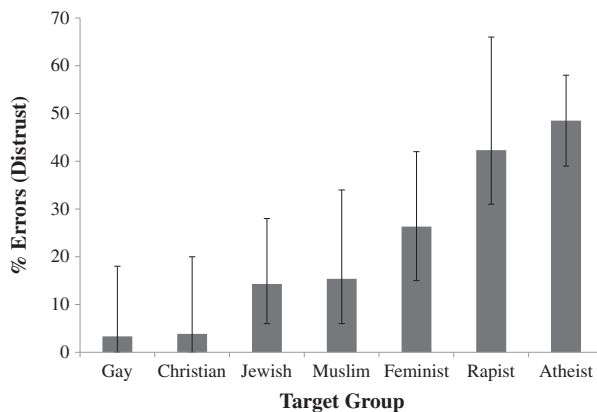


Figure 1 Indirectly measuring distrust: The percentage of conjunction errors produced for different targets, given a description of an untrustworthy individual (from Gervais, et al., 2011, Studies 2–4). Atheists produced significantly more conjunction errors than any group except rapists. Error bars represent 95% CIs.

as much as Christians by primarily Christian samples. Further, none of these approaches predict that even religiously unaffiliated believers (that is, people who believe in a god but do not belong to a specific religious ingroup) would nonetheless distrust atheists. Also of interest, intergroup approaches to prejudice typically find relatively symmetrical biases. Yet anti-atheist prejudice is an asymmetrical phenomenon: Atheists typically exhibit greatly attenuated or nonexistent bias against religious believers (e.g., Gervais, et al., 2011; Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999). Intergroup approaches are implicitly predicated on the assumption that atheists constitute a group that can be in conflict with any given religious group. Yet atheists themselves do not consistently perceive themselves as a group (e.g., Jackson & Hunsberger, 1999; Ysseldyk, Haslam, Matheson & Anisman, 2012), and atheists are not a particularly visible or coherent group, if they count as a meaningful group at all. Indeed, reactions to atheists are similar whether participants judge atheists as a group or whether they are asked to simply judge one individual who does not believe in a god – that is, when an atheist group identity is not implied (Swan & Heesacker, 2012). While intergroup approaches somewhat obscure the nuanced reactions people have towards atheists, it would be well worth pursuing research avenues that more directly compare intergroup conflict and individual distrust mechanisms. It is especially interesting to speculate about intergroup conflict dynamics as atheists begin to cohere into more visible groups, thus potentially creating the sorts of intergroup visibility and conflict that so often drive prejudice. Beyond intergroup approaches, stereotype content also failed to predict many of the present findings. Jewish people and feminists were indistinguishable from atheists in terms of perceived warmth and competence, yet participants only judged a description of an untrustworthy freeloader to be representative of atheists. Finally, the present framework – but none of the alternatives considered – predicted the finding that endorsement of the cooperative benefits of supernatural monitoring fully mediates the relationship between belief in God and atheist distrust (Gervais, et al., 2011, Study 4).

Belief in a morally concerned god appears instrumental in distrust of atheists. At the same time, other factors likely contribute. For example, shared norms play a key role in promoting cooperation (e.g., Henrich, et al., 2010), and people might have difficulty inferring atheists' norms. An observer with some familiarity with a given religious outgroup might be able to infer some of their norms (e.g., if I know that someone is an observant Jew or Hindu, I can hazard a guess at many of their moral views). Atheists, being defined solely by one thing they do not believe, may simply be viewed as wildcards. Without some basis to infer atheist norms, people may treat them with suspicion. Similar effects may also be evident in attitudes towards other groups defined solely by their lack of adherence to a broad set of norms (e.g., anarchists, apolitical individuals, etc.).

The Good News for Atheists: Distrust of Atheists Is Surprisingly Malleable

Believers consistently distrust atheists. However, atheists themselves are not particularly noticeable on an individual or collective level. Because people do not know much about atheists, opinions about atheists might be relatively malleable.

Trust in numbers

Consider a brief thought experiment: What would happen if you took 10 million atheists and put them together in a small, cold place? Would chaos erupt, as these untrustworthy people repeatedly rip each other off, renege on cooperative commitments, and free ride on the hard work of others? Arguably, that thought experiment describes many modern Scandinavian countries. Denmark and Sweden combined boast around 15 million inhabitants, and a 2005 Eurobarometer poll indicated that fewer than one in three Danes

and Swedes believe in a god. Yet these are perhaps the two most cooperative, peaceful, and stable large-scale societies in the history of humanity (e.g., Zuckerman, 2008).

Globally, atheists are surprisingly common. According to a comprehensive 2007 estimate, there are around 700 million atheists in the world (Zuckerman, 2007), making them the fourth largest religious group² in the world behind only Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. If atheists were even remotely as untrustworthy as they are perceived to be, then one might expect that nearly a billion of them would leave chaotic and obvious evidence of their presence. Yet atheists go largely unnoticed.

We thus face three conflicting notions: 1) atheists cannot be trusted, 2) atheists go unnoticed, and 3) atheists are numerous. Perhaps information about the last notion might affect people's opinions on the first. With this in mind, it is possible that informing people that atheists are quite common might actually *reduce* distrust of atheists. This prediction deviates from previous sociological work that typically finds a positive association between, for example, prejudice against racial minorities and the prevalence of those minorities (e.g., Quillian, 1996; Taylor, 1998). But racial prejudice targets an identifiable outgroup that is primarily viewed with fear, driven by perceived threats to safety (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). Small wonder that increased prevalence of an identifiable and feared group might lead them to be perceived as even more threatening. However, things are different for atheists. If they go unnoticed, then information about their prevalence may undermine a perception that they cannot be trusted.

Four studies support the existence of a negative relationship between the actual and implied prevalence of atheists and people's distrust of atheists (Gervais, 2011). In a country-by-country analysis of atheist distrust in 54 nations around the world, atheist distrust among believers was negatively related to the actual prevalence of atheists in these countries, controlling for relevant sociodemographic measures (Study 1). Turning from the international to individual level of analysis, distrust of atheists was less pronounced among individuals who *perceive* atheists to be more prevalent in their area (Study 2). This relationship was causal in nature, as reminders of atheist prevalence reduced distrust of atheists in both explicit and implicit measures (Studies 3 and 4). Across studies, effects appeared to be distinct from well-known contact effects (e.g., Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Providing accurate information about the actual prevalence of atheists might be one purely informational intervention to reduce distrust of atheists. Recent advertising campaigns have sprung up, highlighting the surprising prevalence of atheists (e.g., Goodstein, 2009, April 27). To the extent that these campaigns actually influence people's perceptions of atheist prevalence, they might help reduce anti-atheist prejudice. However, the success of such campaigns will likely hinge on them not triggering a backlash in which atheists are perceived as being confrontational or pushy with their disbelief.³

Trust in science

Religious belief is a potent predictor of anti-atheist prejudice. To the extent that belief contributes to distrust of atheists, factors that reduce religious belief should also reduce prejudice against atheists. Among other things, religion provides a source of perceived meaning and coherence in the world. Alternative sources of meaning and coherence may undermine the motivation that promotes religiosity and in turn reduce anti-atheist prejudice. Consistent with this hypothesis, there is an inherent psychological tension between science and religion (Preston & Epley, 2009), and reading scientific arguments can decrease implicit and explicit religiosity (Shariff, Cohen & Norenzayan, 2008). Interestingly, reading about evolution can also reduce anti-atheist prejudice (Magee & Hardin, 2010). Making nonreligious sources of meaning and coherence salient can increase tolerance of atheists.

Trust in government

To many believers, since atheists do not believe that a watchful god is monitoring their behavior, they must therefore lack an external incentive for moral conduct. However, gods are not the only ones watching. In many societies, secular authorities now serve as potent enforcers of cooperative norms. Indeed, as countries develop more effective secular institutions, religion tends to fade (e.g., Norris & Inglehart, 2004), and in the lab, reminders of gods and governments produce similar consequences (e.g., Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan & Laurin, 2008; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007).

Three experiments also revealed that experimentally priming secular authority concepts reduces believers' distrust of atheists (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012b). Participants watching a police report exhibited reduced distrust of atheists relative to participants watching a tourism report. In addition, subtly primed (e.g., Srull & Wyer, 1979) secular authority concepts also decreased distrust of atheists. Crucially, these secular authority primes did not affect general attitudes towards other outgroups (Jewish people, Muslims, and gays), specific disgust-based antigay prejudice, or distrust of outgroups in general. Effects extend from the lab to the broader world, as political intolerance of atheists is reduced in countries with more effective secular rule of law (Norenzayan & Gervais,). Supernatural monitoring concerns engender distrust of atheists, but reminders of secular monitoring reduce this distrust.

People tend to trust individuals who they perceive as having an external incentive for cooperative behavior. This external incentive can be earthly or supernatural in nature, but people distrust those individuals who are seen to act without concern for external incentives. This implies that, for example, an anarchist who does not perceive the legitimacy of governments might be distrusted in the absence of cues that he or she believes in divine retribution for misdeeds.

Coda

Anti-atheist prejudice is initially puzzling, from the perspective of many social psychological approaches to prejudice. However, an evolutionary framework for understanding prejudice, combined with a cultural evolutionary approach to religious prosociality, suggests that distrust lies at the heart of anti-atheist prejudice. Atheists, more so than many outgroups, are targets of acute and specific distrust – an effect not easily predicted by general approaches to prejudice and stereotyping. Instead, this work emphasizes the utility of moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to prejudice and instead considering the specific adaptive threats that specific outgroups are perceived to pose. Such an approach even offers suggestions for tailoring specific interventions for specific prejudices (e.g., Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012b; Huang, Sedlovskaya, Ackerman & Bargh, 2011).

The study of atheism and people's reactions to atheism has the potential to illuminate many classic topics in social psychology, as well as contemporary discussions regarding human culture and evolution. Hopefully, future research efforts will continue to bring big-picture questions about the cognitive foundations of religious belief and disbelief (e.g., Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012c; Norenzayan, Gervais & Trzesniewski, 2012; Pennycook, Cheyne, Seli, Koehler & Fugelsang, 2012; Shenhav, Rand & Greene, 2012), the nature of human culture (e.g., Boyd, Richerson & Henrich, 2011), and the evolutionary bases of human cooperation and morality (e.g., Chudek & Henrich, 2011; Haidt, 2007) under the expanding purview of social psychology.

Short Biography

Will Gervais is an Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Kentucky. His interests lie at the theoretical intersection of evolution, culture, and cognition. Most of his

research focuses on trying to understand the cognitive, cultural, and evolutionary causes and consequences of supernatural belief and disbelief. Basically, he is trying to figure out why some folks are religious and other folks are not, as well as the effects this difference has on their lives and cultures. His research has appeared in journals like *Science*, *Psychological Science*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *PLoS ONE*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, and *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. Will grew up in the mountains of Colorado and holds a BS from the University of Denver along with both an MA and a PhD from the University of British Columbia in drizzly Vancouver, Canada.

Endnotes

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¹ Across studies, we varied the name of the protagonist so that participants also read identical descriptions of “Sarah” and “a man”.

² With the obvious caveats that atheists are not religious and may not even be meaningfully considered a group

³ An additional condition, which unfortunately did not make the final cut of Study 4, found that reading popular atheist rhetoric (Dawkins, 2006) did not lead people to perceive atheists as more trustworthy.

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