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Socio-political thoughts and impact of atheism on contemporary Western society

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Abstract

This article deals with the emergence of atheist identity and its classification as implicit and explicit atheism. Implicit atheism manifests itself in the absence of theistic faith without consciously rejecting it, whereas overt atheism is a conscious rejection of all theistic beliefs. The author notes that the social and political impact of atheism on Western society in our days largely go unnoticed and gives rise to various disputes. Atheism in modern Western societies is still stigmatized, and many non-believers are still hesitant to confess their atheism. Instead of the term "atheism" people prefer to use concepts "agnostic" or "non-religious". However, all those who do not believe in God are actually atheists, implicit or explicit. Despite the political, cultural and social context, gender also plays an important role in building identity, for example, men tend to be less religious than women. Existing research shows that the role of gender in religious views is due to normative genetic roles in society. This article seeks to examine socio-political thoughts on atheism in contemporary western societies as well as the concept of atheism in social identity construction in these societies. The author concludes that the meaning of life is closely associated with the existence of God, and so are the concepts of humanity, life and death.

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Keywords

Atheistic identity, social identity, implicit and explicit atheism, faith.

Introduction

Atheism is as old as theism, either being the opposites. However, for thousands of years blatant and open unbelief in God or atheism has been considered distasteful and offensive. For example, Sir Charles Wolseley while associating political freedom during Enlightenment with emergence of atheism said that "irreligion in its practice has been the companion of every age, but its open and public defense seems to be peculiar to this" [Durant, Durant, 1963, 802]. Interestingly, there has been a surge of atheism in the world with roughly a billion-people questing the existence of God and challenging religious practices and systems.

In most cases, political causes and impacts of specific non-beliefs are largely ignored in comparative politics despite it being a suitable approach to understand the politics of atheism. Among and between members of similar socio-political groups, the debates on religion and the existence of God otherwise referred to as "God debates" have long been controversial especially on the concepts of humanity, life, and death. That "life is meaningful because God exists" echoes with many people in the Western societies. This paper seeks to examine socio-political thoughts on atheism in contemporary western societies as well as the concept of atheism in social identity construction in these societies.

Socio-political thoughts on atheism

According to Jack D. Eller, atheism is "at its core, a profoundly simple idea" and that it is "derived from the Greek a = not and theos = god: not-god". For social scientist, atheism consists of two principal elements, namely: ideology and identity. The common denominator of atheistic ideologies is a lack of belief in any supernatural deity, whereas atheistic identity refers to self-identification as an "atheist". Depending on the research question, either surface of atheism could constitute the focus of a political study [Jack, 2010, 514]. While atheism is often construed as the belief that no gods exist, he demonstrates that such a definition is overly exclusive. Eller explains, "Atheism, in its basic form, is not a belief, it is the absence of belief. An Atheist is not primarily a person who believes that god does not exist; rather, he does not believe in the existence of a god" [Ibid.]. As is true of theism, there are many diverse categories and subcategories of philosophical beliefs that qualify as atheistic. Similarly, George H. Smith offers a useful classification of "implicit" and "explicit" atheism.

Implicit atheists do not believe in a God, but have not necessarily rejected theism conscientiously, whereas explicit atheists consciously reject all theistic beliefs. Implicit atheism includes those who have never been exposed to theistic belief systems as well as those who have encountered theisms but have not subscribed to their truth claims. As such, atheistic citizens of authoritarian nations with state policies of "coercive atheism" are more likely to be implicit atheists than atheistic citizens socialized in liberal religious environments [Smith, 1974, 380].

Implicit atheists may consider themselves atheists, or they may lack an irreligious identity altogether. In the past, communist governments created antireligious policies and programs designed to regulate and limit citizens' exposure to theisms, replacing existing religious institutions with an ideology of "scientific atheism" recognized to the philosophies of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin, among others. Although essentially obsolete in the West, coercive atheism continues to bear an impact on the irreligious climate of those formerly communistic societies, as evident in their relatively low levels of religiosity even decades after the end of the Cold War [Holman, et al., 2013, 312]. Explicit atheists, in comparison, are more likely to be "organic atheists", having resolved upon

their atheistic worldviews without governmental coercion. Empirical evidence reveals a sharp distinction between the socioeconomic conditions of "Western Bloc" (organic) atheists and atheists living in formerly communist states. Nations with recent histories of coerced atheism exhibit poor economic development, high levels of corruption, and poor physical health, whereas nations with high levels of living atheism "are among the healthiest, wealthiest, best educated, and freest societies on earth" [Smith, 1974, 380].

In general, beliefs about whether humans are creations of a higher source of intelligence and power bear many effects on the ways individuals situate themselves in society and the world. Religious persons who profess belief in God rarely suggest divine indifference towards one's behavior as a mortal human. On the other hand, God typically dictate strict demands to their followers and provide rigid normative moral codes for differentiating right from wrong.

If non-beliefs have any impact on politics, such an impact ought to manifest itself in a comparison of individuals with contrasting opinions about what is perhaps the most central non-belief of all that concerning the existence of God. Supporting the necessity for this examination of non-belief in society is the fact that atheist identifiers are more likely to be apostates than members of any sizable religious group. Apostasy in this context typically requires conscious reevaluation of religions' truth claims and the eventual rejection of religious doctrines altogether. This process is by no means deterministic, according to social scientists [Ibid., 167].

However, it is conditioned by a variety of social, political, and psychological factors. Individuals' worldviews comprise a variety of idea elements, some of which are more central than others. In the political behavior literature, the gradations of belief centrality are often conceptualized using Robert Worcester's metaphorical schema of opinions, attitudes, and values.

Worcester defines opinions as "the ripples on the surface of the public's consciousness, shallow and easily changed", attitudes as "the currents below the surface, deeper and stronger" [Ibid., 380] and values as "the deep tides of public mood, slow to change, but powerful" [Dixon, 1983, 11]. While attitudes are more resistant to change than opinions, they may be modified by the attainment of new information or reconsideration, the latter of which typically results from exposure to a new perspective. Values are least subject to change but can be influenced by interpersonal communications or exogenous "shocks" that inspire a comprehensive re-examination of personal beliefs. That said, individuals often derive similar attitudes and opinions about an issue while maintaining vastly different value systems as sources of motivation. By considering the role of each concept in opinion formation, scholars of political behavior investigate public opinion by searching below the "waves on the surface" for the idea elements that shape individuals' opinion statements [Ibid.]

For instance, Ronald Inglehart investigates the political effects of two contrasting value systems (materialism and post-materialism) across societies, revealing various correlations between values and political behaviors. The belief centrality of the values identified and operationalized by Inglehart light in comparison to that of non-belief in god. If post-materialist and materialist values are indeed the source of different political behaviors, an even deeper "current below the surface" bears the potential for momentous political divergences. The expression of unbelief as a social identity reflects an incomplete – though significant – manifestation of a widespread shift in the way many individuals perceive mere existence [Inglehart, 1997, 464].

As Almond and Verba's seminal quantitative analysis of political culture demonstrates, values and politics share an interactive relationship in society. Values are relatively stable over time and can affect political attitudes and opinions in systematic ways. One's self positioning in the "God debates" often lies even deeper than one's normative values and may therefore bear substantial influence on one's

political values, attitudes, and opinions. Despite its potentially vast implications, the nature of this influence remains largely unexplored [Almond, 1963, 567].

Atheism and social identity

The adoption of an atheist identity entails more than a lack of belief in gods. Until recently, the term "atheist" had a social stigma attached to it especially in many Western societies. In fact, "coming out" as an atheist was, and in some cases still is, rarely a decision to be taken lightly. In addition, the label of atheism is largely shunned among most ideological atheists around the globe. They prefer labels such as "agnostic" or "nonreligious." However, all of those without belief in God are in fact atheists, whether implicit or explicit.

Thus, the atheist self-labelling process is conditioned by more than merely a lack of belief in God. Nations across the Western world vary significantly in their proportions of atheist identities among those lacking belief in God. What socio-political and/or historical factors are responsible for these cross-societal differences in atheist self-identification? This question is primarily concerned with social identity construction and should therefore be addressed and concisely understood as such.

To position themselves within social life, members of a society rely on nothing but identity. Despite hierarchical organization of society based on different criteria such as salience and strength of each level of the society, individual identity retains its uniqueness against other members of the same category.

Moreover, identity is used to delineate membership in social groups. One may adopt an identity to align with a group, to express deviance, or to synchronize personal views with extant social categories, among other motivations. In short, "identity is about belonging somewhere" [Smith, 1974, 380].

An atheist identity typically entails the adoption of a stigmatized, socially deviant label, which may experience a high cost for the atheist identifier. In a study of American atheists, Smith finds that the price of "coming out" as an atheist is typically offset by the rewards of internal consistency and an outspoken, honest self-positioning. Furthermore, Smith reveals that atheists' determination to disassociate from religion is enhanced by interactions with theists, as "the felt tensions, and the awareness of the deviant status of their views, actually serve to encourage or promote their desire to claim the deviant identity". Interpreting these findings through the lens of symbolic interaction theory, Smith develops a four-stage model of atheist identity development. The process begins with the "ubiquity of theism" in society, which serves as a reference point for all cosmological self-positioning in society. The next stage is characterized by the questioning of theism, which is often experienced by young adults living away from home for the first time, particularly in college, when moral foundations are frequently scrutinized.

The third stage entails the rejection of theism, occurring once an individual perceives core religious claims to be implausible. Altemeyer and Hunsberger argue that those who reject religion generally do so as a result of disagreement with theological truth claims, rather than as a reaction to individuals or cultures within the religious community. The final stage of the process is defined as "coming out as atheist," whereby one internalizes the atheist self-label and applies it in social discourse. According to Altemeyer and Hunsberger, advancement to this stage implies a "dramatic transformation of self in terms of becoming one's own person... being free and confident in one's nonreligious beliefs" [Hunsberger, Altemeyer, 2006, 159].

This transformation is generally coupled with the avowal of a scientific, secular worldview. This parsimonious model emphasizes the centrality of religion's role in the social construction of atheistic identities.

Atheism and gender

Despite the importance of social context, several demographic attributes of nonbelievers transcend both cultural and political boundaries. For instance, surveys reveal that men tend to be less religious than women in every society with available data. Concerning disaffiliation from religion, "in all existing studies of apostasy...men are far more likely to become apostates than women" [Ibib., 159]. As one would suspect, individuals raised in nonreligious homes are consistently more likely to identify as nonreligious. Even among the nonreligious, avowed atheists are most frequently young, unmarried, college educated, and male.

A gender gap pervades nearly all standard indicators of irreligiosity, though its severity is conditioned by several known factors as well as others yet to be discovered. The extant research suggests that the role of gender in religious disaffiliation is conditioned in part by normative gender roles in society. Collett find the gender gap to be substantially smaller among adults raised in gender egalitarian households than among those from patriarchal homes. The authors attribute this correlation to variation in the extent of children's social control across the household types. Greater social control during childhood, rather than mere maleness, is linked to a higher propensity for risky behavior. After childhood, male college students demonstrate more dramatic declines in religious observance than their female counterparts [Collett, Lizardo, 2009, 213-231]. However, two recent studies of American "none's" fail to identify a gender effect on the stability of adults' nonreligious identities over time. This is likely due to the crystallization of religious identities that usually occurs before the late 20's. [Smith, 1974, 380].

Finally, atheists are observed to have relatively high levels of economic security relative to their peers. Similarly, Inglehart demonstrate that economic security is the driving force of secularization, particularly when coupled with higher education. The social demographics of avowed atheists are rather conducive to the core elements of the theorized secularization process [Inglehart, 1997, 464].

Conclusion

In conclusion it should be pointed out that, while the debates and discussion on socio-political thoughts and impacts of atheism on Western societies in modern times remains largely ignored, the research findings reveals a controversial phenomenon. The meaning of life is closely associated with the existence of God, and so are the concepts of humanity, life and death. On the other hand, experts and social scientists maintains that ideology and identity are the main concern of atheism. Not believing in God without necessarily rejecting theism is term implicit atheism, whereas explicit atheism is the conscious rejection of all theistic beliefs. However, in most modern Western societies, atheism is still stigmatized and therefore many atheists are still reluctant to refer to themselves as atheist except for the nonreligious and avowed atheists who are mostly young, unmarried, college educated and male.

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Социополитические мысли и влияние атеизма на современное западное общество

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Аннотация

В статье исследуется понятие атеистической идентичности, рассматриваются такие типы атеизма, как и явный неявный атеизм. Неявный атеизм проявляется в отсутствии теистической веры без сознательного отклонения его, тогда как явный атеизм представляет собой сознательное отклонение всех теистических верований. Автор отмечает, что социальные и политические воздействия атеизма на западное общество в наши дни в значительной степени остаются незамеченными и порождают различные споры. Атеизм в современных западных обществах все еще стигматизирован, и многие неверующие все еще не решаются признаться в своем атеизме. Вместо термина «атеизм» люди предпочитают употреблять такие понятия, как «агностик» или «нерелигиозный». Однако все те, кто не верит в Бога, на самом деле являются атеистами, неявными или явными. Несмотря на политический, культурный и социальный контекст, гендерные аспекты также играют важную роль в построении личности, например, мужчины, как правило, менее религиозны, чем женщины. Существующие исследования показывают, что влияние пола на религиозное поведение обусловлено нормативными гендерными ролями в обществе.

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Ключевые слова

Атеистическая идентичность, социальная идентичность, неявный и явный атеизм, вера.

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