**Atheism and Mental Health**

Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation

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**Preamble**. Before I begin my homily this morning, I’d just like to say that the request to provide a homily came to me at the same time as I found that I was missing some of my continuing education requirements. Studying a paper on Atheism suddenly became very relevant. I’ve read the paper, passed the exam, and I’d like to thank you for that with brownies at coffee time.

**Introduction**. And so we begin. When I was young, its likely my mother realized almost immediately that bringing me into her Sunday School class at our United Church was not her best idea ever. I think I have always been an Atheist, probably fueled in part by my family’s disagreements about religion. Reminiscent of my behaviour in my mother’s class, I later took a Sociology of Religion course in university and given the wide array of choices for my paper, selected the Satanists. Now these people knew how to party and their strong emphasis on sex found an eager young student. Later, while working as an Aide at a psychiatric hospital I was pulled urgently to the frightening ward for aggressive new admissions, where men are men and little guys like me learn how to talk fast. I was told that I was there that night because they had admitted 2 Gods, 2 Jesuses, and a Holy Ghost, and our task was to prevent them from smiting each other.

As time passed, our family came to Beacon Unitarian and a struggle began for me that I think continues to the present day. As an Atheist not keen on churches I had arrived at something that walked like a church and talked like a church, complete with hymnals, orders of service, facing forward and a kind of dogma. While grumbly and careful never to sing “God” during hymns, I found over time, as perhaps a number of you have, a level of diversity that has multiple points of entry and all the liberals you could possibly want. I have been thinking about this and I realize that a Unitarian Atheist gives up at least 3 things. The first is a potentially comforting mythology, often complete with a cool, omnipotent parent. The second is participation in a religion in the mainstream that people are more likely to actually have a clue about. Finally, depending on the kind of Atheist you are, the third loss is the perceived right to get up in the grill of those with religious beliefs, due to the Unitarian emphasis on tolerance.

Over time in my Atheist journey, I have heard about studies that looked at the relationship between religious belief and well-being and frequently found that committed Christians, in particular, tended to be happier and even to live longer. Not to begrudge them this good fortune, I found that I begrudged them this good fortune and have often wondered about the parameters on this kind of finding.

**The paper**. Well, here’s our chance to look closer at this relationship. The paper I want to discuss today comes from a journal called The Counselling Psychologist, looks at American literature on Atheism from 2001 through 2012, and broadens the examination of the relationship between religiousity and mental health. I should acknowledge right up front that the focus on the US is both a limitation of this analysis, but also a source of fascination given the strictures in the American situation. Try to get elected to an American office without regular references to God, for example.

The article begins by noting that during the past decade there has been a flood of pop-Atheism literature from authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. These authors are described as the beginning of New Atheism, quote “a more militant, in-your-face kind of Atheism marked by a drive to bring Atheist discourse out of the shadows and into mainstream culture.”

So let’s make a tentative attempt to define terms. “Defined loosely, *religiousity* refers to personal beliefs in a God or gods and organized or institutional practices and beliefs…whereas *spirituality* is described as a belief in a higher power and/or mystical experiences accompanied by less participation in traditional forms of worship.” These 2 terms are often confused. In the US, between 80 to 95% report having a religious affiliation and a belief in God.

This contrasts with 4% to 15% of individuals in the US identifying as Atheist. However, this article points out that: “There remains no clear consensus on who Atheists are and what they believe (or, rather, what they do not believe).” Recent literature presents nonbelief on a continuum that ranges from *strong Atheism* (such as an informed decision to reject a belief in God) to *weak Atheism* (such as agnosticism). There are other identifiers within nonbelief such as secular humanism, defined in this paper, *“as an ethical lens through which people are responsible for choosing their own destinies and live considerately toward others, while being disinterested in issues of the supernatural, God/gods, or an afterlife.”* You have to be nice to others as a humanist too, thus the title humanist rather than nananaboobooist. At this point the spell checker melted.

As I alluded to, there is lots of research pointing to positive links between religiosity and/or spirituality and the promotion of mental health and physical well-being, including improved prognoses for people suffering from cancer, HIV, and heart conditions. However, the authors point out, “a tacit message in this research is that if religiousity and spirituality is linked to well-being, then a lack of such beliefs, such as beliefs held by people who identify as Atheist, agnostic or just apathetic, must be linked to poorer outcomes.” Some of this research has been challenged on methodological grounds and it has been pointed out that this kind of assumption can be used by religious fundamentalist groups aggressively and unquestionably seeking control of the US.

The paper spends some time on Atheists as a marginalized group within the US, with a number of comparisons to LGBTQ individuals, including the idea of “coming out” as an Atheist in the American setting. Findings from several surveys indicate that compared to religious/spiritual individuals, Atheists are regarded by Americans as “more troubling,” less moral, and not someone you want to marry into the family or lead the country. The risk in the US context, among other contexts we might think of, is that visible Atheists will be marginalized and suffer the mental and physical health risks that have repeatedly been demonstrated as experienced by marginalized groups.

The authors’ search of the literature yielded 31 articles that focused specifically on mental health topics such as well-being and distress. The most frequent religious groups studied along with Atheists in the studies were Protestant Christians, Catholics, Jews, and Buddhists. So what were some of the findings in comparisons between Atheists and the religious/spiritual? I would like to discuss 7 findings.

* First, most of the studies that included both Atheist and religious/spiritual participants found no differences between the groups on measures of psychological well-being or distress.
* Second, what I found to be a particularly interesting recurring finding was a curvilinear relationship between the certainty of people’s beliefs (religious/spiritual or Atheist) and dimensions of psychological well-being. So what does that mean in plain English? [**demonstrate**] People who were very religious or very non-religious tended to do better than people who are less certain of their religious beliefs, are spiritual but not religious, or who are agnostic. In one of the studies showing this pattern, people who were confidently religious or Atheist reported greater life satisfaction and emotional stability than those who were unsurely religious or agnostic. It was noted that this pattern suggests that confidence in one’s worldview may be more important for mental health than the religious beliefs themselves. We will definitely return to this finding.
* A third study found no difference in depressive symptoms among Christians, Muslims, Atheists, and agnostics.
* Fourth, one study comparing Atheists, Christians, and Buddhists found similarities in terms of well-being and empathy. Atheists, on the other hand, did score much lower on magical ideation. This particular finding was described as supporting the stereotype that Atheists are logical, skeptical, and nonconformists, but not as cynical and joyless as previously thought. “Cynical and joyless,” I’ve never been so offended.
* Fifth, one interesting study found that religious/spiritual Alcoholics Anonymous members were more likely to sustain their attendance at AA meetings than nonbelievers.
* Sixth, a comparison of nonbelieving and religious/spiritual individuals found no differences between the groups for well-being, satisfaction, or locus of control. The religious/spiritual group in this particular study scored higher on meaning of life and had more social supports. Nonbelievers scored higher on use of humor for coping. Yah baby, if you can’t be saved, be funny. I‘m perplexed by the locus of control finding, though. Locus of control is an individual difference in where you look for the origin of events. Those with an internal locus tend to see themselves as making choices that lead to outcomes, while those with an external locus see the control as being in the environment. Things happen to them, not by them. This would seem like a logical Atheist/Humanist versus Theist split and I don’t know why this particular study did not find that.
* Finally, one study looked at 88 Atheists in palliative care. Okay, just let all the nuances of that statement wash over you in all the richness of its implications, 88 Atheists in palliative care. Worst children’s book ever. Moving on, this study found that participants wanted clinicians to respect their nonbelief and not force prayer or references to higher powers. They also expressed a deep desire to find meaning, to maintain connections to important people, and to appreciate the natural world through their dying experience. Wow.

The authors of the overall paper we have been reviewing discuss some limitations of this research and indeed the comparisons between what we call the religious/spiritual and Atheist do raise a number of questions.

* First, its noted that many or most of the comparisons made between Atheists and quote “religious people” have involved participants who identify as Christian. This, of course, may obscure important similarities and differences between Atheists and other faith systems.
* Second, there are a host of issues around the fuzziness in identifying whether someone fits into a particular religious/spiritual group, or for that matter, groups. For example, one method is to look at church attendance as a determinant of religious belief, but the problem with that is that many individuals may attend religious services out of obligation, not actual faith.
* Third, I’m intrigued by possible next steps in this kind of research, such as looking at the role of different faith systems in times of crisis. I wonder if particular faith systems help or hinder coping in particular situations. In my case, a watershed was gall bladder surgery and general anesthetic. As an analogue for death, being pulled into the dark with nothing more than a version of “shit happens” as a belief system was a test of my faith that frankly continues to rattle me. Another existence after death, with or without unlimited single malt, seems a little easier to face.

Let’s now return for a bit to the curvilinear relationship **[gesture]**. Again participants who were either confidently religious or firmly Atheist had higher levels of well-being than those who were less certain of their religious faiths. This recurring pattern suggests that confidence in one’s beliefs and worldviews may be much more important for mental health than the content of those beliefs. Taken together, in terms of psychological health, those who are firmly Atheist look quite similar to religious/spiritual individuals who are strong in their faiths.

Again, I find this finding fascinating. I wonder if across the landscape of beliefs we create a kind of bowl of happiness. The rim represents those who are confident and comfortable in their various beliefs and correspondingly experience the highest well-being, while the bottom of the bowl represents those who are less confidence or comfortable in their beliefs and experience less well-being. I think this relationship between commitment to beliefs and well-being raises a number of large and difficult questions:

* From what does the well-being of certainty derive? A sense of meaning, one of the things we have talked about as important for resilience, certainly comes to mind. Do clear beliefs provide comfort and direction in an inherently ambiguous and changing world? Does tangible participation in the belief (like participating in a church) or implied participation (a feeling of belonging to a like-minded group) help the individual to feel connected to others, less alone, and generally on the “right track?”
* Given this relationship between certainty and well-being, how do we understand fanaticism and extremism? Would we expect them to have such good well-being that they are euphoric? I think that’s quite possible for some. Alternatively, do some of the fanatical outer edges of belief operate by different, perhaps pathological rules, than we have seen here with comparisons largely between Protestants and Atheists?
* Finally, If certainty of belief is related to greater well-being, is there a risk associated with a studious refusal to adhere to any one well-defined belief system or dogma, such as we can see with Unitarianism? How do we explain the committed group before me and the diverse religious tapestry of their lives? Well, this is a huge question. In my small contribution to this I think we come to what is the nature of our particular shared beliefs. We do not have a static dogma about how the world was created, although overall Unitarians tend to be rather fond of scientific explanations. Rather, we have more systems of thought that have change built into them, and this to me is key, a capacity to adapt to new information and new understandings as we all continue to evolve. It was in working on this homily that I came to understand the Unitarian principles better as providing the structure for an adaptable, not static or immovable, belief system that at the same time serves as a rallying point for liberal thinkers. I’m expecting that a commitment to Unitarianism will show the same strong mental health findings as committed believers or nonbelievers. Unfortunately in spreading the word about our particular faith, you do need folks with a degree of comfort with being outside of the mainstream. In addition, being a UU is not so good for elevator speeches describing the faith, unless you have a slow elevator and a tall building.

So, decades of research have pointed to clear positive associations between levels of religious/spiritual belief and mental health. But the findings from a host of studies does not support a simple belief that more religion is good, and less religion is bad. There has not been meaningful differences between the religious/spiritual and nonbelievers on a host of domains, such as well-being, life satisfaction, locus of control, or empathy. As the author states: “Such findings parallel those reported in international samples in which Atheists either score very similarly to religious/spiritual participants on dimensions of psychological well-being or distress, or report *less* distress than people who are religious/spiritual.”

One purpose of the paper we have been discussing was to provide guidance to Counsellors working with Atheists and so I will close with their guidance in that regard. The following quote is my favorite: “Counsellors should avoid using reassurances that may typically soothe religious/spiritual clients, such as (I have trouble even saying this) ‘things happen for a reason,’ or ‘events are all part of a larger plan’ as such statements stem from religious/spiritual faith. In contrast, Atheist people tend to believe that they are responsible for creating meaning and purpose in their lives…” Therapies that recognize this will be more likely to be effective.

Thank you for your attention and see you in the forum.

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