

Secularism Orientations

Original Research

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Abstract

Introduction: There has been extensive research conducted on religious orientations, but less so of secularism orientations. We sought to examine several ways that secularist beliefs connect and compare.

Methods: Undergraduate students in introductory psychology classes ($n = 397$) completed an online questionnaire assessing their secularist beliefs, religious orientations, and psychological well-being.

Results: An exploratory factor analysis yielded four types of secularism orientations: Faith in Humans, Faith in Law, Faith in Science, and Faith in Paranormal. These four factors then distinctly correlated with religious orientations and subcomponents of well-being.

Conclusions: Identifying secular belief systems and their implications is key to understanding the consequences of the Western decline in religious practice. These preliminary data provide insights into their types and benefits for psychological functioning.

Key Words: Secularism, Religious Orientation, Well-Being

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Introduction

For thousands of years, humans have attempted to understand the world and the cosmos through a religious lens, one that focused on deities and other supernatural beings as the molders of nature and reality. More recently, however, humans have taken an areligious or even anti-religious stance, where their understanding of the world and morality stems from their understanding of fellow humans and societal structures. Secularism is the belief that promotes the principle of the separation between government and religious entities,¹ and it is growing in prevalence. In the United States, the number of people reporting no religious affiliation increased from 17% to 26% between 2009 to 2019.² Such secularist belief systems have been noted and there have been recent attempts to classify them,³ but most of these classifications have been based on case studies rather than on data-driven analyses. Other research has shown some common and differing characteristics among apostasy,⁴ paranormal beliefs,⁵ and spiritualism,⁶ suggesting that secularism can involve a variety of factors.

For understanding broader existence and establishing a sense of purpose, we suggest that secularism is a subclass of religious orientation that exists without the inclusion of such supernatural entities. In most cases, the classification of religious orientations have been tied to such beings, producing four primary approaches. Intrinsic religious orientation refers to a tendency to pursue religious practices as inherently valuable.⁶ Adopting an orientation predicts religious



behaviors such as engaging in prayer. In contrast, an extrinsic religious orientation refers to a tendency to pursue religious practices as a means to a social end.⁷ This type of orientation relates to behaviors such as church attendance and participation in church functions. Adopting a quest orientation involves pursuing religious practices in a search for meaning and truth.⁸ In contrast, adopting an orthodox religious orientation involves literal translation of church teachings and scripture,⁹ and is associated with strict adherence to what is deemed to be religious law. To date, however, no research has examined the links between secularist and religious beliefs.

Some religious orientations are also more beneficial for psychological well-being than others.¹⁰ Intrinsic orientation has positive effects on mental health, while extrinsic has negative effects.¹¹ Research has also found positive links between orthodox religious orientation and mental health.¹² Despite these insights, there has been very little examination of the psychological benefits of secularism orientations. The only exception found inconsistent results between secularism and life satisfaction over time, which was also moderated by cultural affluence and education.¹³ The researchers did not, however, consider the variability in secularism values and well-being.

The purpose of our study is to explore the ways that secularist belief systems exist as a multidimensional construct. Our exploratory study seeks to understand how these factors cluster together to gain insights into the various approaches people seek to understand their experiences without reference to a god or deity. We also sought to examine how these secularism orientations are associated with religious orientations and subcomponents of psychological well-being.

Scientific Methods

Participants

Participants for this study consisted of 397 undergraduate students who participated in exchange for course completion credit in introductory psychology and psychology research method courses. The ages of participants ranged from 18 to 71 with the average age being 21 years of age ($SD = 6.646$). 77.3% were female, 20.7% male, and .5% non-binary. The sample also consisted of 83.4% white/Caucasian, 3.5% black/African American, 1.3% Hispanic, 2.3% Asian, and 2.2% other. Participants religions ranged from 66% Christian/Christian denomination, 12.3% Non-religious, 5.5% Agnostic, 2.5% Questioning, 2.3% Atheist, .8% Spiritual, .5% Muslim, .3% Pagan, and .3% Hindu. The study was reviewed and approved by the University Institutional Review Board in 2018.

Protocol

Each variable was measured using self-report surveys with Likert scales that consisted of values 1 to 5 (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) unless otherwise specified. Participants were given access to a self-report questionnaire via an online data collection system. Participants filled out the questionnaire, which consisted of a battery of scales. These measures included: the 10-item Belief in Science ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.69$) scale,¹⁴ the 20-item Ethics Position ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.40$) Questionnaire,¹⁵ the 80-item Humanism scale,¹⁶ the 15-item Atheism Quote ($M = 2.01$, $SD = 0.82$) scale developed by the principal investigator, the 29-item Nationalism ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.62$) scale,¹⁷ the 25-item Paranormal Belief ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.56$) scale,⁵ the 42-item Ryff Psychological Well-Being scale,¹⁸ the 22-item Spiritualism ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.52$) scale,⁶ the 20-item Age-Universal scale¹⁹ to assess Intrinsic ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.91$) and Extrinsic ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.68$) religious orientations, the 12-item Quest ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.59$) scale,²⁰ and the 24-item Christian Orthodoxy ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 0.74$) scale.⁹ Participants then provided their demographic information, which included age, gender, ethnicity, and religion. After the participants completed the questionnaire, they received a debriefing statement on the final screen.

The mean across the ratings for each scale was obtained for the overall score for each variable. The Humanism scale was separated into nine subcomponent scores: Good ($M = 3.49$, $SD = 0.66$), Bad ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 0.66$), Warmth ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.54$), Openness ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.58$), Romantic Rationalism ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.55$), Human Rights ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 0.59$), Discipline ($M = 2.68$, $SD = 0.67$), Control ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.66$), Rigorous Empiricism ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.46$), and Law & Order ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 0.60$). The well-being scale was separated into six subcomponent scores: Autonomy ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.63$), Environmental Mastery ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.55$), Personal Growth ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.57$), Purpose in Life ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.64$), Self-Acceptance ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.68$), and Positive Relations with Others ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 0.58$).

Statistical Analysis

To examine the clustering of secularism beliefs, we utilized a principal components factor analysis using Varimax rotation on the Belief in Science, Ethics Position, Humanism, Atheism, Nationalism, and Paranormal Belief scores.



After the factors were identified, we examined how each factor predicted each of the four religious orientations, and each of the six components of psychological well-being. A $p \leq 0.05$ was considered statistically significant a priori.

Results

Using principal components factor analysis, we were able to distinguish four factors relating to secularism. Table 1 displays the results of the exploratory factor analysis for the four secularism factors. The results of this test showed that Ethics Position, Humanism: Good, Humanism: Warmth, Humanism: Openness, Humanism: Romantic Rationalism, and Humanism: Well-being loaded onto Factor 1, to which we named the *Faith in Humans Factor*. The results of this test also showed that Humanism: Discipline, Humanism: Control, Humanism: Rigorous Empiricism, Humanism: Law and Order, and Nationalism loaded onto Factor 2, to which we deemed as the *Faith in Law Factor*. The results of this test also showed Belief in Science, Atheism, and Spiritualism (negatively) loading onto Factor 3, to which we deemed as the *Faith in Science Factor*. Lastly, the results of this test showed both Humanism: Bad and Belief in Paranormal loaded onto Factor 4, to which we deemed as the *Faith in Paranormal Factor*. The mean of the measures corresponding to each of the four factors were then obtained to create each factor's total score for subsequent analyses.

Table 1. Principal Components Factor Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Secularism Scales.

	Faith in Humans	Faith in Law	Faith in Science	Faith in Paranormal
Ethics Position	.627	.108	.172	.078
Humanism: Good	.551	.026	-.113	-.475
Humanism: Warmth	.675	-.127	-.318	-.175
Humanism: Openness	.817	-.104	-.085	-.050
Humanism: Romantic Rationalism	.799	.027	.030	.055
Humanism: Human Rights	.720	-.090	-.032	-.031
Humanism: Discipline	-.161	.669	.237	.364
Humanism: Control	-.246	.689	.094	.132
Humanism: Rigorous Empiricism	.205	.712	.196	-.105
Humanism: Law and Order	.034	.793	-.255	-.070
Nationalism	.036	.535	-.503	-.144
Belief in Science	.217	.066	.807	-.020
Atheism	-.082	.121	.791	.243
Spiritualism	.384	.028	-.664	.214
Humanism: Bad	-.172	.450	.296	.619
Paranormal	.100	-.079	-.078	.795
Eigenvalue	3.34	2.62	2.39	1.57
% Variance Explained	20.93%	16.40%	14.90%	9.84%

An initial series of bivariate correlation analyses were conducted to examine the zero-order correlations among the four secularism factors, the four religious orientations, and the six well-being variables (see Table 2). Two sets of linear regression analyses were then conducted using the new Secularism Orientation (SO) scores. The first set of analyses examined how the four Secularism Orientations (SO) predicted the four Religious Orientations (RO) (see Table 3). The results showed distinct patterns for each form of secularism. Extrinsic RO was positively predicted by all four SOs. Both Intrinsic and Orthodox ROs were positively predicted by Faith in Law and Faith in Paranormal, and negatively predicted by Faith in Science. Quest RO was only positively predicted by Faith in Paranormal. Taken together, these results suggest adherence and avoidance of secular orientations when also adopting religious orientations, with the strongest patterns emerging for Intrinsic and Orthodox ROs.

**Table 2.** Bivariate Correlations among the Secularism Factors, Religious Orientation, and Well-Being Variables.

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.	13.	14.
1. Humans SO	<i>r</i>	---													
	<i>p</i>	---													
2. Law SO	<i>r</i>	-.11	---												
	<i>p</i>	.033	---												
3. Science SO	<i>r</i>	-.17	.034	---											
	<i>p</i>	.001	.504	---											
4. Paranormal SO	<i>r</i>	-.22	.298	.231	---										
	<i>p</i>	.001	.001	.001	---										
5. Extrinsic RO	<i>r</i>	.036	.179	.154	.296	---									
	<i>p</i>	.472	.001	.002	.001	---									
6. Intrinsic RO	<i>r</i>	-.01	.178	-.65	.149	.068	---								
	<i>p</i>	.800	.001	.001	.003	.178	---								
7. Quest RO	<i>r</i>	.011	.054	-.06	.105	.402	.178	---							
	<i>p</i>	.822	.284	.241	.038	.001	.001	---							
8. Orthodoxy RO	<i>r</i>	.058	.138	-.73	-.02	-.04	.738	.117	---						
	<i>p</i>	.252	.006	.001	.680	.490	.001	.021	---						
9. AUT PWB	<i>r</i>	.108	-.07	-.18	-.17	-.11	.030	-.16	.084	---					
	<i>p</i>	.033	.175	.001	.001	.024	.556	.002	.097	---					
10. EM PWB	<i>r</i>	.109	.066	-.29	-.25	-.17	.122	-.20	.205	.458	---				
	<i>p</i>	.031	.193	.001	.001	.001	.015	.001	.001	.001	---				
11. PG PWB	<i>r</i>	.337	-.26	-.33	-.41	-.26	.003	-.02	.193	.415	.431	---			
	<i>p</i>	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.958	.723	.001	.001	.001	---			
12. PIL PWB	<i>r</i>	.223	-.12	-.40	-.35	-.22	.115	-.09	.269	.358	.551	.645	---		
	<i>p</i>	.001	.023	.001	.001	.001	.023	.062	.001	.001	.001	.001	---		
13. SA PWB	<i>r</i>	.121	-.03	-.33	-.28	-.15	.189	-.17	.224	.435	.616	.506	.589	---	
	<i>p</i>	.016	.563	.001	.001	.003	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	---	
14. PRO PWB	<i>r</i>	.246	-.11	-.43	-.30	-.21	.199	-.11	.310	.290	.510	.563	.541	.566	---
	<i>p</i>	.001	.030	.001	.001	.001	.001	.037	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	.001	---

Note. *SO* = Secularism Orientation, *RO* = Religious Orientation, *PWB* = Psychological Well-Being, *AUT* = Autonomy, *EM* = Environmental Mastery, *PG* = Personal Growth, *PIL* = Purpose in Life, *SA* = Self-Acceptance, *PRO* = Positive Relations with Others. Shaded cells indicate statistical significance.

Table 3. Regression Analyses of Secularism Orientations Predicting Religious Orientations.

	Religious Orientations							
	<i>Extrinsic</i>		<i>Intrinsic</i>		<i>Quest</i>		<i>Orthodoxy</i>	
	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Secularism Orientations								
<i>Faith in Humans</i>	.13	.011	-.07	.056	.03	.603	-.04	.309
<i>Faith in Law</i>	.11	.029	.11	.001	.03	.657	.13	.000
<i>Faith in Science</i>	.11	.026	-.74	.000	-.09	.109	-.78	.000
<i>Faith in Paranormal</i>	.27	.000	.28	.000	.13	.025	.12	.003
<i>F(4,383)</i>	13.66, <i>p</i> = .000		116.19, <i>p</i> = .0000		2.13, <i>p</i> = .077		134.97, <i>p</i> = .000	
<i>R</i> ²	.13		.55		.02		.59	

The second set of analyses examined how the four Secularism Orientations (SO) predicted the six Psychological Well-Being variables (see Table 4). The results showed further evidence for unique patterns of each form of secularism. Faith in Humans positively predicted Personal Growth, Purpose in Life, and Positive Relations with Others. Faith in Law positively predicted Environmental Mastery, but negatively predicted Personal Growth. Both Faith in Science and Faith in Paranormal negatively predicted all forms of Psychological Well-Being. Taken together, these results suggest that Faith in Humans is a generally beneficial secular orientation for psychological well-being, whereas Faith in Science and Paranormal are not.

Table 4. Regression Analyses of Secularism Orientations Predicting Psychological Well-Being.

	Psychological Well-Being Variables											
	<i>AUT</i>		<i>EM</i>		<i>PG</i>		<i>PIL</i>		<i>SA</i>		<i>PRO</i>	
	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p
Secularism Orientations												
<i>Faith in Humans</i>	.05	.283	.03	.508	.22	.000	.11	.017	.03	.472	.14	.002
<i>Faith in Law</i>	.02	.645	.15	.003	-.15	.001	-.02	.678	.05	.300	-.03	.527
<i>Faith in Science</i>	-.14	.007	-.24	.000	-.22	.000	-.32	.000	-.27	.000	-.36	.000
<i>Faith in Paranormal</i>	-.12	.038	-.25	.000	-.27	.000	-.25	.000	-.23	.000	-.18	.000
<i>F(4, 383)</i>	5.38, $p = .000$		16.15, $p = .000$		40.15, $p = .000$		30.89, $p = .000$		18.09, $p = .000$		31.11, $p = .000$	
<i>R</i> ²	.05		.14		.30		.24		.16		.24	

Note. *AUT* = Autonomy, *EM* = Environmental Mastery, *PG* = Personal Growth, *PIL* = Purpose in Life, *SA* = Self-Acceptance, *PRO* = Positive Relations with Others.

Discussion

Our results demonstrate that secularist belief systems can be classified into four orientations: Faith in Humans, Faith in Law, Faith in Science, and Faith in Paranormal. These orientations in turn predict distinct patterns in religious orientations and psychological well-being. Those who strongly adhere to Christian beliefs and practices tend to also adopt faith in legal societal institutions, but not scientific ones. In contrast, those who seek religious activities as a means to a social end tend to also adopt all four secular orientations. Regarding psychological well-being, our results showed that those who adhere to scientific and paranormal beliefs tend to also experience lower forms of psychological and emotional functioning. Only placing one's faith and trust in others' good will seemed to produce modest ties to well-being.

Unlike Gray², our results provide data-driven insights into the types of belief systems people adopt. We have replicated and expanded upon the recent work¹⁴ by supporting the two forms of humanism, and by showing two additional areas of secularism that have important psychological consequences. Overall, secularism orientations tend to place a basic trust in human morality (Faith in Humans), they trust a corrective system to counter human immorality (Faith in Law) or ignorance (Faith in Science), or they trust an otherworldly source other than deities (Faith in Paranormal). More importantly, our results demonstrate the psychological benefits and detriments of adopting these secularist orientations. This expands upon past research^{9,10,11} showing that orientations beyond religious ones have significant connections to well-being, often times lowered well-being. The basic trust (or lack thereof) in human morality and reasoning may account for the differences between Faith in Humans and the other three in relation to well-being.

Future work should address the limitations of the current study. The preliminary and exploratory nature of these data should be interpreted with caution. Further work should expand the examination to non-college samples, to other cultures, and to compare against religious belief systems other than Christianity. In addition, the detrimental link between Faith in Science and Faith in Paranormal with psychological well-being should be pursued further. Future work should focus on how people with these secular orientations cope with their lowered well-being, if at all. For example, people with a high faith in science may be more inclined to seek psychotherapy, whereas people with a high faith in paranormal may be more inclined to seek New Age or spiritualist practices. Examining alternative outcomes beyond well-being could also be beneficial, including preferences toward informational sources and political ideologies.

Conclusions

With the increased number of the religiously unaffiliated, it is crucial to examine the consequences of adherence to areligious belief systems. Our research has demonstrated that there are four distinct forms of secularism, and that these may have important psychological consequences for those who adopt them. Noting that two of the four orientations were consistently associated with low levels of psychological well-being, this exploratory study serves as a word of caution for those who seek secularism to explain their world and guide their morality.

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