

TALKING ABOUT NONRELIGION AND HUMANISM WITH CHILDREN

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Overview

Nonreligion is growing globally.

The UK's religious landscape has included a majority with nonreligious identities since 1993 (absolute since 2010), and a majority of atheists since 2019.

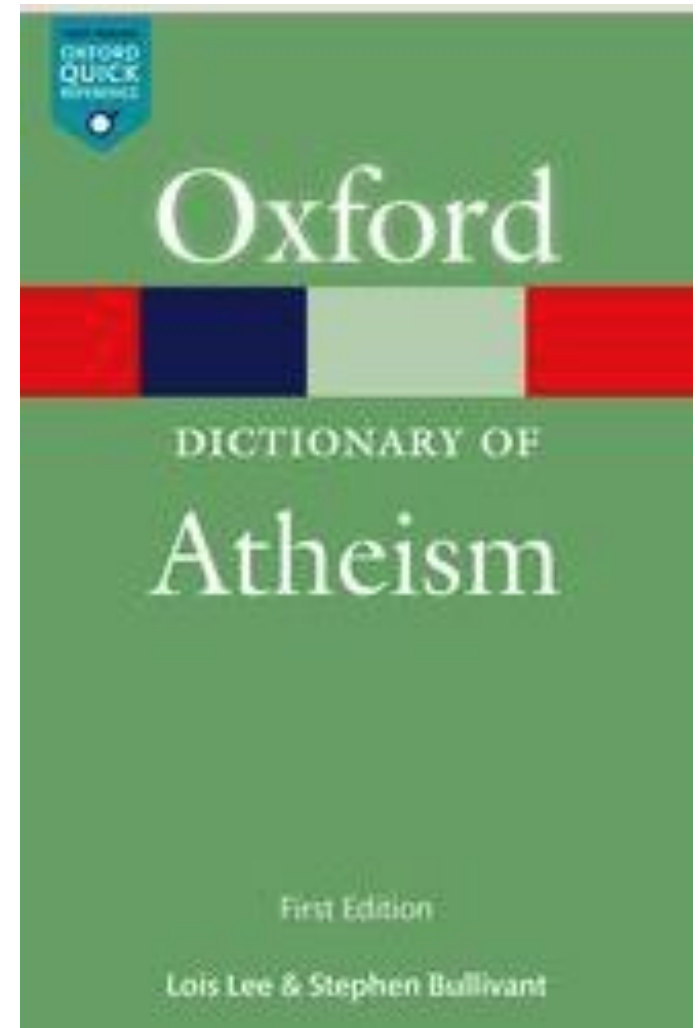
Humanism is a big part of that picture.

- Goal 1: best ways to understand and describe this landscape
- Goal 2: constructive ways to engage with nonreligious and humanist worldviews in schools



Key concepts

- a resource
- multiple meanings:
helpful to be specific
about yours
- helpful to acknowledge
multiple meanings with
children
- anticipate widespread
nonreligious illiteracy,
even within nonreligious
populations



'Nonreligious worldviews'

- **Nonreligion:** anything primarily understood by how it differs from religion (Lee 2015); often nonreligious identification / identities
- **Atheism:** without theism; without experience of God(s) as existing
 - Majority of nonreligious are atheist; majority of atheists are nonreligious; but not all; and culturally contingent
- **Nonreligious worldviews:** modes and traditions of conceptualizing life or existence that are identified as other than religious



OXFORD

RECOGNIZING ^{THE}
NON-RELIGIOUS
REIMAGINING THE SECULAR

LOIS LEE

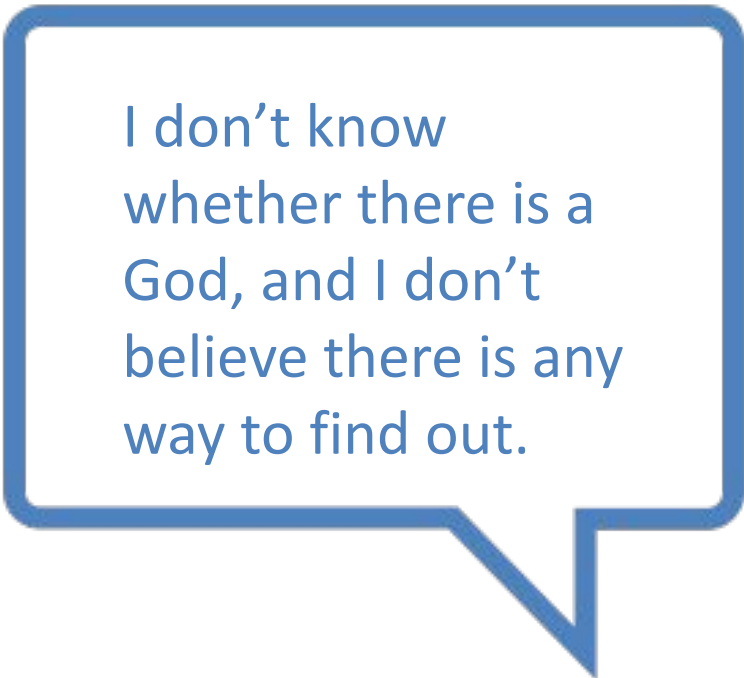
Secularism?

- this-worldly worldviews, OR a differentiation of social spheres including religion/worldviews from 'secular' domains; secular domains are those requiring this-worldly logics
- relationship between nonreligion and the secular is complex / confusing
- inc. no fixed relationship between nonreligious worldviews and political secularism, e.g. State Atheism; Christian secularists
- do you need to talk about secularism?

‘Atheists’, ‘agnostics’



I don't believe
in God




I don't know
whether there is a
God, and I don't
believe there is any
way to find out.

International Social Survey Programme

Humanism?

- Humanism vs humanism
- Big-H Humanism: historical; cultural movements self-identifying as 'Humanist' (emic)
- Little H humanism: analytical classification of a philosophical and cultural form (etic)
- cf. famously, many with humanist outlooks do not have Humanist identities
- the reverse is probably also true




What we have come to call Humanism largely seems marked by a relationship between achievement and human ingenuity—that is to say, a growing mode of thought and behavior grounded in the argument that humanity has the capacity for moving through the world with intentionality and consequence. As such, it shifts from critiques of supernaturalism; to the presentation of ethics tied only to humanity; to the outlining of modes of politics safeguarding human flourishing through reason and development; to scientific advancement and sensibilities with a tenacious grasp on the world within the limits of human capacity. For example, there is something in the contexts of

Anthony Pinn (2020) Introduction, *Oxford Handbook to Humanism*, OUP

Humanism is a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good.

– *American Humanist Association*

<https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/definition-of-humanism/>





Humanist landscape?

- 
- limited data, but clues
 - cultural presence of humanist movements (from Marxisms to New Atheism to the (liberal) big-H Humanisms) suggests humanism is widespread
 - humanism in arts and media
 - humanist ethics in education, 'the professions', etc
 - in some regions/media spaces, arguably 'the sea that we swim in'



NONRELIGION AND HUMANISM IN CHILDHOOD




Identities

- in UK, overwhelming majority of children are not religious
- children have not-religious identities from quite young
- often implicit
- but part of their social lives, including their relationships with other children, parents and teachers
- RE curriculum and other teaching centred on religion can be an important driver for reflection on own identities
- nonreligious identities widely misunderstood, e.g. as 'scientific worldview', catered to in the science curriculum / classroom
- huge value of speakers from nonreligious worldviews to children – and teachers! Opportunity to hear from personal experience they may not otherwise encounter



See:

- Anna Strhan, Lois Lee, Rachael Shillitoe, **Becoming Humanist: Worldview Formation and the Emergence of Atheist Britain**, *Sociology of Religion*, 2024; <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srad05>
 - Lee, Lois, Anna Strhan & Rachael Shillitoe, **The magic of Christmas? Childish beliefs, child-centred rituals and the formation of new existential movement'** (working title)
- 

Humanist Christmas?

- Inductive: Christmas really matters to atheists and agnostics
- Raised by majority of children in interviews (unprompted)
- Christmas also highly affective for parents
- The emergence of Christmas as a humanist ritual, centring children, humanist ethics, and rationalist epistemologies in relation to Santa beliefs
- Christmas as a *rite de passage*



'Merry Christmas', Kenny Meadows, Illustrated London News, 25 December 1847.



Santa/Father Christmas and humanism

- Santa central to how children talk about Christmas
- Santa (+Tooth Fairy and Easter Bunny) part of process of developing evidential and empiricist reasoning while at the same time truly magical

Zoe: I think if I had a survey, if there was one that's 'no religion', then I'd put that because 'no beliefs' isn't exactly true because I believe in things like Santa and the tooth fairy.

Louise: I don't believe in Santa or the tooth fairy because-

Zoe: What? You don't?

Louise: Well, I think tooth fairy is probably more likely than Santa because to go around... Even if he literally chucked the presents down the chimney, he still wouldn't be able to get round in time. I know he's magic, [it still doesn't make any sense 0:09:05].

Zoe: No, but you know the night always seems longer when it's Christmas Eve, maybe he can make the night longer and then go round-

Louise: Or maybe like, you know in the winter it's always a shorter day and it's a longer night-

Humanist ritual elders

- Many parents express a strong connection with Christmas
- Christmas is portrayed as child-centred; a shift from its adult-centred history
- Timeline parallels emergence of humanism
- Distinct role for parents are providers/guardians of nonreligious Christmas rituals for children
- Schools often provide an institutional framework for Christmas

Interviewer: In terms of holidays and events with them, or ideas such as Christmas, Easter or anything else, do you celebrate any of those? If so, how and what do you do?

Rich: Yes, we certainly do celebrate Christmas. Christmas is one of those things that always annoys me slightly because I feel it's an extremely important festival that's been hijacked by Christianity. It just annoys me that they've glued this whole 'Birth of Jesus' thing onto it, because it is the Midwinter Festival.

Another parent said, 'we do it [Christmas and Easter] in a very 21st century secular, I would say, way, in that it's more about the presents, and the chocolate, and the food, and getting together, than it is about religion.'

- Active role of parents in cultivating belief
- Adults often undertaking extensive labour to cultivate their children's beliefs
- Documented in children's narratives

Lea: 'when we wake up every Christmas morning, my mum has to Hoover... Because there's always snow footprints on our stairs, there's always snow footprints'



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Rite de passage?

- Children and parents are reflexive about their age and phase of life impacting their relationship with Christmas
- Moving into parenthood identified as ushering in a new relationship with Christmas
 - recapturing joy
 - becoming a ritual provider
- But children and parents particularly identify changing relationships with Christmas – and especially Santa-belief – through childhood, as children come into maturity
- Christmas as a coming-of-age ritual within a humanist existential tradition





Age/development and Santa beliefs


Lea: Sometimes people say to me, like my friends say, "Do you believe in Santa and the Tooth Fairy?" And they don't. Violet once asked me, "Do you believe in Santa and the Tooth Fairy?" And I do, but I was a bit embarrassed to say I do because she doesn't.


[...]

Bethany: They don't believe in it and you just feel like they'll laugh at you or something?

Lea: Yes.

Bethany: That's what my brother does. Because he's older than me, his friends might pick on him if he tells them he believes in Santa. **They say that you can't believe in Santa once you're ten, or eleven.** But you can always believe in Santa.






Debbie: I think [my son] **Tim is coming out the other end now**, but I think they do believe in Santa. They think there's an Easter Bunny, they think there's a Tooth Fairy. It's funny actually, because **Tim, this year, he's going to be nine in the summer, and so this last Christmas I think is probably the last one that he's believing in.** And he's starting to ask questions already, and I think he's starting to realise, as he grows older, that it's not physically possible for there to be a Santa that flies around the world and does the whole thing in, you know, 24 hours...

And what's really interesting is that he starts to question stuff, and I just sit and listen, and then I think, "Oh goodness, he doesn't believe anymore." And then, I think I've asked a sort of an open question like, "So, do you think there is a Santa then, Tim?" **And it's almost as if he doesn't not want to believe yet - he's holding onto the last vestiges of that belief. So, he's asked me all the questions, as far as he can without saying to me, "Mum, is there Santa?"** And then if I've turned it around and said, "Do you think there is one?", I think he's then kind of gone - he's put the breaks on the whole conversation, and has gone, "Woah, don't want to take this any further." He said, "Mum, are you telling me there isn't a Santa?" And I can't say to him, "No, there isn't," because **I don't want to burst that childhood bubble for him. But equally, I don't want to say to him, "Yes, there is."**

And it's a really difficult one as a Mum. And it's like, "Tim, we all want to believe in the magic. If you want to carry on and believe in that magic, because Christmas is magical, then that's great - you do so." And he's been quite happy with that.

But it's almost as if he's testing the boundaries with me, as to whether - looking for confirmation that it is all untrue. And then, if it looks like I am about to burst that bubble for him, and he senses that, he's pulling back.



Tricky questions about...

- “Do you believe that God exists?”

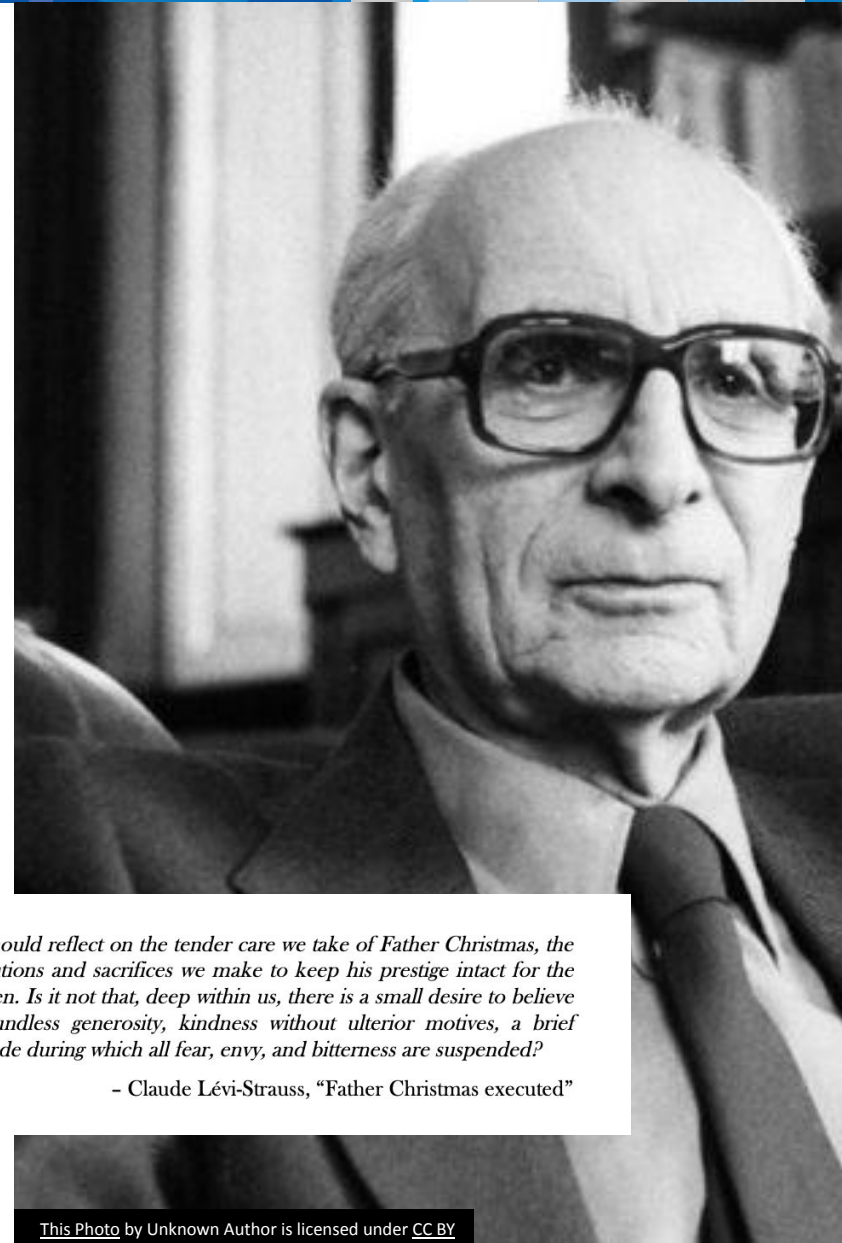
- “Do you believe that Father Christmas exists?”

- Researcher reflections:

- in fieldwork, comfortable talking honestly about beliefs/non-beliefs, when children asked; but questions about Father Christmas were much more challenging.
- ‘I felt an immediate sense of awkwardness and so in most cases I said, yes, I do believe.’

- Why?

- Beliefs about FC more sacred and more protected than other beliefs
- ‘Perhaps it because those beliefs have a ‘shelf life’ to them and children will eventually stop believing in Father Christmas and so as adults we try to protect and preserve that space as long as possible.’
- Feels risky to be open. Including could foresee moral outrage from parents if a visitor came in and suggested otherwise
- Rite de passage: ‘I think it’s almost because belief in Father Christmas is seen of a rite of passage for most children (although not all) and so protecting and upholding that belief is seen as an important duty of adults.’
- Working with older children, might become possible to say that some people do believe in FC, others don’t



We should reflect on the tender care we take of Father Christmas, the precautions and sacrifices we make to keep his prestige intact for the children. Is it not that, deep within us, there is a small desire to believe in boundless generosity, kindness without ulterior motives, a brief interlude during which all fear, envy, and bitterness are suspended?

– Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Father Christmas executed”

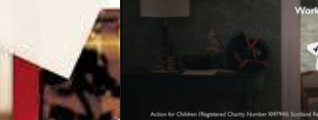
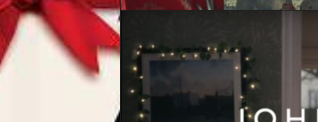
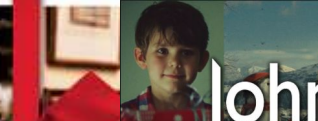
Christmas as a lens...

- on humanism as culture, practice, identity, emotional repertoire ... as well as philosophy
- on humanism as tradition – shared between parents and children, cultivated by schools, enjoyed with siblings and friends
- humanism is, actually, all around?

**love
actually**



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NONRELIGIOUS WORLDVIEWS IN GLOBAL CONTEXT





Understanding Unbelief

- An international research programme investigating the nature and diversity of religious 'unbelief' as a global and multifaceted phenomenon
- Sampling 'atheist' and 'agnostic', using ISSP belief question
- Six nations: Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, UK, US
- Main methods:
 - large scale surveys (n: 900, representative of local atheist and agnostic populations; n: 100, gen. pop.);
 - in-depth interviews (n: 30 per country)



Overview

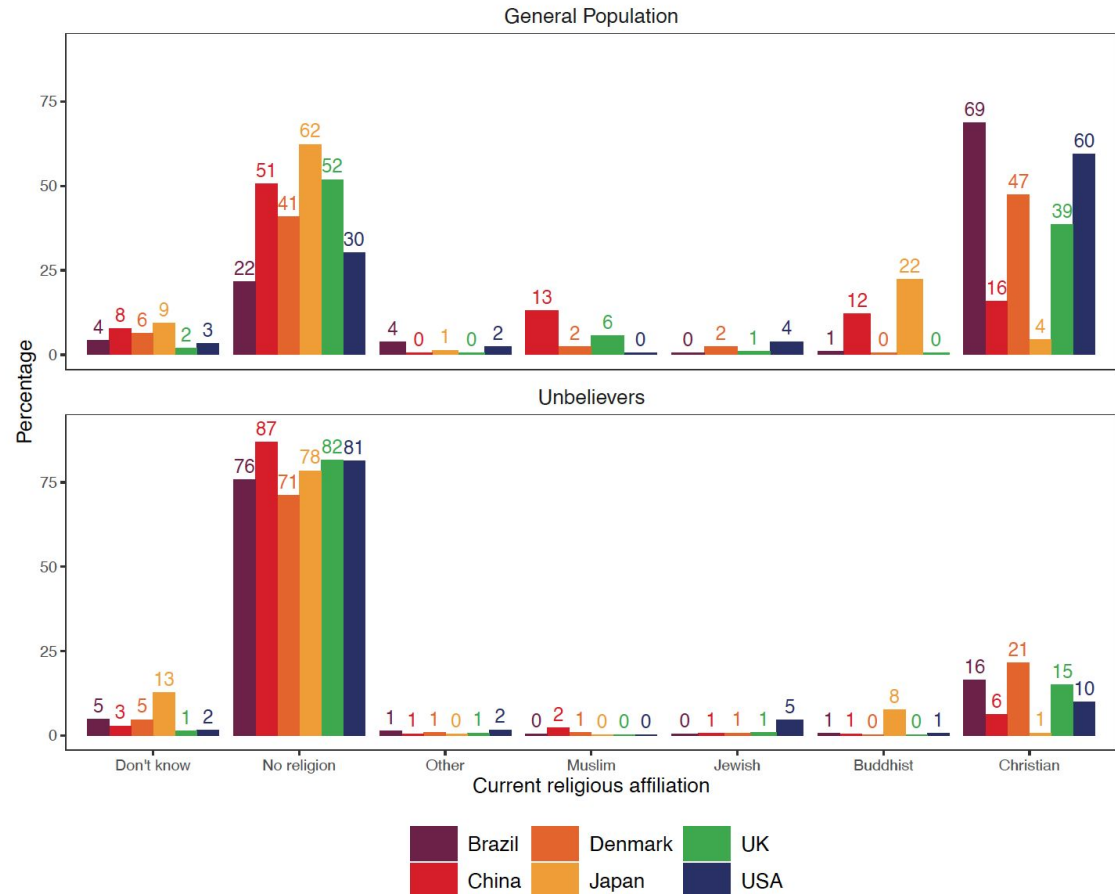
- nonreligious worldviews are growing globally
- this means something: worldview change (vs worldview decline)
- this doesn't mean everything: nonreligious worldviews take different forms, shaped by local cultures and contexts
- So: should not generalize or essentialise nonreligious existential experience or nonreligious worldviews (like humanism)

Images © Aubrey Wade See <https://www.aubreywade.com/lives-of-unbelief>

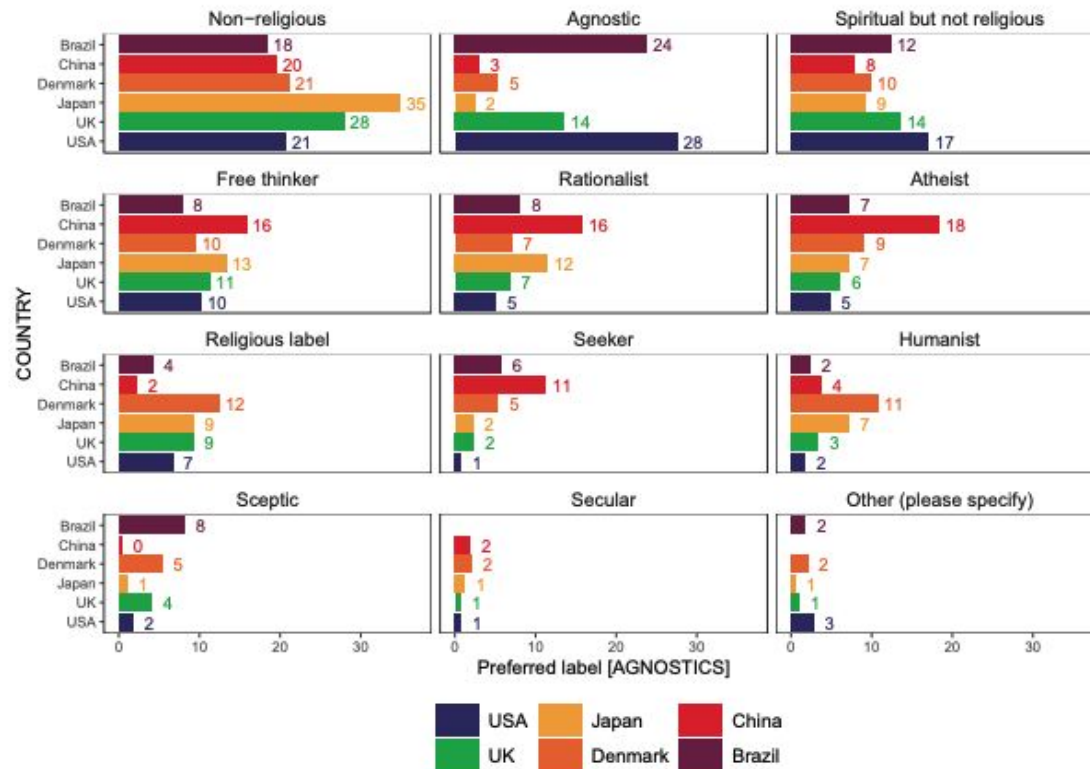
1.1. Current religious affiliation of atheists/agnostics and the general population in each country

Terminology differences play out in the data

- Extensive overlap between NR ID and atheism/agnosticism but imperfect
- Some people with religious IDs have nonreligious worldviews (Christians, US Jews)
- Some people with religious worldviews have non-religious identities

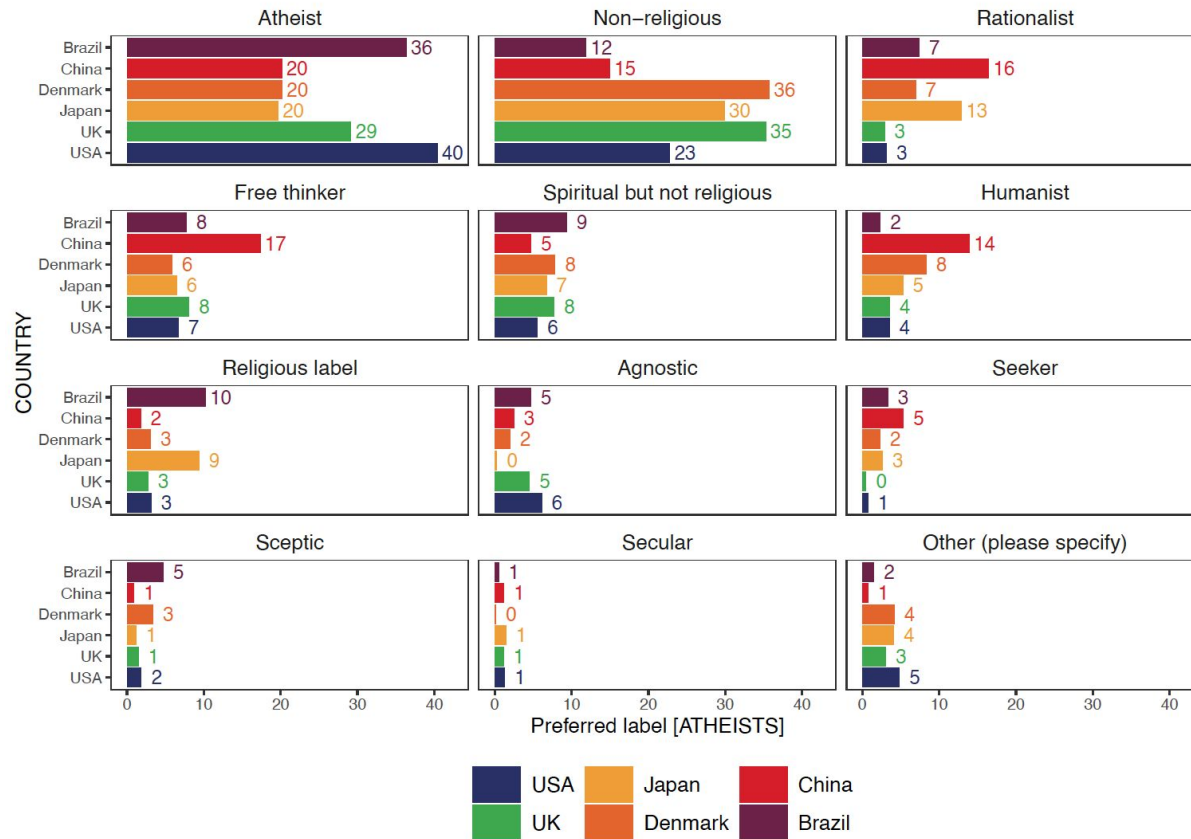


1.3. Preferred (non)religious identities of atheists and agnostics in each country



Agnostic identities

- 'Humanism' is 9th most popular identity overall
- Danish and Japanese agnostics most likely to identify as 'humanist'
- 'Humanist' is third most popular identity for Danish agnostics (after NR or a religion)

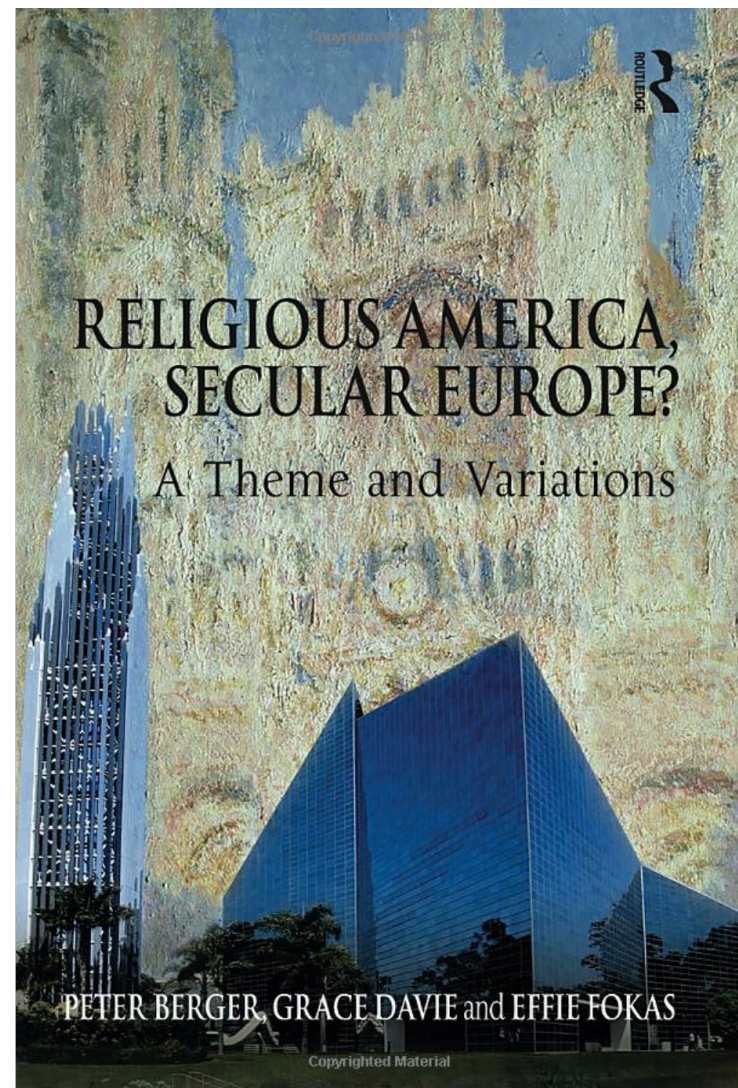


Atheist identities

- Humanism is 6th most popular identity for atheists overall
- Relatively popular in China (though only 5th most popular identity) and Denmark

Global picture

- Nonreligion is growing
- Old story: nonreligion and/or atheism are growing but not as fast as religion and/or theism
- New story: religion and/or theism is growing but not as fast as nonreligion and/or atheism
- Old story: 'Secular Europe, religious America'
- New story: America is fastest nonreligionising country in the world



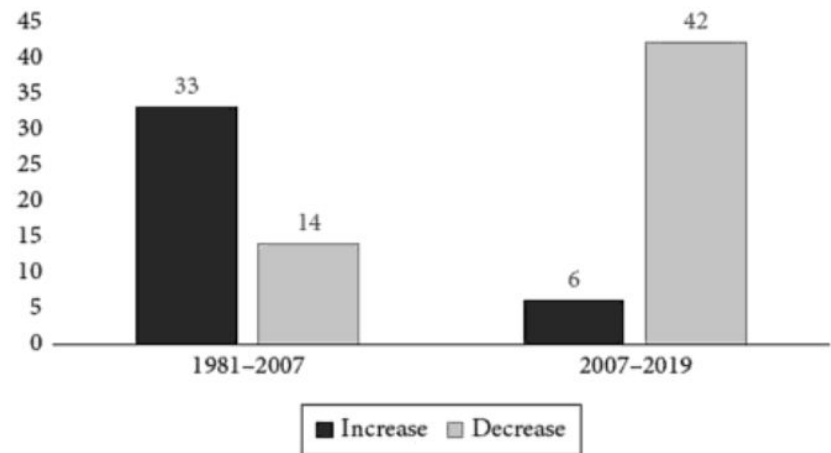
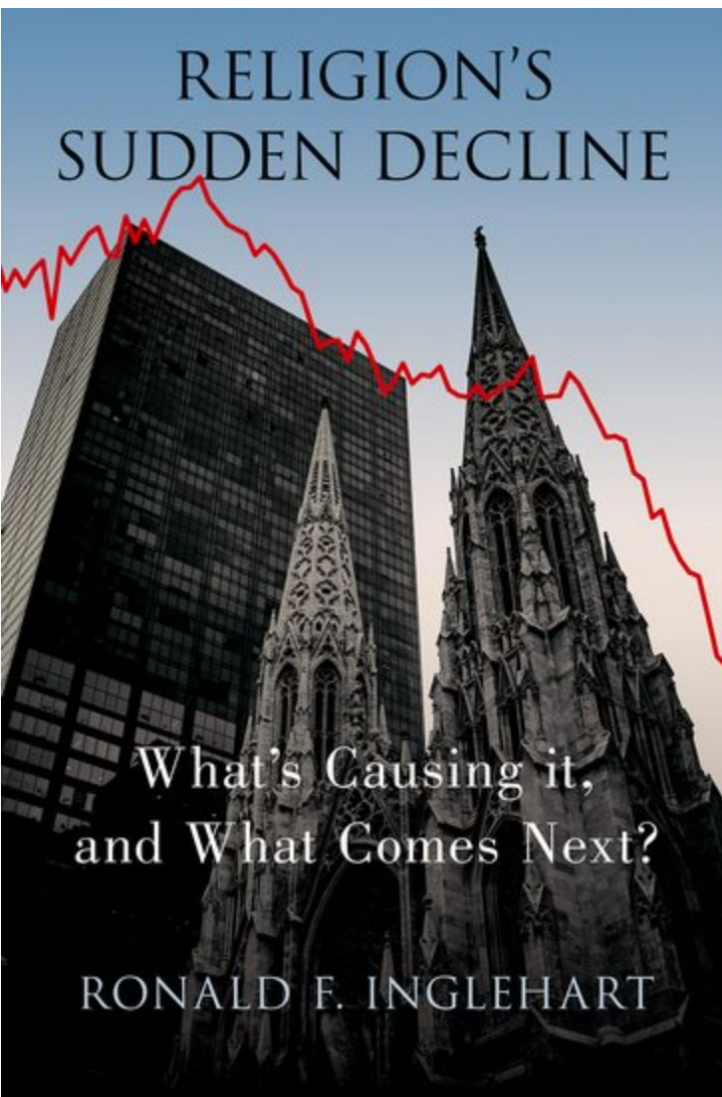


Figure 1.1 Countries showing increasing and decreasing religiosity over two time periods.

Source: Responses to question "How important is God in your life?" asked in the World Values Survey and European Values Study. See Figures 7.3, 7.4, and 7.5 for fuller details.



SECULARISATION OR WORLDVIEW CHANGE?



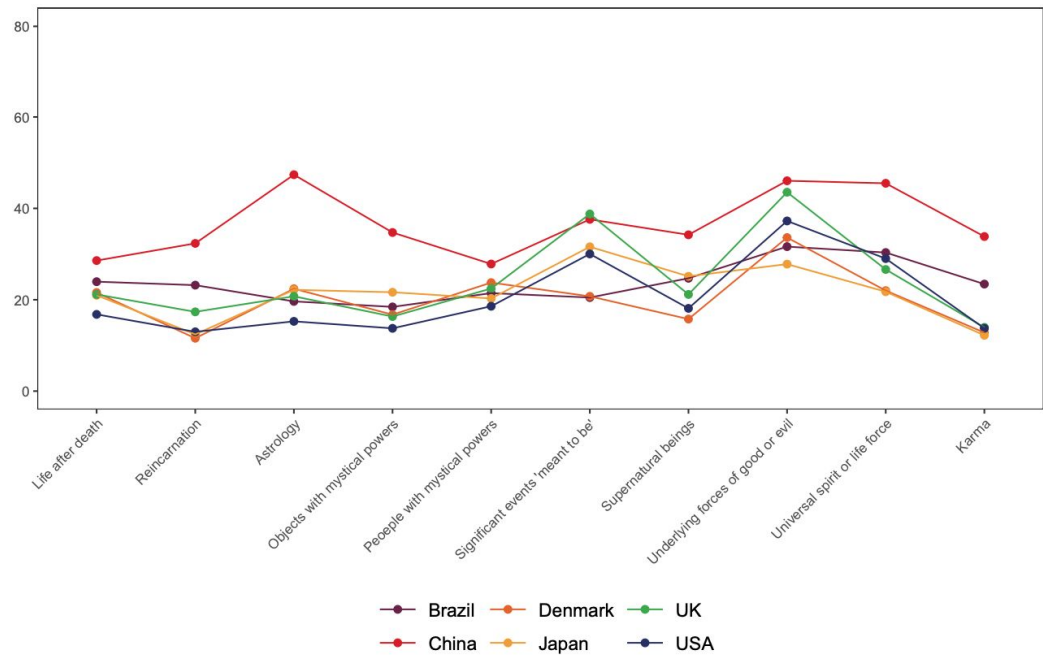
Worldview change

- Vs public and academic accounts which downplay change
- Vs secularization theory: religion declines, societies move on



Increasing
naturalism
(explainer
slide)

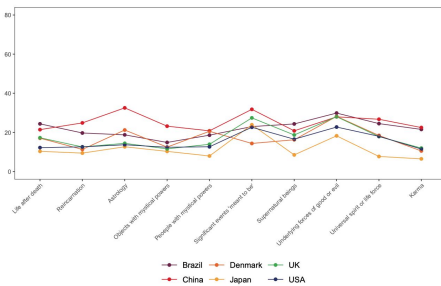
12 2.2.2. Agnostics



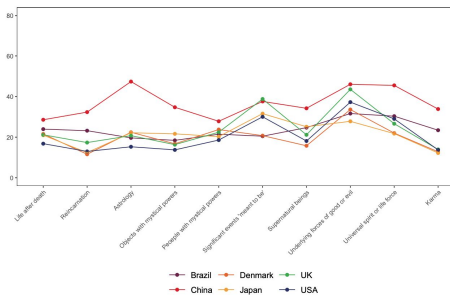
Increasing naturalism (comparative)

2.2. Proportion of atheists, agnostics and the general population 'strongly' or 'somewhat' agreeing with the existence of various supernatural beings/phenomena

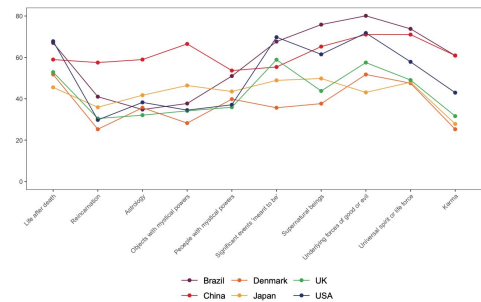
2.2.1. Atheists



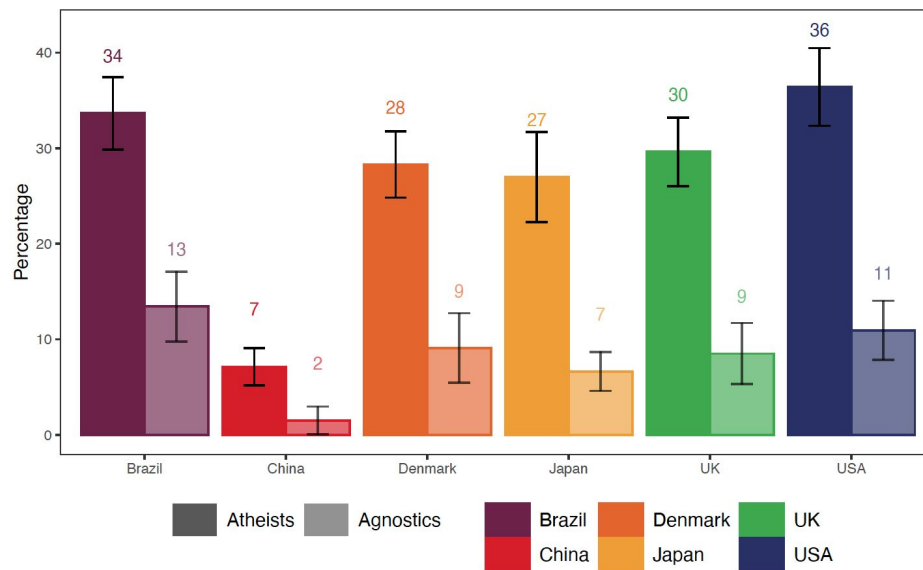
2.2.2. Agnostics



2.2.3. General Population



2.3. Proportions of atheists and agnostics who are naturalists (i.e., who 'strongly' or 'somewhat' disagree with all 'existence of supernatural being/phenomena' questions)



- high levels of naturalism
- contours of nonreligious worldviews shaped by supernatural traditions
- distinct nonreligious worldviews: (at least) two groups

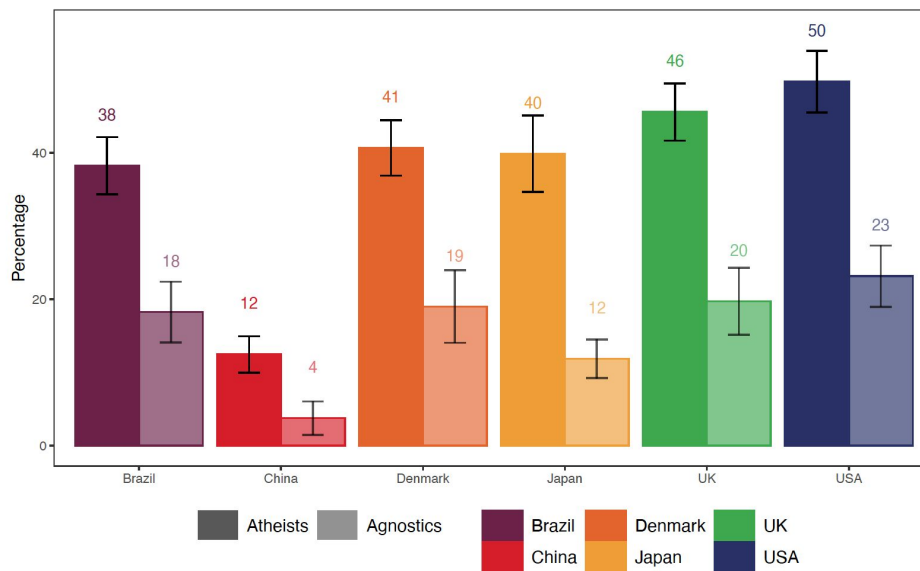
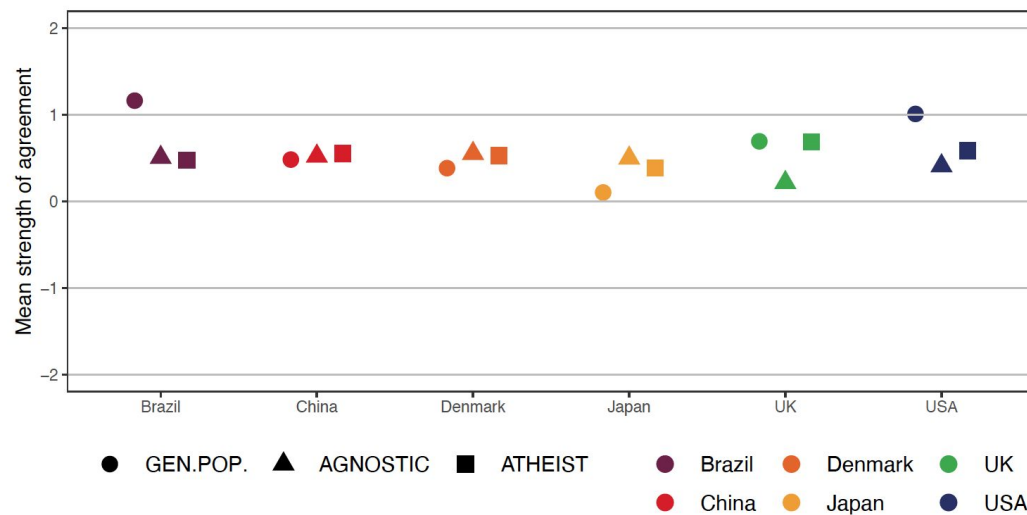


Figure 1: Same as above but without good/evil, fate, and life force

- certain beliefs are particularly popular cross-culturally
- good/evil, fate, life force
- remove those and very high levels of naturalism overall
- but relative significance of certain beliefs helps understand nonreligious worldviews
- e.g. idea of intrinsic / fixed 'evil' (anti-humanist)

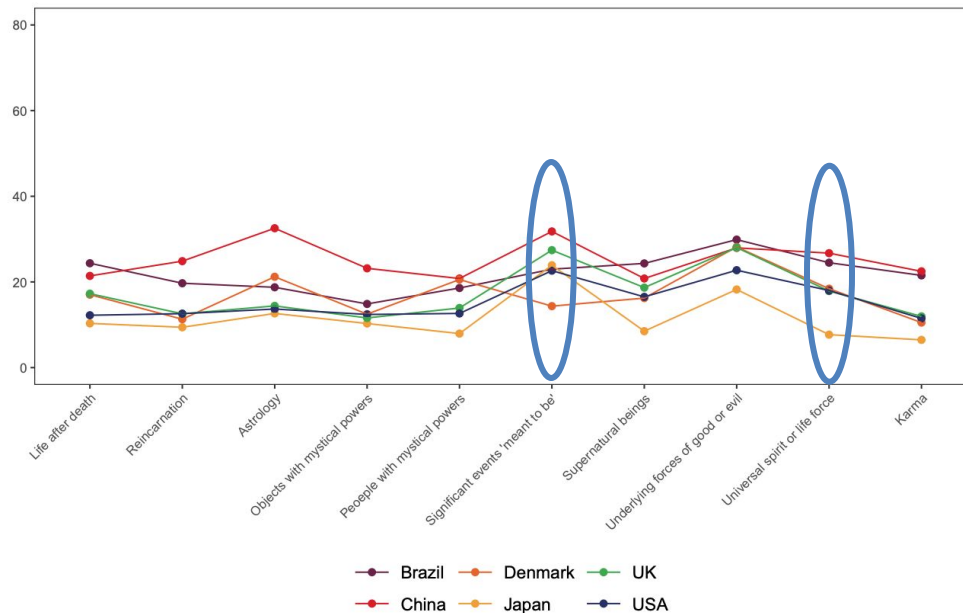
Equal confidence in religious and nonreligious worldviews

2.1. *Different groups' mean strength of agreement with the statement 'I feel confident that my beliefs about God's existence are the right ones'*



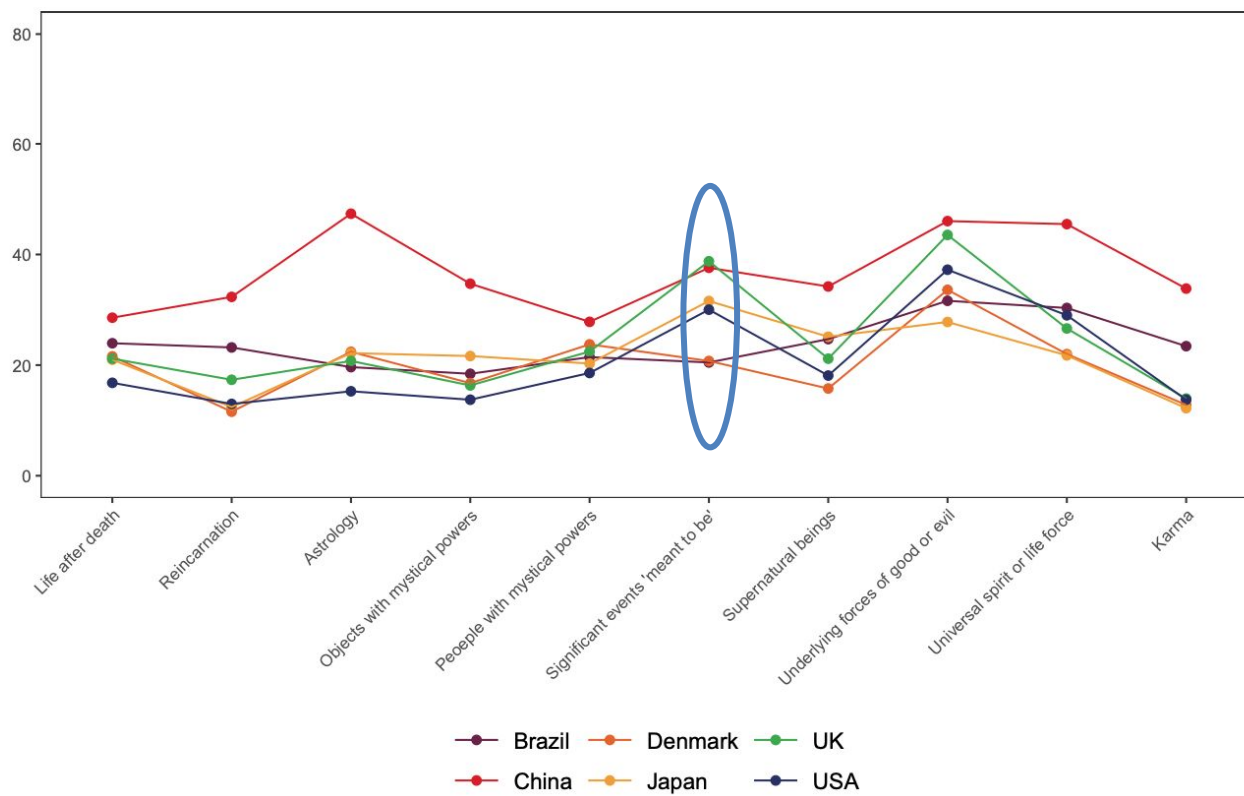
2.2. Proportion of atheists, agnostics and the general population 'strongly' or 'somewhat' agreeing with the existence of various supernatural beings/phenomena

2.2.1. Atheists

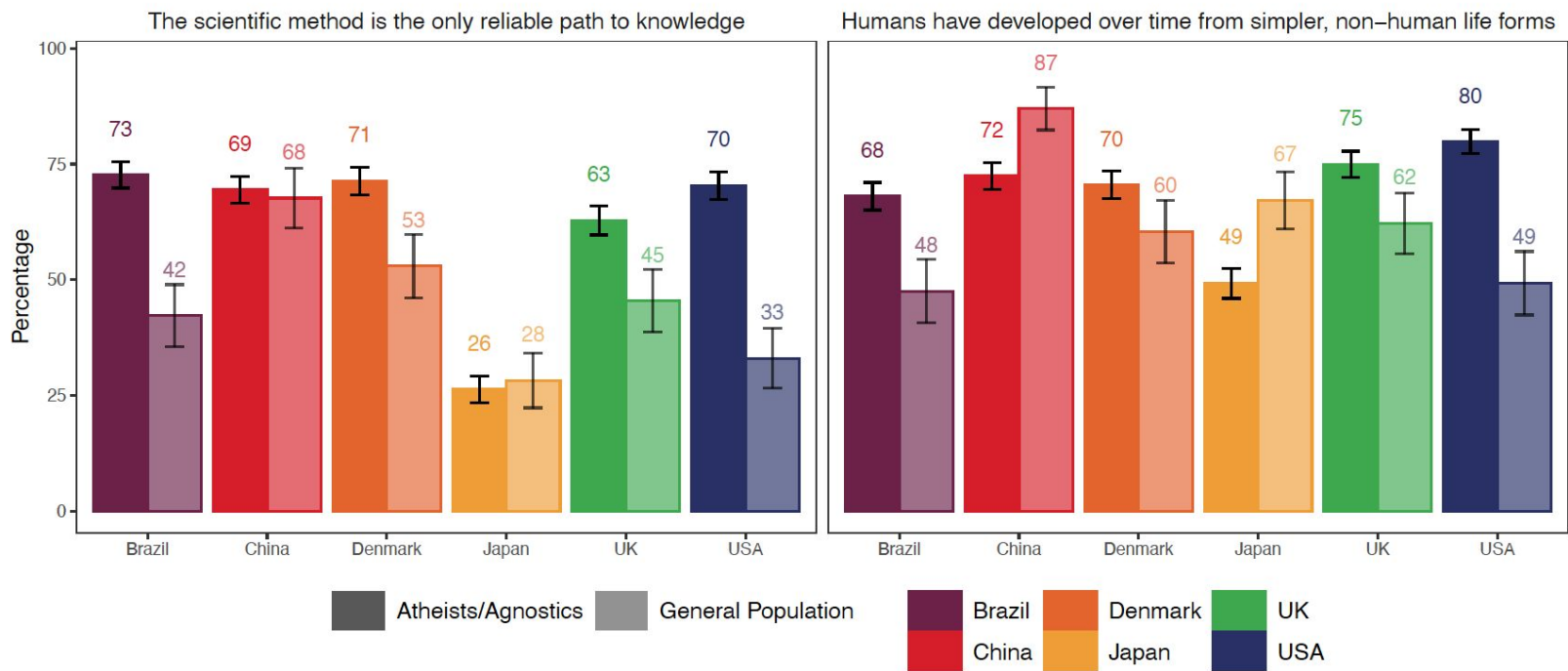


- general patterns but significant cross-cultural variation
- someone being 'atheist' (or 'humanist') tells you something about them but not everything
- patterns of sources of meaning are similar, e.g. 'truth' as value in (post-)Protestant settings regardless of theism/atheism, 'friendship' in Denmark, 'present moment' and 'compassion' in Japan

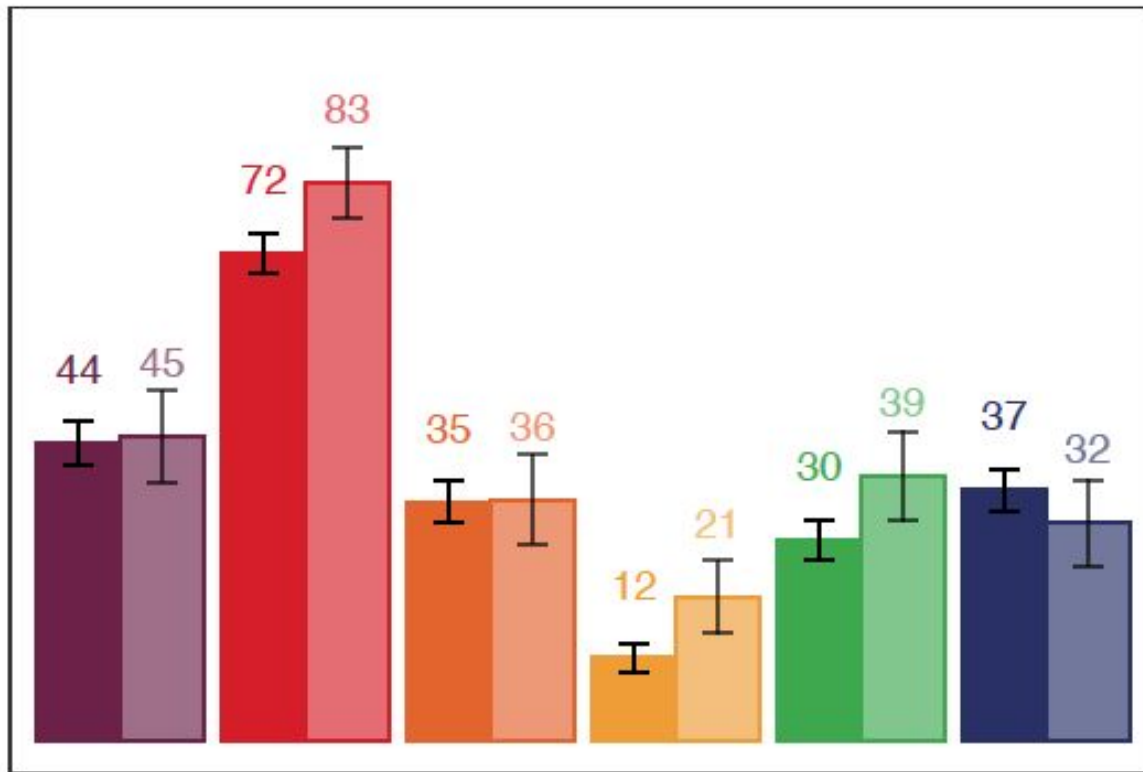
12 2.2.2. Agnostics



2.5. Proportions of atheists/agnostics and general population 'strongly' or 'somewhat' agreeing with selected science items



In the long run, society becomes better over time



100% 90% 80% 70% 60% 50% 40% 30% 20% 10% 0%

- lots of humanism around probably
- hard to quantify (currently)
- dominant in schools, at least in middle childhood
- but also worldview diversity
- including:
 - alternative spirituality
 - agnosticism / post-modernism
 - non-human-centred materialisms
 - post-humanisms



Images © Aubrey Wade See <https://www.aubreywade.com/lives-of-unbelief>

Resources from today



- **Understanding Unbelief:** more information at <https://www.explainingatheism.org/resources/understanding-unbelief>
- **Explaining Atheism:** more information at <https://www.explainingatheism.org/>
- Bullivant, S., M. Farias, J. Lanman & L. Lee (2019) **Understanding Unbelief: Atheists and agnostics around the world**, Interim findings from 2019 research in Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, available online [here](#)
- Lee, L (2015) *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular*, OUP
- Anna Strhan, Lois Lee, Rachael Shillitoe, **Becoming Humanist: Worldview Formation and the Emergence of Atheist Britain**, *Sociology of Religion*, 2024; <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srad05>
- Laborde, C. (2017) *Liberalism's Religion*, Harvard UP
- Wade, A. **Lives of Unbelief** project: learn more at <https://www.aubreywade.com/lives-of-unbelief> and <https://www.theguardian.com/global/2021/jan/23/atheists-agnostics-non-believers-on-the-meaning-of-life>



Over to you!

- Grateful for any reflections or feedback
 - Any surprises here?
 - Anything that is useful to you in your work?
 - Anything that could have been useful that is missing?
- 