The International Demography of Atheists

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Who is an atheist? This article defines atheists in two ways, by belief and by self-identification. Logically speaking, one might expect to get the same results from the two approaches—that is, for people who do not believe in God to call themselves atheists, and conversely for people who call themselves atheists to disbelieve in God. For the most part this is true, but there are surprisingly many exceptions: self-described atheists who nonetheless say they believe in God, as well as people who don’t believe in God and yet do not accept the label of ‘atheist.’

Both the World Values Survey and win-Gallup International use self-identification rather than belief as their yardstick for measuring atheists. Both surveys ask respondents whether they are religious, not religious, or atheists. Separating the categories this way seems absurd from the viewpoint of pure logic, since they are not mutually exclusive: someone who is an atheist can be, and probably is, also not religious. In practice, though, the surveys are probably capturing something real: ‘Atheist’ is perceived in most countries as a fairly extreme, even confrontational stance, versus the milder ‘not religious.’

The World Values Survey and win-Gallup International are also alike in steering people away from taking their own behavior into account in answering the atheism question, recognizing that even non-religious people might be engaged in religious activities if they are, for example, married to or living with somebody who is religious. The World Values Survey question wording is as follows: ‘Independently of whether you attend religious services or not, would you say you are: A religious person; Not a religious person; An atheist; No answer (not read); Don’t know (not read).’ The win-Gallup International question reads: ‘Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person or a convinced atheist?’ Note the slightly different question wording compared with the World Values Survey.¹

Demographers and surveyors generally don’t define atheism with the same formal rigor as philosophers and theologians might. The Oxford Handbook of Atheism defines atheism as ‘an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’ (Bullivant and Ruse 2013:2). But anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann (2012) argues that belief is socially situated. This chapter demonstrates, through cross-country comparisons, that Luhrmann is correct in that religiosity and atheism are perceived quite differently from one country to another (see also Keysar 2014). Regardless of the dictionary definition, the connotation of ‘atheist’ is very different in South Korea from what it is in, say, Saudi Arabia. In many societies, most notably Muslim-majority ones, coming out as an atheist is risky, as atheists are mistrusted outcasts (Beit-Hallahmi 2015; Cragun et al., 2012).

¹ Earlier WVS waves have used the term “a convinced atheist.”
The objectives of this chapter are four-fold: first, to estimate the number of atheists worldwide by utilizing two definitions of atheism (identification and belief); second, to compare estimates for each country by those two definitions; third, to provide socio-demographic profiles of the two populations of atheists (identification and belief) around the globe; and lastly, given the discrepancies of the two approaches, to look alternatively at the Nones, the more encompassing group, by country and worldwide.

## Atheists Worldwide

Win-Gallup International, an international network of polling organizations (that was historically connected to the Washington-based Gallup Inc.), created its religiosity and atheism index based on surveys in 57 countries across the globe. In those countries, 13% of respondents defined themselves as ‘atheist’ in 2012, an increase of 3 percentage points since 2005 (Win-Gallup International 2012).

The World Values Survey (WVS), organized by a global network of social scientists headquartered in Sweden, is conducted in almost 100 countries. The most recent data come from the 2010–14 updated Wave 6. Its 85,000 respondents also represent 57 countries, about 3.7 billion adults worldwide. According to WVS estimates, 11% of the people in surveyed countries describe themselves as atheists (with 3.1% do not know or do not answer to the religious question). However, the share of atheists drops to 4.2% when excluding China (with 3.0% unanswered), which dominates the totals because of its sheer size and high ratio of atheists. Beyond the overall estimate, the WVS offers global comparisons and time series analyses, since it has repeated the same questions in several waves beginning in 1981. The WVS covers the three dimensions of religion: belief, behavior, and belonging.

For consistency, this chapter relies on one main source of data available to researchers, namely the WVS. It allows demographic comparisons since similar methodology was applied to collect data, and similar survey instruments were utilized in the participating countries. This approach is unlike a meta-analysis, which combines many data sources based on different methodologies. However, the global comparisons present methodological shortcomings as well. Translation of the survey instrument is challenging as...