

Alan Dershowitz: Church-State Merger

Paul Kurtz: Election 2000

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*Celebrating Reason and Humanity*

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KAMINER**

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Evolved Yet?**

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as Political Territory**

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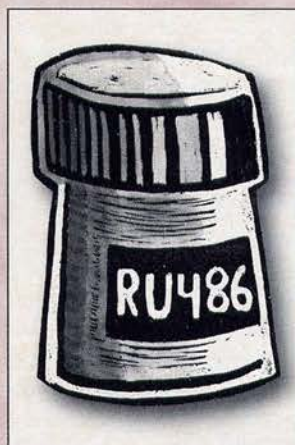
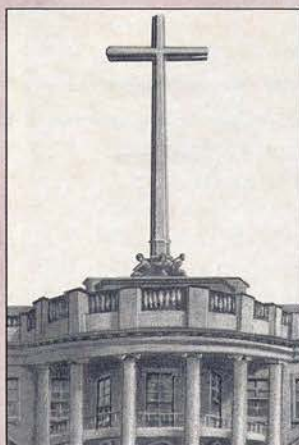
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# Are Atheists More

A NEW STUDY TELLS THE TALE

## Depressed than Religious People?

Franz Buggle,

Dorothee Bister, Gisela Nohe,

Wolfgang Schneider, Karl Uhmann

**I**n recent years, the view that religious belief and participation in religious acts of worship has a positive effect upon the well-being of man has repeatedly been publicized in the German-speaking sphere by high-circulation magazines such as *Der Spiegel* and popular-science periodicals like *Psychologie Heute*, which cite epidemiological inquiries and quantitative research.<sup>1</sup> These articles also suggest that religious people are able to cope with crises in their lives, with stress and psycho-social conflicts, more easily and develop highly effective coping strategies; moreover, they state that faith has a positive effect upon psychological and even physical health. A mass inquiry conducted in 1992 among members of the two major churches in Germany (Roman Catholic and Lutheran Protestant), for example, revealed that self-perceived satisfaction with life was more than 10% higher among regular church-goers than among those who do not go to church. This statement, among others, seemed to confirm the results of previous extensive studies, all of them suggesting that devout and practicing adherents of a religion were generally less prone to depression than persons who were brought up in religious faith but had turned away from church later in their lives.<sup>2</sup> Other inquiries that were conducted among smaller populations, too, lead to the assumption "that religion has a slight positive sum effect on self-perceptions of happiness." In his essay "Can Religion Make You Happy?" (*FI*, Summer 1998), John F. Schumaker gives a survey of seven quantitative studies dealing directly with the two variables, and of 20 others that operated with components of "happiness," all of them rendering more or less the same results.<sup>3</sup>



These kinds of studies have repeatedly been criticized, and rightly so, pointing out that the effects described are not the result of religious belief but of other factors, such as social support, conformity, etc. On no account does this mean, however, that the results of these studies can be rejected altogether. But the question arises as to whether they were not principally distorted by a systematic error made in designing and performing the studies. All of the studies mentioned have a serious methodological deficiency: none of them examines a control group of determined atheists whose psychic condition is, for example, compared to that of groups of half-hearted wavering atheists and groups of persons ranging from the only slightly religious to religious fanatics. Moreover, the epidemiological studies suppress the fact that the absolute number of determined atheists in the total population is very small in relation to the number of more or less religious people. By no means, however, may the unequal distribution of the two groups within the basic total number play a part in a *qualitative* comparison between them. This fact has to be given due consideration with any experimental design if it really is to meet the methodological criteria.

A study we conducted ourselves among determined atheists is very well suited to the purpose of putting the debate of whether there is a statistically substantiable relation between religiousness and depression on a more objective level, a debate that is also quite often influenced by ideological views.<sup>4</sup> Our study, which was conducted on the basis of a comprehensive questionnaire, comprises a population of 174 persons of all ages and both sexes, who, in order to be considered for our evaluation, had to fulfill the following preconditions: all test persons must come from religious families and must also have received the religious education of the average citizen (as far as the imparting of religious doctrines and the performance of certain rituals are concerned); they must also have left the church later in their lives.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they were categorized as determined atheists only if they were also subscribers to a German anticlerical periodical. With this latter criterion we wanted to ensure that the test persons had left church not "only" for financial reasons but also from inner conviction and, moreover, manifested more or less openly that they were opposed to religion. For the measurement of the average emotional condition of our test persons, we used Beck's Depression Inventory (BDI), which is widely applied in psychology. We had chosen this standardized measuring method especially for the reason that it would enable us to compare the values obtained from our test population with those obtained from test groups of religious persons.

In a study conducted almost at the same time as ours among Catholic students (all of whom were, of course, church

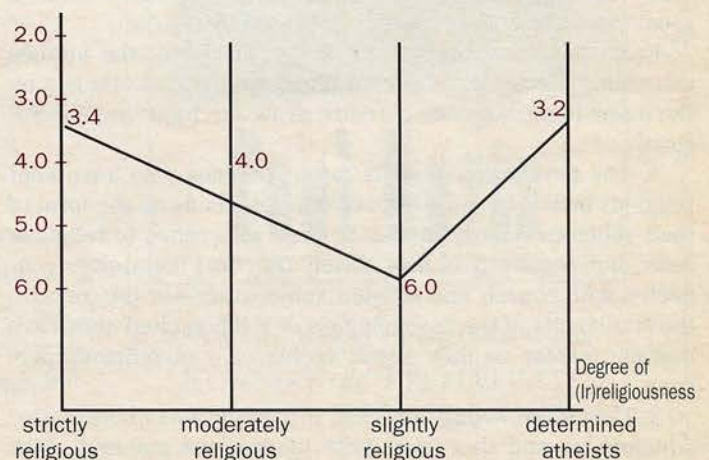
*Dr. Franz Buggle is professor emeritus of the Department of Clinical Psychology of Albert-Ludwigs-University at Freiburg/Breisgau, Germany. He is the author of many books including Empirische Untersuchung über die weltanschauliche Einstellung heutiger deutscher Universitätsstudenten (Meisenheim 1962) and Denn sie wissen nicht, was sie glauben. Oder warum man redlicherweise nicht mehr Christ sein kann. Eine Streitschrift (Reinbek 2nd ed. 1997). He conducted his study with Dorothee Bister, Gisela Nohe, Wolfgang Schneider, ad Karl Uhmman*

members), the assessment of the test persons' statements by means of the BDI scale, where higher values also mean a higher proneness to depression, suggests that significantly fewer (in statistical terms) signs of depressive conditions were to be noted with strictly religious persons than with those to whom faith is of relatively little importance.<sup>6</sup> The authors determined

## These kinds of studies have repeatedly been criticized, and rightly so, pointing out that the effects described are not the result of religious belief but of other factors.

an average value of 4.6 for all church members they had questioned. Moreover, they subdivided the test groups according to how close their emotional ties with religion and church were. The values they determined were 3.4 for the strictly religious group, 6.0 for the less religious group, and 4.0 for the group of moderately religious people, which means the highest degree of depression was found in the sub-group of the least religious persons. From this, the investigators—like the studies cited above—draw the conclusion that "depression is the price that has to be paid for giving up religious convictions." This conclusion, however, is entirely dubious, as the values determined in the group of less religious people, i.e. the "lukewarm" Christians, are—in a suggestive manner—taken as a comparative value for all those who have freed themselves from the religious beliefs in which they were brought up, and the investigators are simply taking advantage of the fact that, in statistical terms, the number of determined atheists is small in comparison to the relatively great number of more or less religious people, as we have already mentioned above. Our study has proved that determined atheists actually show a significantly lower depression score: 3.2. If we transfer these values into a coordinate system and take the inverse value for depression as the ordinate and the degree of (ir-)religiousness as the abscissa, we obtain an asymmetrical U-shaped curve. This means that fanatical Christians and militant atheists are least prone to depression, whereas wavering atheists and the half-

Figure 1. Inverse Degree of Depression According to BDI (Beck's Depression Inventory)





heartedly religious are literally “washed out”—or, to illustrate it by a quotation from the Bible: “But the half-hearted I shall spew.” The asymmetry is due to the fact that, on the average, even with devout Christians depressions occur more frequently than with determined atheists. The most distinct contrast, however, is to be noted between the group of determined atheists and the group of slightly religious people.

## DEGREES OF DEPRESSION

An inquiry among church members that we had used for the purpose of comparison also revealed that, with the Christians questioned, a correlation existed between their basic psychological condition at the present time and the contents that were imparted to them by religious education, that is, the more positive the notion imparted to them of the “qualities” of their

## **Our study has proved that determined atheists actually show a significantly lower depression score.**

god and of the traits in the human character was, the better they feel today; the more sinful man and the more malicious their god appeared to them from what they had been told, the worse they feel today on the average. As mentioned above, we had, for reasons of comparability of the various studies, only evaluated the data obtained from those atheists who, just like the church members already mentioned, had been brought up in religious faith, then turned away from the religion that had been inculcated in them and finally left the church.

In the case of the church opponents who were questioned, our study revealed that, in contrast to church members, their psychological condition at the present time does not depend on the *specific contents* of religious socialization. For this purpose, we compared—among other data—the statements relating to the image of God that was imparted to our test persons in their childhood to their emotional condition at the present time. The test persons were subdivided into three groups, i.e. groups that had either a positive, negative, or a neutral notion of God during their childhood. The F-value of a variance analysis was not significant at the 5% level. In contrast to the aforementioned study we used for the purpose of comparison, we could not find any statistically proven correlation between the variables mentioned. We conclude that the participants in our study had been able to free their minds and emotions to a great extent from the restraints imposed by religion.

From the first comparison of the results of the studies examining church members on the one hand and atheists on the other hand, we can therefore draw the following conclusions:

1. The psychological condition of persons who have kept religious beliefs in some form or other depends on the form of their religious education and on their adherence to religious rules, independently of how closely they feel themselves connected with church and religion subjectively—in this regard, the statements of the psychologists of religion cited above are correct, insofar as they speak *exclusively* of religious persons.

2. They were wrong, however, if they put forth speculative statements—and that in a quite tendentious manner—with

regard to the psychic condition of atheists. For, as our study proves, a person who underwent religious socialization and then had the courage and clear mind to break with religion and church later on has the best chance to live a happier life than any Christian under statistically comparable conditions. Apart from an atheist attitude that is based on reason, this requires a clear analysis and understanding of one's own past in regard to religion.

In the following, we shall present our findings regarding the way the church opponents questioned were able to free themselves from their religious beliefs of the past and describe the correlation between the determination the test persons had shown in this conflict and their psychic condition and thinking today.

## THE COURAGE TO BECOME

As is to be expected, *science* plays a central role on the way from religion by upbringing to atheism. Knowledge gained by means of observation and logical conclusion is best suited to question the fundamentals of any religion, that is, the existence of any supernatural being.

*Ninety-two* percent of our test persons therefore answered the question of whether a gain in scientific knowledge had played a part in the process of detachment from religion positively, natural sciences taking first place with 76% of those questioned. In comparison, only 59% stated that unpleasant experiences with church institutions had been a decisive factor for them.

Consequently, gaining knowledge seems to be of greater importance in the process of detachment from religion than unpleasant occurrences and experiences, which, in turn, can only be evaluated adequately when, after being judged as to their consequences for the individual, they are also assessed within overall categories. The first doubts raised by the persons we questioned were, in 74% of the cases, raised by so-called religious doctrines (such as the existence of God) and not, as could also be supposed, on the behavior of religious parents or teachers. We may conclude from this that it is the breach of the taboo on thinking (that is, of the prohibition of examining the degree of probability of religious statements) in connection with the gain in knowledge that is most detrimental to faith and is the most effective form of protection against mysticism and irrationalism. This is impressively confirmed by the answers to the question of whether belief in God had come up again at any time, perhaps in desperate situations, after those questioned had left the church: 79% of the atheists answered “no,”—that means after their abandonment they never again showed any inclination to fall back upon the consolation promised by their former religious faith. Ninety-seven percent of the atheists we questioned were of the opinion that scientific thinking is incompatible with religious thinking; moreover, they reject speculation and irrationalism in not openly religious manifestations as well: 81% reject astrology, in which God's influence is replaced by that of the stars; 79% agree with the statement that “soul and spirit” only exist on the basis of physiological, e.g. material processes. Consequently, 83% were of the conviction that there is no life after death whatsoever. Eighty-four percent reject with reference to the evolution theory any worldly versions of the creation myth, suggesting a fixed pre-existing plan behind the ori-



gin of the vegetable and animal kingdoms.

Incidentally, one of our results may shed light on how far the atheists questioned had, during their detachment from religion, moved away from the "intellectual atmosphere" prevailing in their families. The families of all of our test persons were, as far as the observation of rituals is concerned, religious on an average level, but were, compared to the total population in terms of social statistics, of a more than average academic type; as was to be expected, in these families, famous personalities, such as Goethe and King Frederick the Great of Prussia, who, in the eyes of the German educated bourgeoisie, stand for tolerance in religious matters and a moderately critical distance towards organized Christianity, enjoyed a mainly positive reputation (for instance Goethe in 73% of cases, Frederick in 53%). On the other hand, the "intellectual" attitude in the families towards famous representatives of the Enlightenment and of sciences probably, in its tendency, corresponded more to that of the average population. Before they reached the age of ten, 59% of our test persons did not know Galileo, 72% did not know anything about Voltaire, and 59% knew nothing about Darwin, and a determined atheist such as Marx was judged negatively by 46%. As was also to be expected, all of these personalities were known to the test persons at the time of the study and were also judged mainly positively: Galileo by 95%, Voltaire by 86%, Darwin by 93%, Marx by 91%.

Apart from science, *sexuality* has a central importance in the detachment from religion. Sixty-six percent of those ques-

tioned noted, as the main point of criticism of religion, "the suppression of sexual and general self-determination and of a happy life." Sixty-six percent also reported that during their childhood and youth they were imparted the notion that sexuality was sinful, dirty, and bad, and as a consequence more than 50% of the test persons suffered from heavy feelings of guilt because of sexual fantasies and activities. While overcoming religious convictions, 46% succeeded completely, 32% partly in overcoming those religion-based feelings of guilt (both according to their own statements). This certainly contributes decisively to the fact that 90% of the atheists were able to note an increase in their opportunities to enjoy life and experience happiness compared to the times when they were still religious. The increase in sexual self-determination is reflected in the increase in general independence (noted by 87%) and self-confidence (also noted by 87%).

In this context some data from social statistics are also relevant. The level of education is unusually high among atheists: 39% are university graduates and another 37% are high school graduates. Their striving for individual independence is also shown by the fact, for instance, that 60% of the test persons are not married (compared to only 40% of the total population of the Federal Republic of Germany) and a further 13% are divorced.

Moreover, the study also revealed differences regarding the degree of self-determination and the proneness to depression among the atheist population. In the course of the evaluation of the data we were able to determine some reasons for

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statistically interpretable deviations between the test persons. For example, we should, on the one hand, point out that the statistical comparison between the depression values of men and women did not render any differences. This result is especially noteworthy because in the average population women suffer far more frequently from depression than men. The evaluation of our questionnaires led to the result that women,

## The study we have presented here is the only one worldwide to examine a population of resolute atheists.

compared to men, had suffered additional disadvantages in the course of their religious education. Thirty-one percent of the men and none of the women noted advantages; 67% of the women noted disadvantages due to their sex in religious education. This sex-linked difference in religious education is statistically highly significant ( $\chi^2 = 31.94$ ;  $\alpha = .000$ ). We are able to prove that most of our test persons who—compared to others—have been victims of greater impairment were able to make up for it by greater efforts during the detachment from religion and that this is why they did not show any higher depression values than men at the time of the study. There was no significant F-value with respect to sex using variance analysis. A small group of women, however, reported that they did not fight against the sex-linked specific role they were expected to adopt, as was imparted to them during their religious education. These women showed significantly higher depression values, which confirms our basic hypothesis that the extent of the individual analysis and assessment of one's religious past will decide to a considerable degree the extent of the present capability of enjoying happiness.

The overwhelming majority of the test persons referred to themselves as militant atheists (74%); only a few of them were rather hesitant and undetermined in their opposition to the church. We examined the possibility of a statistical correlation between this rather placid attitude towards the church and the tendency of these test persons to fall back upon so-called religious coping strategies, e.g. consolation promised by the church. While 74% of the militant atheists do not remember situations when they would have wished to pray again, this is only the case with 61% of the nonmilitant atheists. This is a statistically significant result ( $\chi^2 = 10.66$ ;  $\alpha = .03$ ). Thus we found—apart from the extent of the assessment of one's own religious past—a second criterion for the statistical prediction of the psychic condition of atheists: resoluteness in their opposition to religion and church.

### PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

In public, the image of an unhappy and dismal atheist who is haunted by inner doubts and fears and is already paying dearly for his opposition to religion in this life is often conveyed. This image is not necessarily—and not always—wrong, but it is certainly wrong when, as we were able to prove in our study, atheists who have gone through a religious upbringing later on succeed in reconquering *all* spheres of life we described above, which had previously been occupied by the church.

In order to conclude this short summary of the evaluation of

the questionnaires (the original study comprises more than 500 pages—further details can be furnished on request) we should like, once again, to point out the most important results: contrary to the tendentious assertions put up by numerous studies on the psychology of religion, simply taking advantage of the statistically small number of atheists compared to the relatively great number of strictly religious persons, atheists are *less* prone to

depression than religious persons. Their psychic condition differs most impressively from those who, though quite obviously with a guilty conscience, do not keep the church's rules, but never seriously analyzed their own religious education and their obviously persistent secret, religion-based convictions. There is a less distinct difference between atheists and strictly religious persons

who unbrokenly stick to religious prescriptions and therefore are less depressed by feelings of guilt than "lukewarm" Christians. But atheists also have an advantage over the hard core of believers with respect to their depression values—although the difference is not so great.

The study we have presented here in short summary is, to our knowledge, the only one worldwide to examine, with due scientific scrutiny, a population of resolute atheists, allowing a comparison of this group with believers by means of a standardized measure. Doubtlessly there is considerable need for further investigation in this field, especially regarding the process of detachment from religion, but such a project—at least in Germany—will not meet with much support from public institutions, quite contrary to inquiries conducted among believers. Further in-depth analysis and verification of our results in international and transcultural comparisons would also be very desirable. We do hope to have given an impulse in this direction with our study. **fi**

### Notes

1. "Was glauben die Deutschen?" ("What Do Germans Believe In?"), *Spiegel* 46, no. 25 (1992), 36-52, based on an inquiry by the EMNID Institute, and "Sind Gläubige gesunder? Die positiven Wirkungen der Religion" ("Are the Religious Healthier? The Positive Effects of Religion"), *Psychologie Heute* 24, no. 6 (1997) based on the aforementioned inquiry.

2. W. Harenberg, "Was glauben die Deutschen? Die EMNID-Umfrage" ("What Do Germans Believe In? The EMNID Poll"), München 1968; G. I. Schmidtchen, "Zwischen Kirche und Gesellschaft" ("Between Church and Society"), Freiburg 1972; H. Hild (ed.), "Wie stabil ist die Kirche?" ("How Stable Is the Church?"), Berlin 1974; A. Feige, *Kirchenaustritte*, Berlin 1977; H. Mynarek, "Religiös ohne Gott?" ("Religious without God?") Düsseldorf 1983.

3. John F. Schumaker, "Can Religion Make You Happy?," *FREE INQUIRY* 18 (1981): 28-31.

4. W. Schneider et al., "Einstellung und emotionales Befinden von Atheisten" ("Attitudes and Emotional State Among Atheists"), *Diplomarbeit/Psychologisches Institut der Universität Freiburg* 1985.

5. As in Germany the state collects the membership fees for the church in the form of tax payment. All church members are registered by the public authorities from the date they were baptized as infants. Therefore, people who want to leave church first have to submit an official declaration to the public authorities before they are exempted from these tax payments and their names are deleted from the church registers.

6. C. Nowak and H. Toboll, "Über die Vermittlung depressions-spezifischer Inhalte im Rahmen der religiösen Sozialisation" ("On the communication of depression-specific content within the framework of religious socialisation"), *Diplomarbeit/Psychologisches Institut der Universität Freiburg* 1983.