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ORIGINAL PAPER

Religiously/Spiritually Involved, but in Doubt or Disbelief—Why? Healthy?

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Abstract

The question of why atheists and agnostic theists attend religious services and pray (and what that might mean for their health) is examined through (1) a thematic analysis of commentaries, perspective pieces, and news articles from the popular literature, and (2) a critical review of scholarly research involving comparisons between religious and nonreligious individuals on a variety of health-related outcomes. Findings suggest that atheists and agnostic theists can take pleasure in attending religious services, and they may be driven to pray at times. In many cases, this was explained by their efforts to stay connected and avoid or manage conflict with family members. Despite a pattern of friction between nonbelievers and believers across the dataset, they predominantly agreed on the whys and wherefores of religious service attendance and the prospect that congregants could "bridge the worlds of belief and nonbelief." The themes identified are intended to inform the development of qualitative interview protocols and survey instruments. Although health was not among the most salient themes in the narratives analyzed here, many of the reasons cited for religious service attendance and prayer can be tied to existing literature that has relevance for health. Atheists who experience dissonance between their self-perception and nonbelief in God—and agnostic theists who are prone to existential uncertainty and have only moderate faith—might experience poorer health outcomes. Recommendations focus on the need to (a) supplement secondary analyses of archival survey data with qualitative descriptions of belief systems within groups, and (b) move away from the adversarial stance taken by some of the authors of recently published studies on atheism, nonreligion, and health.

Keywords Atheist · Agnostic · Religious service attendance · Prayer · Health

Introduction

Almost 50 years after Vernon (1969) found that atheists and agnostics might identify with a religious tradition, nationally representative surveys continue to reveal anomalies in responses to items involving religion. For example, based on an analysis of the General

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Social Survey (GSS) from 1988-2000 (N = 8027), 6.5% of self-identified atheists and 12.3% of individuals who said they doubt the existence of God reported that they attend religious services on a weekly basis (Sherkat 2008). In the 2007 Baylor Religion Survey (N = 1648), 7.6% of self-identified atheists selected "Jewish," and 17.2% of self-identified agnostics indicated a Protestant denomination when asked, "With what religious family do you most closely identify?" (O'Brian Baker and Smith 2009). Between 2008 and 2012, roughly one-quarter of respondents to the GSS (N = 3427) who said they do not believe in God simultaneously identified themselves as being religiously affiliated (Speed and Fowler 2016). In 2012 and 2014, approximately 80% of the GSS interviewees (N = 2670) who said they are uncertain about God's existence also indicated that they are part of a religious tradition (Speed 2017). In the 2014 Religious Landscape Study ($N > 35{,}000$), 8% of self-identified atheists said they believe in God or a universal spirit (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2015). These responses are not consistent with ways in which atheism and agnosticism are commonly understood (Wolf 2006).[1] How should such survey findings be interpreted then? The widely recognized challenges of measuring constructs in the religion/spirituality[2] domain, definitional confusion on the part of survey respondents, and/or social desirability bias among responses obtained from members of stigmatized secular minority groups could explain the discrepancies (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Hill 2005; Hill and Hood 1999; Hill and Pargament 2003; Hwang et al. 2011; Idler et al. 2003; Reitsma et al. 2007; Sherman and Simonton (2001)).

Alternatively, the responses could be taken at face value as an indication that religious and/or spiritual (R/S) beliefs are not synonymous with R/S identity (defined as the extent to which a person identifies with a particular R/S tradition), R/S affiliation (defined as membership in a R/S group), or R/S practice (e.g., public/organizational activities such as attendance at religious services and private behaviors such as prayer or meditation) (Chaves 2010; Hackett 2014). Counterintuitive as it may seem, it is conceivable that individuals who do not believe in God, and those who are uncertain about the existence of God, could identify with a R/S tradition or group—not just in the context of responding to a survey, but also in the usual course of their life. And, it is perhaps not that uncommon for them to pray or meditate and attend services held at a church, mosque, synagogue, temple, etc. (Hackett et al. 2012). The question of *why* they might do so has not been fully explored.

A fair amount of scholarly research has been conducted on the origins, demographic characteristics, and life course of religious doubt, disbelief, and *apostasy* (Norenzayan and Gervais 2013; Sherkat 2008; Zuckerman et al. 2016). Baker (2015) found that psychological type (see Francis 2005) could play a greater role for agnostic and atheistic church

[1] Atheism and agnosticism refer to separate philosophical positions of belief and knowledge. Belief-knowledge categories based on the GSS item ''…which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?" are as follows with the corresponding response choice(s) in parentheses: (1) *Negative atheist* ("I don't believe in God"); (2) *Agnostic atheist* ("I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out"); (3) *Agnostic theist* ("I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others'' or ''While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God''); and (4) *Gnostic theist* (''I know God exists and I have no doubts about it'') (Speed 2017).

[2] Religion and spirituality reflect the "feelings, thoughts, experiences, and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred" (Hill et al., 1998, p. 21). The terms are presented jointly here in an attempt to ensure that terminology is not overly restrictive. Although a comprehensive review of distinctions between religion and spirituality (see Zinnbauer et al., 1997) is beyond the scope of this paper, a very basic categorization suggests that individuals may be (1) religious-spiritual, (2) religious-not spiritual, (3) spiritual-not religious, or (4) not religious-not spiritual.

leavers than it does for individuals who maintain their belief in God but leave the church.[3] Conversely, very little information exists in peer-reviewed scientific journals about atheists and agnostic theists who do *not* withdraw from religion/spirituality altogether, but instead maintain some level of R/S involvement (defined for this study as R/S identity and/or practice). Thus, reasons as to why individuals would stay the course despite their R/S doubt or disbelief are less well understood.

To my knowledge, only two previous studies have expressly addressed the topic of R/S involvement among atheists and agnostic theists. In the first study, Ecklund and Lee (2011) surveyed scientists at elite American universities and found that nearly one in five participants who were atheistic and had children were part of a religious congregation and attended religious services more than once during the previous year. The findings suggest that—even when parents do not hold religious beliefs themselves—they might engage in religious socialization of their children because they want to expose them to diverse sources of knowledge, and allow them to make their own decisions about a religious identity. In the second study, Dennett and LaScola (2010) conducted in-depth interviews with individuals from quite an unforeseen population: nonbelieving clergy. Although the participating clergy were never explicitly asked whether they believe in God, some of them volunteered that information by referring to themselves as "atheistic" or "atheistic-agnostic"; by indicating that they do not believe in a "supernatural theistic God"; or by confiding that they could no longer find truth or meaning in various religious principles. As to explanations for their R/S involvement as *non*believing clergy, the interviewees generally cited the need to provide financially for their family, as well as a reluctance to upset their family, friends, and congregation with news of their nonbelief in God. Others described their emotional investment in the church environment and community, which had been a source of comfort and affirmation in their lives, and which continued to provide opportunities to make a positive difference in the lives of other human beings while liberalizing the church.

Assuming scientists and clergy have unique perspectives, I consider reasons why atheists and agnostic theists from the *lay* (general) population attend religious services and pray. I focus on *atheistic-somes* (people who do not believe in God, but who still identify with a R/S tradition and/or engage in R/S practices) and *agnostic theists* (people who believe in—but have doubts about—the existence of God; for the purpose of this study, I add identification with a R/S tradition and/or participation in R/S practices to this category). Collectively, I refer to atheistic-somes and agnostic theists as "R/S-somes." For the sake of precision and comparison, several other R/S belief, knowledge, identity/affiliation, and practice categories are shown in Table 1.

Taking into account the many possible implications of R/S involvement for physical and mental health (Koenig 2012; Levin 2017; Lucchetti and Lucchetti 2014; Mrdjenovich 2010; Şenel and Demir 2018), it is important to understand patterns and potential motivations of R/S (non)involvement among R/S-somes. I return to this point in part two of this paper, in which I present a critical review of scholarly research involving comparisons between R/S and nonreligious and/or nonspiritual (nonR/nonS) individuals on a variety of health-related outcomes.

[3] Atheistic and agnostic church-leavers endorsed Introversion, Sensing, Thinking, and Perceiving; "Believers who didn't belong" endorsed a preference for Introversion, Intuition, Thinking, and Perceiving.

Table 1 Religious and/or spiritual (R/S) belief, knowledge, identity/affiliation, and practice categories

Category	Believe	Know	Identify/ Affiliate	Practice
Negative Atheist	N	Y	- -	- -
Agnostic Atheist	N	N	- -	- -
Agnostic/Weak Theist	Y	N	- -	- -
Gnostic/Strong Theist	Y	Y	- -	- -
Deists (spiritual-not religious; believe in a Higher Power)	Y	- -	N	Y
Atheistic-Somes (affiliated nonbelievers)	N	- -	Y	Y
Atheistic-Nones (neither believe nor belong)	N	- -	N	N
Theistic-Nones ("unchurched believers"; believe, but don't belong)	Y	- -	N	- -
Theistic-Somes (religious-spiritual; believe and belong)	Y	- -	Y	Y
Nones (not religious-not spiritual; no preference)	- -	- -	N	N

Believe Believe in the existence of God, *Know* Confident about one's belief in God; *Identify/Affiliate* Identify with R/S tradition/member of R/S group, *Practice* Engage in public or private R/S practices, *N* No, *Y* Yes, "- -" Not applicable (see also Lim et al. 2010; O'Brian Baker and Smith 2009; Speed and Fowler 2017a, b)

Part 1: Why?

I address the question of why R/S-somes attend religious services and pray through a thematic analysis of commentaries, perspective pieces, and news/feature articles from the popular literature (e.g., *The New York Times, The Washington Post, BBC News Magazine, The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*) (see reference list entries marked with an asterisk). My rationale for this approach is fairly straightforward. First, relevant information is scarce in peer-reviewed scientific journals. Second, archival (survey) data may be of limited utility for exploring the phenomenon of interest. Due to the use of single-item indicators of religious preference and forced-choice items that suggest people can either believe in God or not be religious, national surveys might not capture the diversity of respondents' experiences. Such surveys may not even allow researchers to distinguish between the "religious" and "nonreligious" or the "spiritual" and "nonspiritual"; in fact, a portion of survey respondents who self-identify as religious affiliates or religious service attendees might actually be negative atheists or agnostic theists (Speed 2017). Third, people who are not religious and/or spiritual in the traditional sense are difficult to locate for research purposes because they are relatively few in number, and they might be reluctant to disclose their R/S orientation in light of negative perceptions about secular minorities (Edgell et al. 2006; O'Brian Baker and Smith 2009; Wright and Nichols 2014). An advantage of thematic analysis is that it utilizes first-hand accounts of people's experiences in their own words, free of sampling and measurement-related constraints. I hope the themes identified in this paper will provide a first step toward the development of protocols for semi-structured qualitative interviews, and items with adequate face validity and content validity that could be included and evaluated psychometrically as part of a questionnaire to assess the functional role of R/S involvement for R/S-somes.

Method

This study was designed and conducted based on a naturalistic paradigm (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). A qualitative strategy was employed that involved reading and coding relevant articles to identify meaningful themes and patterns and then organizing and presenting the data in such a way that it told a coherent and logical story. The approach was inductive, semantic, and essentialist. That is, the goal was to describe experiences and explicit (as opposed to latent) meanings of the data without trying to fit the data into a preexisting model or framework (Patton 2014).

Materials and Procedures

In order to identify articles for the thematic analysis, the following keywords were entered into a search engine using the default settings that sort results by relevance and date: "atheist," "agnostic," "attend religious services," and "prayer." Related phrases identified by the search engine were also used to identify articles (i.e., "going to church as an atheist," "atheist attending mass," "going to church but not believing in God," "best churches for agnostics," "atheist equivalent of prayer," "how to pray if you are agnostic," and "how to pray if you're not religious"). Because there is little reliable guidance on the sample size needed for a thematic analysis, a target number of articles was not specified at the outset. The inclusion criteria were: (a) personal accounts of religious service attendance and/or prayer from individuals identified as atheistic or agnostic (classified as "actors"), and (b) accounts from individuals who speculate as to why atheists or agnostics might attend religious services or pray (classified as "observers"). These criteria allowed for cross-case analyses (i.e., actors vs. observers). The exclusion criteria were that actors could not be scientists or clergy, because those populations had been involved in previous research (Dennett and LaScola 2010; Ecklund and Lee 2011) and because the present study focuses on the lay population. Articles were included when they met the selection criteria. Three articles written by former or current clergy were *not* excluded because the authors referred to atheistic or agnostic actors from the lay population (DeWitt 2013; Rauser 2017; Wallace 2014). Selection continued until the point of saturation; that is, when further coding was no longer feasible and no new themes could be identified.

There were six steps to the thematic analysis for this study: (1) *become familiar with the data* (systematically read and re-read text), (2) *generate initial codes* (label key terms and phrases; collate data relevant to each code), (3) *search for themes* (combine codes that share similar meaning to form overarching themes), (4) *review themes* (consider whether and how themes support the dataset), (5) *define and name themes*, and (6) *write the report* (see Braun and Clarke 2006). These steps were accomplished using NVivo 12 Pro computer software for qualitative data analysis. Codes were generated for narrative point of view (actor-author, actor-other, or observer), article type (perspective, commentary, or news/feature), belief or knowledge category for actor, observer, and/or author (atheist, agnostic, theist, or unspecified), behavior (religious service attendance or prayer), and reason for behavior (i.e., segments of the data that directly answered the research question in the actor's or observer's own words). A subset of six articles (roughly one-third) was selected at random and coded independently by the author and three colleagues. Good inter-rater reliability was demonstrated using Krippendorff's alpha for nominal data and multiple raters ($\alpha \geq 0.80$).

Findings and Discussion

Articles

The sample consists of 22 articles (perspective pieces [n = 9], commentaries [n = 9], and news or feature articles [n = 4]) with an average length of approximately 1500 words per article that were published between 2010 and 2018 in sources from the United States and United Kingdom (e.g., *The New York Times, The Washington Post, BBC News Magazine, The Guardian*, *Huffington Post*). The authors identified themselves as atheistic (n = 9) or theistic (n = 4); other authors did not specify their theistic orientation (n = 9). The perspective pieces were written in the first person by atheists or agnostic theists; the commentaries and news/feature articles were written in the third person by theists or authors who did not specify their theistic orientation (Table 2). In some cases, the perspective pieces included accounts of atheistic or agnostic actors other than the author, and the latter articles included accounts of atheistic or agnostic actors collected by the observing commentator/reporter. Thus, the actors were not necessarily the authors of the articles. Cross-case analyses were conducted based on the theistic orientation of actors and observers.

Thematic Structure

A meta-theme of "Relationships between Believers and Doubters/Nonbelievers" was identified. This theme reflects a pattern across the dataset of tension between theists and R/S-somes, and their efforts to connect with one another and avoid or manage conflict associated with differences of R/S belief. In many cases, these efforts explained why atheistic or agnostic actors were religiously/spiritually involved; thus, the meta-theme directly addresses the research question.

The meta-theme of relationships is conceptually comprised of two content-driven themes: (1) *Family ties*—This theme refers to atheistic or agnostic actors who either explained their R/S involvement in terms of a connection with their familial heritage, or attended religious services and prayed to keep the peace within their family, and (2) *Building bridges across the congregation* —This theme reflects the possibility that believers and doubters/nonbelievers could attend worship services together despite their differences if each group does its part. The content-driven themes correspond to a selection of the codes presented as a domain (i.e., reasons for religious service attendance and prayer) summary in Table 3 and Table 4. I begin the narrative with the domain summary, and then I elaborate on the content-driven themes.

Religious Service Attendance

One of the most significant findings was that R/S-somes might take pleasure in attending religious services. They could appreciate the physical beauty of a church building, the music, the opportunity for communal singing, the practical guidance contained in a sermon, and the chance to reflect on the issues that are most important in their lives (Table 3). They might attend religious services simply because they enjoy the experience—without adopting a particular set of beliefs. An atheistic college student remarked, "All my life, I was raised in an atheist environment. . . . you might be tempted to think: 'Why would you go to Mass if you are not familiar with [religious] traditions?' . . . The . . . answer is: because I *enjoy* going to church."

Table 2 Articles for thematic analysis by article type and authors' theistic orientation

Article type			
Author (date)	Perspective	Commentary	News/feature
Bertrand (2016)	A		
Boorstein (2013)			U
Brown (2013)	A		
Bui (2017)	A		
Carter (2014)	A		
Cline (2017)		U	
Cohen Bertel (2017)		U	
DeWitt (2013)	A		
Douthat (2017)		T	
Hattenstone (2014)	A		
Hill (2017)	A		
Hines (2014)			U
Humphreys (2017)	A		
Malesic (2017)		U	
McKay & McKay (2017)		T	
Rauser (2017)		T	
Reisman-Brill (2014)		U	
Ripudaman (2016)	A		
Schneider (2010)		U	
Sherwood (2018)			U
Wallace (2014)		T	
Wheeler (2013)			U

A Atheist, *T* Theist, *U* Unspecified theistic orientation

A summary of the reasons cited for religious service attendance with illustrative quotes is presented in Table 3. For purposes of comparison, the table is arranged by group, with atheistic or agnostic actors on the left, and theistic or unspecified observers on the right. The latter are speculating as to why the former might/would/should attend religious services (e.g., based on accounts of atheistic or agnostic actors they had collected as a commentator or reporter); they are not discussing reasons for their own religious service attendance. The top of the table lists the areas in which both groups cited the same reasons for religious service attendance, and the bottom of the table lists reasons that were uniquely cited by each group. Bearing in mind the meta-theme of relationships between believers and doubters/nonbelievers (discussed later), the fact that the groups are predominantly in agreement is particularly salient.

In terms of differences, some of the theistic or unspecified observers—but none of the atheistic or agnostic actors—mentioned the opportunity to get involved with charitable service (e.g., volunteering at church or working with community organizations) as a reason for religious service attendance. Compared to their nonattending peers, church attendees report higher levels of charitable service and giving (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2015). If there were churchgoers among the observers, this could explain why

Table 3 Reasons R/S-somes attend religious services: Areas of agreement and disagreement by theistic orientation (with illustrative quotes)

Agree	
Atheistic or agnostic	Theistic or unspecified
Diverse perspectives and beliefs	
" . . . exposing yourself to different perspectives is healthy and, at a time of heightened cynicism and intellectual segregation . . . Mass is a tonic." *(Atheist who attends Mass)*	"This brings us to another reason why an atheist might attend religious services: to learn, first hand, what members of different religious faiths really believe and how they express those beliefs. . . . they are curious about what others believe and think that they might be able to learn something, even from those they disagree with quite strongly." *(Author of unspecified theistic orientation)*
	". . . church keeps people in touch with folks from different walks of life, and promotes a message of universal brotherhood that mitigates the acrimony that arises between different segments of society." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*
Heritage and tradition	
"I have been a happy non-believer for years. I don't go to church to worship the supernatural. . . . I go to church on Sundays to be part of my mother and father's community. I was married there [and] buried Mom in the [churchyard cemetery]." *(Self-identified "nontheist")*	"I know a surprising (at least to me) number of atheists who still go to their former denomination houses of worship and observe their holidays and rituals, because they enjoy the tradition and nostalgia, and the continuity with their ancestors and families . . ." *(Humanist of unspecified theistic orientation)*
Humanitarian values and needs	
"I go to church not for God but for humanity. . . . It [going to church] is a cure for haste and pride. . . . There's no place better than a church for being with people who make you feel . . . a little more human." *(Atheist)*	"And for the agnostics . . . I propose looking at church like . . . the best possible vehicle for meeting universal human needs . . . without wholly assenting to their theological foundations." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*
	"Getting involved in an active community of faith, even without faith, can . . . offer opportunities to meet the needs around us . . . and do something constructive and meaningful about it together." *(Episcopal priest)*
Music and communal singing	
"In this short list [of reasons I attend Mass], I haven't even mentioned the music (think of the Palestrina Choir)." *(Atheist who attends Mass)*	"At the Unitarian church . . . they even offer . . . a service for folks who may not believe in anything divine, but enjoy music . . ." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*
"Then everyone started singing—a kindly stranger handed me a hymn book, open at the proper page—so I joined in." *(Self-described "militant atheist")*	"Even if the nearest Lutheran church has a crummy website, its music is surely better than what you'll find at the 'atheist church'." *(Author of unspecified theistic orientation writes, "Go to church even if you don't believe")*

Table 3 continued

Agree	
Atheistic or agnostic	Theistic or unspecified
Physical beauty of place of worship	
"Inside [a gothic-revival church] was even more stunning; a mighty, cavernous stone grotto dripping with art and flickering in candlelight . . ." *(Self-described "militant atheist")*	" . . . the Episcopalian or Presbyterian church is often the most beautiful building in town." *(Author of unspecified theistic orientation writes, "Go to church even if you don't believe")*
Practical guidance	
"A good preacher . . . will weave current affairs . . . into his or her sermon, leaving you with a practical, memorable take-home lesson." *(Self-described "militant atheist")*	"You'll hear uplifting messages [and] sound, practical advice for better living. . . . a boon to the growing number of folks who aren't sure about their beliefs and are looking for a church that teaches good principles unattached to a very specific theological position." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*
Reflection and reorientation	
"I . . . use this time [at Mass] for silent reflection to think of, or wish goodwill towards, loved ones living and dead. . . . Whether they can hear . . . is beyond the point. Through this rite, we are reconnecting in an important way with the cycle of life. . . . I unfailingly leave the church . . . reoriented towards what really matters." *(Atheist who attends Mass)*	". . . church attendance invites us to reflect on our gratitude . . . and re-focuses us on our larger purpose." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*
Social affair, social connectedness	
". . . for some of us [atheists], going to church is an entirely social affair." *(Atheist and former Jehovah's Witness)* "There is a church here at the college where I am going, and it has almost become my second dorm. I spend most of my time in there . . . simply hanging out with my friends." *(Atheistic college student)*	"To be sure, in our culture today, there is so little opportunity to experience camaraderie and affiliation with other people. . . . Church offers this rare opportunity for meaningful fellowship, if we give ourselves to it." *(Episcopal priest)*
Disagree	
Family obligation	**Charitable giving and service**
". . . every year on Christmas Eve our family (including extended family from out of town) attends services together. I hate being 'that guy' who refuses to participate, so I go, knowing that it's as much for family . . . as it is for worship." *(Atheist describing holidays with his family)*	". . . a lot of folks, perhaps most, find they don't follow through on their intention to get involved with charitable giving and organizations unless they're encouraged to do so at church. Not only is it easier . . . to get started with service when presented specific options for doing so at church, it's also harder to say no when [the church] is counting on your participation . . ." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*

Table 3 continued

Disagree	
Forced to attend	**Spiritual/inner discipline**
". . . I was forced to go to Mass. It was a Catholic high school. . . . High-schoolers, especially those from small Catholic schools, don't exactly have the freedom and the privileges [to decide for themselves whether they wish to attend]." *(Atheistic college student)*	"The structure provided by weekly church attendance constitutes a spiritual discipline. . . . Aspects of the service itself also develop inner discipline . . ." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*

Agree Both groups cited the same reasons for religious service attendance; *Disagree* Each group cited different reasons for religious service attendance

charitable service came to mind. Interestingly, the higher rates of service and giving among churchgoers may be a product of the social networks that develop within religious congregations rather than a function of theistic beliefs. Campbell (2013) contemplated the degree to which "atheist churches" or "unchurches" could replicate religious social networks and prompt a comparable level of charitable service: "The jury is still out on whether such religion-less congregations can keep people coming and, if so, whether the social networks formed within an avowedly secular group can have the same effect on charitable giving" (n.p.) (see also Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Prayer

Another intriguing finding was that R/S-somes might be driven to pray at times despite their doubt or disbelief in God:

> ". . . an atheist can in fact pray (if we stretch the definition of prayer just a little). . . . Atheists may never be able to fully fool themselves into believing that someone else is actually listening whenever they speak out into the void, but the practice can still be very effective. . . . I loved to pray as a Christian, and I still love praying as a non-believer". *(Former pastor who converted to atheism)*

> "I'm happy to kneel in prayer even though I can't believe there's anyone out there". *(Atheist who occasionally attends Mass)*

A summary of the reasons cited for prayer with illustrative quotes is presented in Table 4. Many of the atheistic or agnostic actors said they view prayer as a form of self-expression that can reinforce their ideas and facilitate personal recovery. They expressed a belief in the power of asking for forgiveness, guidance, and healing through prayer, but they attributed answers to the personal act of prayer rather than an act of God. Remarkably, some of the atheistic or agnostic actors appear to pray for the many of the same reasons theists do (Paloma and Pendleton 1991).

Family Ties: Ritualists, Closet Dwellers, and Peacekeepers

Similar to the group of individuals Zuckerman et al. (2016) identified as "ritualists" (who have lost some or all religious belief, but continue to identify with a religious community and participate in various religious ceremonies or rituals), some of the atheistic or agnostic

Table 4 Reasons R/S-somes pray (with illustrative quotes)

Belief in the act of prayer
"Believing in the act of prayer means that answers come from the simple *act* of praying, and not through an act of God."
(Author of unspecified theistic orientation considers why atheists pray)
Family prays before meals
". . . when my extended family gathers to pray before eating big meals, I don't stand off by myself in protest; I join them and hold hands and even bow my head a little so as not to distract them. I don't close my eyes, because for some reason that crosses a line for me . . ."
(Atheist and self-described "deconvert")
Forgiveness
"Asking for forgiveness aloud in a room full of other people is cathartic."
(Atheist who attends Mass)
Help and healing for others
"He felt guilty for all the things he never did for his son, and he didn't know what to do to save him. So he started praying. He was asking for help, asking for guidance, and asking God to heal his son."
(Author conveys the experience of an atheistic father of a drug-addicted son)
Personal transformation/recovery
"[He] doesn't believe there is some supernatural being out there attending to his prayers, [but] describes himself as having had a 'conversion' that can be characterized only as a 'miracle'. His life has been mysteriously transformed, he says, by the power of [prayer]."
(Author describes the experience of an atheist who took up prayer after joining a 12-step recovery program)
Reinforcement of ideas
"Prayer has the effect of reinforcing and hardening ideas so that they become truths—truths that we can act upon."
(Atheist who attends Mass)
Self-expression
"Stripped of the reference to God, prayers are expressions of wonderment, of our aspirations and desires, and of contrition."
(Atheist explaining why he prays)

actors explained their R/S involvement in terms of an attachment or connection with their familial heritage or traditions:

> "I have been a happy non-believer for years. I don't go to church to worship the supernatural. . . . I go to church on Sundays to be part of my mother and father's community. I was married there [and] buried Mom in the [churchyard cemetery]". *(Self-identified "nontheist")*

> "For as long as there have been unbelievers, there have been unbelievers who've kept their religious heritage close to them . . . . I'm fond of the artifacts of my upbringing . . . " *(Atheist and former Jehovah's Witness)*

> "I know a surprising (at least to me) number of atheists who still go to their former denomination houses of worship and observe their holidays and rituals, because they enjoy the tradition and nostalgia, and the continuity with their ancestors and families . . ." *(Humanist of unspecified theistic orientation)*

Other atheistic or agnostic actors, however, did not express the same sense of attachment or nostalgia:

> "Not everyone can coexist with their religion of birth. Not if we're being honest about our beliefs, anyway". *(Atheist)*

Stuck between his atheism and the faith of his family, an atheist described the experience of holiday celebrations as the only non-Christian member of his family:

> ". . . every year on Christmas eve our family (including extended family from out of town) attends services together. I hate being 'that guy' who refuses to participate, so I go, knowing that it's as much for family . . . as it is for worship. . . . The family basically engages in two full days of Christian-based festivities that are very alienating to me". *(Atheist)*

For individuals from families in which R/S involvement is expected, the questioning or loss of faith (Exline 2002) may cause significant personal distress and considerable disruption within the family unit. Zuckerman et al. (2016) called this phenomenon "transformative apostasy." In an attempt to avoid estrangement from their families, it may be that R/S-somes attend religious services or pray without ever revealing the truth about their religious beliefs:

> ". . . some atheists may simply not be able to 'come out of the closet'. . . . their adherence to the traditional faith has changed; in some cases, that may be perceived as enough to be treated as a form of betrayal or scandal. . . . Rather than deal with so much drama and conflict, some atheists just continue to pretend that they believe . . . " *(Author of unspecified theistic orientation considers why atheists go to church)*

Reminiscent of the nonbelieving clergy interviewed by Dennett and LaScola (2010), other atheistic or agnostic actors were more or less *out* of the closet where their families were concerned (although their families were not necessarily privy to the details of their personal struggle with religious faith). Nevertheless, they continued to attend religious services or pray in order to "keep the peace." They indicated that compromise and accommodation were just easier in some cases. An atheist whose family had not followed him into apostasy from the faith of his upbringing offered the following advice for nonbelievers on how to handle family functions that involve religion:

> "I continue to cooperate . . . because it's in everyone's best interest to do what we can to maintain good relationships, even to the point of making painful compromises. . . . my 'compromises' are usually more like capitulations, accommodating the needs of others in order to keep the peace. . . . And in certain circumstances, that seems like the easiest path to take. For example, when my extended family gathers to pray before eating big meals, I don't stand off by myself in protest; I join them and hold hands and even bow my head a little so as not to distract them . . ." *(Atheist and self-described "deconvert")*

Building Bridges Across the Congregation

Some of the atheistic or agnostic actors felt they were not welcome at places of worship, which led to a decline in their attendance at services:

> "The message is clear: If you don't believe, you don't belong. Don't let the door knock you on your way out." *(Atheist and former Jehovah's Witness)*

> "The churches told them [nonbelievers] they had to believe in order to belong. They don't believe. So they [stopped attending regularly]." (*Author of unspecified theistic orientation writes, "Go to church even if you don't believe")*

Indeed, nonbelief in God and changes in R/S beliefs are among the most commonly cited reasons for infrequent religious service attendance among individuals who used to attend more often (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2015). A related implication from the articles is that ". . . the decline in church attendance has eroded a shared language . . . that formerly built bridges between those [congregants] on opposite sides of the aisle [believers and doubters/nonbelievers]" *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*. This brought with it questions of whether and how believers and doubters/nonbelievers might still "bridge the worlds of belief and nonbelief" by attending services together despite their differences. There was a sense among many of the actors and observers that it might be possible to do so if each group did its part; viz., if believers would "open their doors" to others without the stipulation of R/S belief, and doubters/nonbelievers would take the invitation and opportunity to share their R/S views:

> "So, can belief and non-belief co-exist? Plenty of atheists think so. We only ask religion does its part, too." *(Atheist and former Jehovah's Witness)*

> "This [nontheists attending religious services] is a phenomenon I'm not sure many church leaders and members are even aware is happening, or can happen. Perhaps we should find a way to open our doors wider to welcome more of the . . . "Friendly Non-theists"—without seeking to convince or coerce or convert them into belief. That is a matter between them and God, after all, whether the God they don't believe in exists or not." (*Episcopal priest*)

> "Rather than allow our presuppositions about other people [whose R/S beliefs differ from our own] to settle our perception of them, it is always better to invite them into our space so they may share their perspective." *(Seminary professor)*

Of course, coexistence is not without potential barriers. For example, through their interviews with nonbelieving clergy, Dennett and LaScola (2010) identified a theme of "Don't Ask; Don't Tell," which brought to light the risks of inquiry and self-revelation around R/S beliefs, and the struggle to find trusted confidants among the members of one's congregation. Along these same lines, roughly two-thirds of self-identified atheists in the Religious Landscape Study said they seldom or never share their views on God and religion with religious people (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2015).

Synopsis

The purpose of this thematic analysis was to consider reasons why R/S-somes attend religious services and pray. Among the most significant findings was that R/S-somes can take pleasure in attending religious services, and they might be driven to pray at times despite their doubt or disbelief in God. The identified themes tell a story in which R/S involvement among R/S-somes was explained by their efforts to stay connected and avoid or manage conflict with family members. Overall, these findings are consistent with earlier discussions concerning the link between religion and family as institutions (Edgell 2005), and the nature of religious disbelief and apostasy (Zuckerman et al. 2016). The findings

extend previous research conducted with scientists and clergy (Dennett and LaScola 2010; Ecklund and Lee 2011) to the lay population.

It may be that believers and doubters/nonbelievers could attend worship services together despite their differences if each group did its part. Although this is not something that can be evaluated with the data at hand (more research is needed on that point), the irony is that—despite the pattern of tension among family members and congregants across the dataset here—R/S-somes and theistic observers predominantly *agreed* on something so fundamental as the whys and wherefores of religious service attendance. Such common ground is rather surprising in view of the increasing spiritual division within the USA and UK (Keller 2008), not to mention accounts of believers and nonbelievers as opponents engaged in a culture war, in which each perceives the other as an outsider (e.g., Edgell et al. 2006). The situation was quite the reverse in some of the articles here. Observers (some theistic, others unspecified) even went so far as to offer words of encouragement for atheistic or agnostic actors, particularly when it came to finding a place of worship that was a good fit:

> "A . . . fundamentalist church would make even the most tolerant and open-minded atheist a bit uncomfortable. On the other hand, an extremely liberal . . . church might not provide enough interesting food for thought." *(Author of unspecified theistic orientation considers why atheists go to church)*

> "If you choose to attend a megachurch, your lack of theism won't be an issue . . . they [other attendees] won't know . . . your exact level of belief. . . . You'll have the freedom to . . . engage to whatever degree you're comfortable. . . . Look around and try out some different options." *(Christian author on why agnostics should attend church)*

> "The aim is to see if there's a place where you feel you belong, no matter what kind of place that turns out to be. Enjoy the process of seeking even [if] you don't have an articulated goal or endpoint. There are many people who, like you, straddle the worlds of religion and atheism, as conflicted as that may seem." *(Humanist of unspecified theistic orientation)*

Lastly but importantly, it is striking that issues of physical and mental health were not mentioned explicitly as actors and observers discussed reasons for R/S involvement among R/S-somes. Indeed, despite substantial growth in media reporting on religion and health (Frenk, Foy, and Meador 2011) and the prominence of health in the relevant academic literature (see part two of this paper)—just one example of which is the large literature on forgiveness (e.g., Thoresen, Harris, and Luskin 2000) that can be tied to the prayer domain (Table 4)—health was not among the most salient themes in the narratives analyzed here. On the one hand, there is evidence that religious beliefs and theistic conceptions play an important role in lay accounts for health and illness (Hughner and Kleine 2004). Nevertheless, misperceptions abound when it comes to the religion-health connection (Levin 2017). For some of the lay actors and observers here, health simply may not have been "on the radar" as a reason for R/S involvement, which could explain the absence of references to health in their narratives. My own research has shown that topics of religion and health might not even be on the radar for *professional* audiences—let alone laypersons—particularly those professionals who have received no formal training in this area (Mrdjenovich 2010; Mrdjenovich et al. 2012).

Practical Applications

I began this paper by observing that existing survey instruments might not capture the diversity of respondents' R/S identity or experience. An underlying concern in the literature is that measures of R/S constructs have been designed primarily to assess the degree to which respondents are religious—not secular (Hall, Koenig, and Meador 2008). The recently developed and initially validated nonreligious–nonspiritual scale (Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen 2015) fulfills a critical gap in the measurement arena; however, Cragun et al. (2015) noted that the instrument is limited by its conception of nonreligiousness as the absence of institutional religion when, in actuality, nonreligion may take the form of casual indifference rather than abstinence (Zuckerman et al. 2016). Cragun et al. (2015) suggested that the practical consequence of abstinence and indifference would be the same; that is, nonreligious people would not engage in R/S behaviors. Yet, that may not be the case, at least not for nonR/nonS individuals who maintain some sense of attachment to a R/S tradition or group, who do happen to engage in R/S behaviors (practices) on a casual or occasional basis.

At present, I am working to develop a psychometrically sound questionnaire to assess the functional role of R/S involvement for atheists and agnostic theists. The thematic analysis reported here was among the first steps in that process. Researchers may wish to adapt the domain summary and identified themes as they develop survey items or interview protocols of their own. As opposed to endorsement or frequency scales, I envision survey items with a multiple response format based on the domain summary. In terms of qualitative interviews, open-ended questions could address themes such as (a) the questioning or loss of faith (follow-up questions might ascertain indifference to R/S constructs versus abstinence from R/S practices), (b) the ways in which family heritage or family relationships influence personal decisions to participate in R/S activities, perhaps with follow-up questions as to whether interviewees are "in" or "out" of "the closet"), (c) the manner in which interviewees have been received by other congregants at places of worship, and (d) the search for the "right fit" in a place of worship.

On a related note, surveys and interviews of R/S-somes should assess the extent to which individuals who participate in R/S activities have an underlying *valuation* of R/S constructs. It is possible to infer that information from some of the quotations presented as part of the thematic analysis reported here. However, as Speed (2017) put forward, the presence of R/S constructs does not necessarily mean that an individual values those constructs.

Limitations

Although thematic analysis has been used increasingly to examine content from the popular literature, it remains an inherently subjective, interpretive approach (and member checking was not feasible in this particular case). Findings might differ based on other content analyzed by a different researcher. The sample was "self-selected" in the sense that actors chose to make their voices public. Individuals who are reluctant to disclose their theistic orientation and R/S involvement might have dissimilar views and experiences. It is also worth noting that the reasons articulated by actors and observers to explain apparently conflicting beliefs and behaviors (e.g., atheism and religious service attendance or prayer) could reflect rationalizations of nonconscious processes. If they were made aware of the apparent contradictions between the beliefs and behaviors at hand, it is possible that some

constructed narratives which allowed them to maintain a sense of consistency but did not accurately reflect the circumstances leading to given behaviors. The findings on religious service attendance pertain to traditional (theistic) places of worship. Researchers may wish to concentrate on service attendance in nontraditional contexts (e.g., Sunday assemblies held at atheistic churches) for future analyses [see Hattenstone (2014), Hines (2014), Wheeler (2013)]. The ability to conduct comparative analyses was limited in cases where the theistic orientation of observers was not specified, and a comparative analysis by theistic orientation for prayer was not presented because the prayer data were reported almost exclusively by atheistic or agnostic actors (who, after all, are the target population for this study). Finally, while it is not possible to draw reliable generalizations from the articles analyzed here, the range of perspectives and discernible themes offer a qualitative understanding of individuals who are not religious and/or spiritual in the traditional sense, which O'Brian Baker and Smith (2009) observed is "glaringly absent" from the literature (p. 730).

Part 2: Healthy?

Next, I turn to a critical review of scholarly research, and the multifaceted and somewhat complicated question of whether people must be theistic and/or gnostic in order to experience the health benefits (e.g., lower mortality rates, protection against disease, recovery from illness, reduction in stress, and greater subjective well-being) of R/S constructs such as religious service attendance and prayer (Koenig and Larson 2001; Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001; Krause 2006a; McCullough et al. 2000; Rosmarin et al. 2013; Strawbridge et al. 1997). At first glance, this might seem like an illogical question. Presumably, belief in God is a necessary condition for identifying with a R/S tradition, and if people were not confident believers in God, then they would not be religiously/spiritually affiliated or practicing, and therefore they could not realize the aforementioned health benefits. In other words, isn't this analogous to asking whether people who do not take vitamins benefit from their vitamin regimen? It is not, because—as reflected in the findings from the thematic analysis reported here—atheists and agnostic theists might be religiously/spiritually involved to an extent. Thus, the question becomes one of whether R/S-*somes* are just as healthy or less healthy than people whose R/S beliefs and involvement are relatively traditional or conventional.

Whose Health Benefits from R/S Involvement? R/S-Somes?

Recent studies of associations between R/S variables (religiosity, service attendance, prayer) and health outcomes (self-rated health, happiness, and life satisfaction) examine several potential moderators including belief in God(s) (Speed and Fowler 2016), confidence in God's existence (Speed 2017), theistic identity (theist vs. atheist), religious identity (affiliated vs. unaffiliated) (Speed and Hwang 2017), and religious membership (Christian vs. not affiliated) (Speed and Fowler 2017b). These studies are based on a set of three interrelated arguments: (1) There is no health liability associated with nonbelief in God or lack of religious involvement; in other words, atheists and the non/irreligious are just as healthy as religious individuals, and religious individuals are no better off for their R/S belief and involvement, (2) The religion-health literature erroneously assumes that R/S constructs are "good for all" regardless of one's (non)belief in God or religious (un)affiliation, and (3) Atheists and the non/irreligious do not benefit from religious "attitudes

and behaviors." Based on regression analyses of archival data that consist partly of responses to single-item indicators of R/S constructs and health outcomes on surveys that Speed and colleagues seem to imply are of uncertain validity, the studies essentially arrive at the conclusion that the relationship between R/S constructs and health is influenced by people's beliefs about the existence of God, how confident they are in those beliefs, and whether they identify as being religiously affiliated. Religiosity (defined as the extent to which one perceives his/herself as being religious) specified conditions under which the association between (non)belief in God and health fluctuated (Speed and Fowler 2016), and the relationship between religious service attendance and health was contingent on religious affiliation (Speed and Fowler 2017b). These findings are not novel in the sense that very few relationships between R/S constructs and health outcomes are likely to be unmoderated (Oman and Thoresen 2002; Park 2007; Seybold 2007; Worthington, Berry, and Parrott 2001). Although it is neither meaningless nor pointless to involve the non/irreligious in studies of R/S phenomena (doing so lends a great deal to the theoretical understanding of social and psychological processes involved in the religion-health nexus), there is a "degree of obviousness" (Speed 2017, p. 254) about the finding that atheists would experience religiosity less positively than nonatheists, and the notion that people who are not religiously affiliated might experience religious service attendance less positively than those who are religiously affiliated (Speed and Fowler 2016, 2017b). What might be less obvious or intuitive are some of the interpretations Speed and colleagues offer for their findings. This is where recent studies have the potential to contribute to an understanding of the *nuances* involved in relationships between R/S constructs and health. I consider some of those nuances and each of the aforementioned three arguments in this review.

The Heterogeneity Issue

Firstly, it is important to recognize that the subject populations vary from study to study in the literature reviewed here. Terms such as "nonreligious" or "nonspiritual" refer to a highly heterogeneous population, which includes people who believe in God but choose not to identify with a religious tradition (detraditionalists); people who believe in a Higher Power, but not a personal God (deists); people who have vague, transitory, or conflicted R/S beliefs ("seekers"); people who have never held any theistic beliefs; people who have no religious interest or preference (the irreligious); people who feel disenfranchised or disillusioned by organized religion and decide to leave their R/S congregation (disaffiliates); people who are not entirely confident about the existence of God (agnostics); people who do not believe in God, but remain open to the idea of changing their mind someday ("nonresistant nonbelievers"); people who used to—but no longer—believe in God (deconverts); and people who are strongly opposed to the idea of God's existence (antitheists). As a result, there are *many* possible combinations of groups, and *many* possible comparisons that could be made between them (e.g., theists vs. deists vs. atheists vs. agnostics vs. the irreligious vs. unaffiliated believers vs. religious affiliates vs. churchgoers vs. former churchgoers vs. returning churchgoers and so on). In order to make clean comparisons in terms of health outcomes, one might like to have a group that is affirmatively atheistic, religiously/spiritually unaffiliated, and not practicing; and another group that is decidedly theist, religiously/spiritually affiliated, and practicing. Unfortunately, such configurations are not easy to achieve due to sampling and measurement issues. This is an ongoing challenge for researchers.

I Can't Believe It's Not Belief

(Non)belief in God was generally not associated with self-rated health in a direct fashion based on regression analyses of the GSS administered between 2008 and 2012 (Speed and Fowler 2016). This finding could be interpreted in a number of ways; viz., religious individuals are no better off for their belief in God; belief in God is not a prerequisite for the health benefits of R/S involvement. Such interpretations are, at the very least, controversial. I propose a different interpretation, recognizing that belief in God is something so fundamental and paramount to religious traditions (as well as a cognitive schema that can profoundly influence the appraisal of life events and lead to coping behaviors or stress reactions) (Dull and Skokan 1995; Keller 2008; Schieman 2008). Rather than implying that belief is not healthy for believers, the implication is simply that nonbelief is not *un*healthy for nonbelievers. The finding merely suggests something researchers have known: The predominant pattern in the religion-health literature—whereby R/S constructs have a positive rather than negative influence on various aspects of physical and mental health—is not entirely attributable to the domain of belief. Clearly, there are additional behavioral, psychosocial, and physiological mechanisms at play (Koenig et al. 2001).

One of the nonbelieving preachers interviewed by Dennett and LaScola (2010) imagined "how non-believers fill the void left by loss of faith, or even if they feel a loss" (p. 137). It may be that the religious/spiritual, the non/irreligious, and atheists can all draw on their belief systems for "support, explanation, consolation, and inspiration" (Wilkinson and Coleman 2010, p. 337; see also Horning, Davis, Stirrat, and Cornwell 2011). Based on interviews with older adults who had either strong religious beliefs or strong atheistic beliefs, there is evidence to suggest that—rather than the specific nature or content of people's beliefs—it is the strength and application of those beliefs that is of greatest consequence for the efficacy of coping (Wilkinson and Coleman 2010).

R/S-Somes Just as Healthy?

No differences between groups when individuals are typical for their group

A number of studies have found no significant differences in subjective health and well-being between religious affiliates and nonaffiliates. There were no such differences in symptoms of depression among a general population sample of adults in the U.K. (N = 471) (Baker and Cruickshank 2009), or in physical health among respondents to the Landmark Spirituality and Health Survey (N = 3010) (although religious affiliates fared better than nonaffiliates in the health behavior domain) (Hayward et al. 2016). While such findings could be taken as support for the argument that there is no health liability associated with lack of religious affiliation, the argument might apply only so long as individuals are typical for their group; viz., when religious affiliates attend religious services on a weekly basis, and the religiously unaffiliated never attend religious services (Speed and Fowler 2017b). The thinking is that religious affiliates and nonaffiliates might both benefit from the *congruence* between their identify/affiliation and behavior.

Some Mechanisms Probably are "Good for All"

Another possible explanation for the reported lack of health-related differences between groups is that R/S-somes might benefit from some of the same mechanisms (e.g.,

worldview defense, shared identity, sense of belonging, social support.) that help explain connections between R/S constructs and health among people who are religious and/or spiritual in the traditional sense (Hayward et al. 2016; Krause 2006a, b; Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010). From this perspective, "good for all" is hardly an erroneous assumption, keeping in mind that the health benefits may depend on the form and extent of R/S involvement, and a host of other personal, contextual, and environmental factors (McCullough et al. 1998; Miller and Thoresen 2003).

In a related discussion of health and well-being among the nonreligious, Hayward et al. (2016) consider the likelihood that—given the demographic shift whereby R/S involvement is becoming less prevalent among the American population (Funk and Smith 2012; Kosmin and Keysar 2009)—secular mechanisms may have to compensate for resources that R/S involvement would otherwise provide, and thus secular resources could become stretched or taxed in generations to come. Interestingly, a scenario in which secular resources offset the missing functions of R/S involvement for nonreligious people must be considered in juxtaposition with circumstances under which *religious* resources provide for the nonreligious. For instance, atheists might find the resources of religious communities useful for raising children (Ecklund and Lee 2011). To the degree that individuals who have not withdrawn from R/S involvement despite their doubt or disbelief in God (a trend which may or may not be represented by the demographic shift) *still partake of R/S resources*, it could be that R/S resources are serving people who—for all intents and purposes—are "secular" (e.g., ritualists, closet dwellers, and peacekeepers) to an extent not previously recognized, in which case an increasing demand for secular resources might be counterbalanced. This, of course, is conjecture that will require further examination, perhaps in the context of sociological perspectives of atheists as consumers of religious resources on grounds of rational cost-benefit analyses rather than spiritual beliefs or spiritual exchange (e.g., Stark and Finke 2000, as cited in Ecklund and Lee 2011).

R/S-Somes Less Healthy?

Some Mechanisms May Need to Operate in a R/S Context

Depending on their level of R/S (non)involvement, R/S-somes might benefit less from mechanisms that confer greater benefits for health when they operate within a R/S context. For example, there is evidence to suggest that religiously based social support can buffer the effects of stress on self-reported health in late life when social support from secular sources does not (Krause 2006b). Similarly, religious coping can explain variance in health outcomes beyond that which is explained by nonreligious methods of coping (Pargament 1997). Another study found that patients who sought pain-relief through prayer were successful only if they were members of a religious group (Dezutter et al. 2011).

Atheism and Dissonance

Nonbelief in God may be an inverse predictor of self-rated health for individuals who are *not* typical for their group; viz., for atheistic-somes when they engage in prayer, and for atheistic-nones (see Table 1) whose level of perceived religiosity is higher than the national average (Speed and Hwang 2017). It may be that nonbelievers who perceive themselves as religious experience poorer health as a consequence of dissonance between their nonbelief, behavior, and self-perception. It may be useful and instructive to consider

cognitive dissonance theory and research in this regard. That being said, more research is needed with respect to the broader contention that atheists and the non/irreligious do not benefit from religious behaviors and attitudes.

It would be interesting to know whether atheists in the studies reported by Speed and colleagues (e.g., Speed and Fowler 2016; Speed and Hwang 2017) were endorsing religiosity of the *intrinsic* type (e.g., internalized personal faith; having concern for the quality of one's personal connectedness with God) or the *extrinsic* type (i.e., using religion for personal gain or social benefit, or as a means to some other end) (Allport 1950; Kirkpatrick and Hood 1990). In this way, findings could be interpreted alongside previous studies on religious orientation that have found an inverse relationship between extrinsic religiosity and well-being. For instance, people who are higher in extrinsic religiosity might perceive negative life events as being beyond their personal control, and they may have a tendency toward higher levels of psychological distress and depression (Parks and Murgatroyd 1998). Yet, because participants' theistic beliefs were not reported (Parks and Murgatroyd 1998)—and because information concerning the type of religiosity was not available from the GSS (Speed and Fowler 2016; Speed and Hwang 2017)—further research is necessary to assess possible differences between atheists and nonatheists in connection with type of religiosity (e.g., whether atheists are acting in a more or less self-interested manner than nonatheists).

Agnosticism and Existential Uncertainty

Individuals who are prone to existential uncertainty might experience fewer health benefits from R/S involvement (Hogg et al. 2010; Vail, Arndt, and Abdollahi 2012). In terms of self-rated health, agnostic theists tended to benefit less than gnostic theists did from higher levels of religious service attendance, prayer, and religiosity based on regression analyses of data from the 2012 and 2014 GSS (Speed 2017). Galen and Kloet (2011) reported a curvilinear relationship whereby agnostic theists were less healthy than gnostic theists *and* gnostic atheists, suggesting again the salience of *confident* belief.

A recent analysis involving the Landmark Spirituality and Health Survey found that agnostics tended to report worse health on dimensions related to psychological well-being than religious affiliates did (Hayward et al. 2016). This is consistent with results from a previous survey on religiosity and well-being (i.e., measures of depression, hopelessness, life satisfaction, and self-esteem) wherein participants (N = 6465) with weaker theistic beliefs were less happy than strong believers (Mochon, Norton, and Ariely 2011). Mochon et al. (2011) suggested that—within the distribution of religiosity—the highest levels of well-being would entail high certainty of belief, and thus moderate believers (e.g., agnostics) might actually be better off reducing their level of religiosity: "When commitment wanes, individuals may be better off seeking new affiliations" (p. 12).

Summing Up

Must individuals be theistic and/or gnostic in order to experience the health benefits of religious service attendance and prayer? To the extent that atheists and agnostic theists can benefit from mechanisms that explain connections between R/S constructs and health among confident believers in God, the scholarly literature suggests that people need not be theistic and/or gnostic in order to experience the health benefits of R/S constructs. Referring back to the findings from the thematic analysis reported here, it is evident that—

even though health does not appear explicitly in the domain summary—many of the reasons cited for religious service attendance among R/S-somes (Table 3) can be tied to existing literature that has relevance for health. For example, "reflection and reorientation" could coincide broadly with meditation, stress reduction, and health (Smith 2001). The "social affair, social connectedness" code is germane to the social support and social identity functions of religious affiliation in health (Krause 2006a, b; Ysseldyk et al. 2010). Likewise, "spiritual/inner discipline" could reflect the association between religious attendance and self-control enhancement, which has implications for health behavior (e.g., Hill, Burdette, Ellison, and Musick 2006). However, R/S-somes might benefit less from mechanisms that operate best in a R/S context when such mechanisms are not part of their R/S repertoire. For example, R/S-somes might not utilize the social support that is available by way of occasional religious service attendance if they do not feel welcome by other congregants at a place of worship, or they might pray to cope, but not in a way that is religiously based. These are hypotheses based on the thematic analysis that will require testing.

Are R/S-somes just as healthy or less healthy than people with relatively traditional R/S beliefs and involvement? Although recent studies have begun to address critical gaps in the literature, the answer to this question is not entirely known. We do know that atheists who see themselves as religious and experience dissonance between their nonbelief and self-perception—and agnostic theists who are prone to existential uncertainty and have only moderate faith—might experience poorer health outcomes than gnostic theists (Hayward et al. 2016; Speed 2017).[4] Yet, research findings have been somewhat mixed, with studies reporting positive, nonsignificant, and negative associations between R/S constructs and health outcomes among nonR/nonS individuals. Curvilinear relationships between R/S constructs and happiness or well-being (Galen and Kloet 2011; Mochon et al. 2011), as well as the finding that nonbelief in God was an inverse predictor of self-rated health for atheists who were especially high in perceived religiosity, and for religiously unaffiliated individuals who attended religious services at a high rate (Speed and Fowler 2016, 2017b), raise questions about whether a health-related threshold exists for R/S constructs, and the degree to which occasional or casual R/S involvement meets or exceeds it.

Recommendations

Future Research

In addition to the proposals and recommendations made thus far (e.g., surveys and interviews of R/S-somes should assess the underlying valuation of R/S constructs; religious resources might serve the nonreligious and offset the demand for secular resources; researchers should continue to examine differences in type of religiosity between groups and consider the concept of a health-related threshold for R/S constructs), future studies should involve believers and nonbelievers in God who have been matched for perceived religiosity, R/S affiliation, and level of R/S practice (e.g., religious service attendance, prayer, etc.). Such studies should determine which of the mechanisms through which R/S (non)involvement can influence health are operating or missing in each group, and to what extent. While studies involving comparisons between R/S and nonR/nonS groups have examined behavioral mechanisms (health behavior, religious service attendance, prayer)

[4] Agnostics have also reported poorer health than individuals with no religious preference (Hayward et al. 2016) and those who choose to forgo religious affiliation altogether (Mochon et al. 2011).

(Hayward et al. 2016; Speed 2017) and psychosocial mechanisms (hope, optimism, personality type, social support, coping, meaning, and mastery) (Ai et al. 2004; Baker 2015; Krause 2006b; Pargament 1997; Speed et al. 2018; Speed and Fowler 2017a; Wilkinson and Coleman 2010), further research is needed to examine possible group differences in health-related outcomes involving other mechanisms such as altruistic behavior (e.g., charitable service and the extent to which individuals give back to their religious communities) (Brown et al. 2003; Putnam and Campbell 2010; Schwartz et al. 2003). Moreover, considering that much of the literature points to a stress buffering or stress-reducing effect of R/S involvement that may decrease allostatic load and risk of disease by way of the cardiovascular, neuroendocrine, and immune systems (Lovallo 1997; Rabin 1999; Rozanski, Blumenthal, and Kaplan 1999; Smith 2001), studies involving R/S (non)belief and biophysiological correlates of stress and negative affect/emotion could make for a fertile, and forward-looking, line of inquiry. Group comparisons and mechanisms aside, there is a broader need to supplement cross-sectional studies and secondary analyses of archival data that examine R/S factors as predictors or moderators of health status with qualitative descriptions of belief systems *within* groups. This could deepen our understanding of how the phenomenon of (non)belief figures in the lives of R/S and nonR/nonS individuals alike.

A New Narrative Involving Secular Minorities

To the degree that research studies have involved general population samples that consist predominantly of individuals who identify with religion and/or spirituality, the religion-health field has been criticized (unduly) for taking a monolithic approach that ignores secular minorities (e.g., Hwang et al. 2011; Speed and Hwang 2017). I would identify this criticism as being part of what Levin (2017) called the "tacit narrative" of misperceptions about the history and scope of the religion-health field. Specifically, two points should be considered with respect to the criticism I mentioned: First, anomalies in survey responses (see introduction to this paper) strongly suggest that secular minorities *have* been included in studies of religion and health. For this reason, the narrative should reflect the importance of disaggregating groups—not the exclusion or marginalization of secular minorities. Second, several areas come to mind in which the religion-health field has endeavored to be *pluralistic* in its orientation and inclusive of secular minorities. For instance, a theorized model of causal pathways by which secular humanism could influence health is presented in the religion and health literature (Koenig, King, and Carson 2012). (According to this model, the self and the community represent God; humanistic doctrines replace supernatural beliefs; a search for truth during this life and an emphasis on ethics and the public good convey psychological traits and health behaviors that positively influence emotions and social connections, which, in turn, positively influence health and longevity.) Moreover, there is an entire literature on the integration of religion and spirituality in health care (e.g., Harris, Thoresen, McCullough, and Larson 1999; Koenig 2008; Larimore et al. 2002; Matthews and Larson 1997; Matthews et al. 1998; Mrdjenovich 2010; Mrdjenovich et al. 2012; Pattison 2013; Post et al. 2000), in which Koenig (2007) describes a secular framework whereby R/S content is not actively elicited or explicitly addressed among secular patients beyond an appropriate assessment—in terms of meaning and purpose, meditation, and social support rather than R/S beliefs, prayer, or congregational membership—and a referral to community resources as needed, which could serve to address the ethical dilemma of withholding health-related information and support from patients

who indicate that religion or spiritually is not personally important. Along similar lines, Ai and colleagues (2004, 2017) have studied the protective influence of secular reverence (defined as a feeling or attitude of deep respect, love, and awe for something sacred) on physical health. Findings suggest that reverence of a nonreligious nature could enhance health outcomes just as more traditional forms of reverence might.

With that background, I would advocate for a new narrative that engages secular minorities but does not reflect the adversarial stance taken by some of the authors of recently published studies on atheism, nonreligion, and health. Perhaps the new narrative would represent a move away from blanket statements made in those publications to the effect that there is "nothing inherently healthy" about R/S constructs.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest I have no conflicts or competing interests to report.

Ethical Standards This research complies with The Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association. Human subjects were not involved.

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