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## Agnostics and Atheists in Mexico

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### Keywords

Agnosticism · Atheism · Religiously unaffiliated · Religious shift · Secularism

### Definition

Agnosticism and atheism are two positions in regard to the world that distance themselves from a theistic or religious posture; although their definition is not based exclusively on the negation of a God or on the lack of religious beliefs, rather, they imply a set of values and representations of a different kind, as well as practical consequences in the actions of agnostic or atheistic people.

Although these positions are usually considered homogeneously, there are important differences among them.

In terms of a substantial belief that influences the patterns of lifeworld, atheists claim *to be* without “religion” and also without “God”; nevertheless, as we have mentioned, negation is not the fundamental argument of atheism, since it can encompass other beliefs systems: scientific or humanistic values, “rationalist” epistemologies, as well as political doctrines and ideologies, among others. Besides, the possible “militancy” in some atheistic collective that pragmatically complements the worldview of atheists must be added.

On the other hand, agnostics share a position that “does not miss God,” although we cannot be affirmed that they totally ignore this notion. These individuals usually consider any transcendent and absolute proposition in the private sphere “unknowable”; in this sense, they represent one of the more specific expressions of “postmodern doubt.”

## Introduction

There has been a considerable increase in the study of agnosticism and atheism, particularly within anthropology and sociology, especially since the last decades of the past century, relating to the growth in the number of religiously unaffiliated – sometimes called the rise of the “nones” – those who are usually associated with atheist and agnostic postures.

The expansion of “nones” is remarkably observable in most of the globe. Actually, they represent 16.4% of the world population by the first decade of the twenty-first century (Pew Research Center 2015). While in Latin America, their proportion is 8%. And in Mexico, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated respondents reaches 7% of the country’s population (Pew Research Center 2014).

Now, it is important to say that the group of religiously unaffiliated is not fully composed of atheists or agnostics. In fact, data in many national census or surveys shows that, on the whole, atheists and agnostics commonly account for fewer than half of the number of “nones.” As an illustration, in America, nearly 25% of adults say they are unaffiliated; however, only slightly more than 6% of the total population is accurately defined as atheist or agnostic (PRRI 2016).

For the Mexican case, according to the Pew Research Center (2014), despite the fact that there is 7% of religiously unaffiliated, only 3% identify themselves as “atheists” and another 3% say they “have no particular religion.” Moreover, the measurement has not registered agnostics. Even so, we cannot deny the increase in the proportion of people with an agnostic or atheistic identification linked to the widening of general religious

disaffiliation. This phenomenon, for itself, contrasts strongly with the monopoly that Catholicism has exhibited throughout the history of Mexico: a nation that has been identified as the birthplace of the “Guadalupano” fervor and as an important asset of Catholicism in the Americas.

## Historical Outline

Historically, the subject of agnosticism and atheism in the Mexican nation can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century. According to Mexican writer Carlos Monsiváis (2002), the “invention” of atheism in the country is set in a controversial event; in 1837, the young Ignacio Ramírez, called “The Necromancer,” in his speech at the Academy of San Juan de Letrán, in Mexico City, pronounced the sentence: “There is no God! Natural beings sustain themselves.”

Such a revelation strongly impacted the public. As “a monster apparition” wrote the politic and poet Guillermo Prieto: “a deafening collapse of the roof, would not have caused more commotion.” In the middle of a “rabid outcry,” the director of the Mexican humanist academy protested: “I cannot allow this to be read here, this is an education place” (Prieto 1906).

Certainly, this event would not have been possible without a structural milieu characterized by a minimum of political secularism. And so it was, during the nineteenth century in Mexico. Throughout this period, the Catholic ecclesiastical leadership (which administered 99% of the religious preferences of the country until 1910) had to defend its authority against different secular challenges:

(1) First of all, against the nation-state, reasserting its role as the only guide of social and moral life, that is, as an institution that preserves the *Truth* for the “survival of the nation”. Moreover, (2) against intellectuals and their “transgressive” and “misunderstanding” interpretations of the world; as opposed to clergymen who had the task of guiding and “keep at bay” the request for religious tolerance. And, most of all, (3) against the common people, who also contributed to “the moral degeneration” with their “selflessness, their enjoyment of life, their sensuality.” (Staples 2009, 276–78)

In the early twentieth century, the Mexican Revolution precipitated the climate of secularization. Right after this conflict, Catholicism began to decrease its quasitotal majority religious affiliation. The armed conflict was, therefore, an “intensive course of secularization” resulting from the “moral relativism” engendered by violence among the different factions in disagreement. Of course, “people continued believing”; however, the conduct of social life was no longer established by the “administrators of beliefs” (Monsiváis 2002).

Taking into consideration the previous historical events, the Mexican religious landscape has undergone substantial changes in recent years. This trend emerged in the early 1990s and continues into the early twenty-first century. As can be seen in Table 1, since the late nineteenth-century the percentage of Catholic people had remained stable or decreased slightly; nevertheless, in 1990, Catholicism declined to 89.7% of the total population, and this has also impacted the growth of the religiously unaffiliated and consequently the growth of atheism and agnosticism.

With all circumstances being considered, analyzing agnosticism and atheism in the early twenty-first century in Mexico means, primarily, recognizing the historical processes that have allowed Mexicans – especially young people – to take

**Agnostics and Atheists in Mexico, Table 1** Trends in Catholic affiliation and unaffiliated, 1895–2010

Year	Catholic %	Unaffiliated %
1895	99.1	0.5
1900	99.5	0.1
1910	99.2	0.2
1921	97.1	0.8
1930	97.7	1.1
1940	96.6	2.3
1950	98.2	n.a
1960	96.5	0.6
1970	96.2	1.6
1980	92.6	3.1
1990	89.7	3.2
2000	88.0	3.5
2010	82.7	4.7

Source: INEGI (2010, 2011)

a position as a part of agnosticism or atheism, with some distinguishing qualities.

### Characteristics

Based on our findings in the context of Mexico City, we found that 34% of “nones” answered a question about their “current religion” by saying they were atheist or agnostic. Among them, one half fully identify themselves with atheism and the other half with agnosticism. That is, only about one-third of unaffiliated people currently identify as atheist-agnostic (These findings are part of our PhD research with nonreligious Mexicans currently conducted at El Colegio de México. We aimed to interview 30 participants aged 17–75, who reside principally at Benito Juárez in Mexico City. Given that the study involved a small-scale nonrandomized sample, our results cannot be generalized to the wider Mexican population, although, similar conclusions from other pertinent, nongeneralizable studies nevertheless suggest that our results may be indicative of broader trends.)

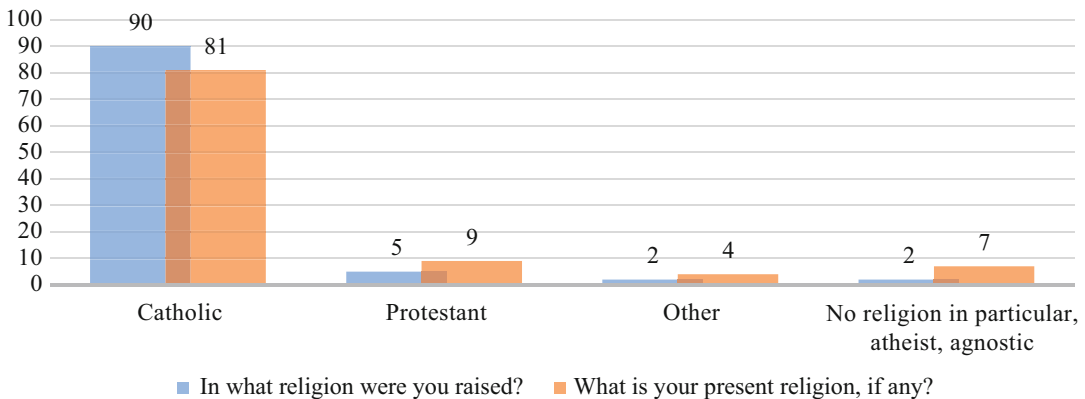
In terms of the characterization of these individuals, young men are more likely to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic. In fact, among our informants, 60% were males aged about 28.

On the other hand, most of our atheist-agnostic informants were raised Catholic but have since left the faith, which is not atypical in view of the hegemonic and historical position of this

church. A similar pattern can be found in the report *Religion in Latin America* of Pew Research Center (2014). They report that 90% of Mexican adults were raised Catholic, 9 percentage points more than those currently identified as Catholic. Data suggest that through religious shifting, other churches and the religiously unaffiliated population in Mexico have gained members (Fig. 1).

We also found in research that most of the religious shift usually developed over time and through experience. A perception of “lax religiosity” in the family is central to narratives leaning towards dispossession of the lineage of belief (atheism) or towards doubt as a continuous state (agnosticism). The less salience of religious beliefs and practices in the family is a significant consequence of the decline of them. This milieu fosters that agnostics and atheists manage their own views and values, taking advantage of the social interactions and structural configurations. For example, access to higher degrees of education than the previous generation, accumulated experience in the labor market, contact with secular networks, and perception of an environment of secularism in public sphere.

Another finding among Mexican agnostics-atheists is that their worldview generally does not promote actions of assembly or militancy offline, which indirectly highlights the tendency towards individualism. This, nonetheless, contrasts with the engagement with online resources and arguments that individuals acquire in social networks, online



**Agnostics and Atheists in Mexico, Fig. 1** Shifting religious identity in Mexico (Source: Pew Research Center 2014)

spaces, and global information technologies in order to construct their own narrative around the religious and nonreligious identity.

## Discussion

A common hypothesis about agnostics and atheists is that they react strongly against religion, maintaining a position of “heresy” or “apostasy.” Consequently, it is noted that these positions are manifested when individuals start to think that all religions are false to the same degree. It is often supposed that someone who “does not believe in God does not believe in anything.” As a consequence, “he is an atheist and may have also become an apostate,” that is, he “subscribes to the act of fighting and attacking the religion” (Garma 1999, 158).

Unconditional heresy or apostasy is not entirely accurate, even though some atheists show strong animosity against religion. As Gutierrez (2005) found in the context of Mexico City, rather than standing against religion, atheists “deny any institutional dependence, in terms of beliefs,” and this involves a greater freedom “to believe and to practice another kind of religiosity”. Consequently, the Mexican sociologist reminds us, “more than atheists, the majority of Mexicans classified in this group correspond to the category of agnostics” (Gutiérrez 2005, 636).

The emerging field that addresses agnosticism, atheism (and nonreligion) recognizes, on the one hand, that these positions do not necessarily imply a change towards a permanent identification, but imply a “multifaceted identity” under the influence of biographical experience and secular environments of socialization along the individual trajectory. And, on the other hand, it notes that these identities don not exclude beliefs and practices often associated with a religious affiliation, for example, the belief in God and other “spiritual” phenomena.

We propose that a plausible approach is to consider agnosticism and atheism in terms of a socially constructed worldview, based on “doubt” or “uncertainty,” representative in the former, and a “nontheistic” perspective, common in the latter.

Therefore, more than agnostics in the strict sense, we can speak of religiously unaffiliated-uncertain (UU), and, more than atheists, they can be considered religiously unaffiliated with the nontheistic worldview (UNT).

Unaffiliated-uncertain (UU) often shows an attitude of irresolution in regard to the probability that God exists and affects the world. Occasionally, they replace the meaning [God] with other deregulated notions of the control of institutional religions, as “universal energy or consciousness,” the “highest being,” “the universe as a whole,” “something,” etc. We suggest that the significant variation in the meaning of religious concepts implicates an attitude of pluralism in regard to diversity of beliefs and definitions that the “others” incorporate in the formation of personal meaning. This position also considers that all search and questions about the moral and the spiritual can be justified in a Secular Age.

In addition to the above, the UU individuals outlooks usually may be mediated by “scientific knowledge,” nevertheless, they do not claim a strictly “rational” position. In fact, they often recognize that “science” has limits and that “it does not provide all the answers” to questions of ultimate concern or to build an integral meaning within life. They keep their minds “open” to the “depth” and “wonders” of human experience, without this representing a state of vital uncertainty, since doubt is in fact a sort of ontological position.

On the other hand, unaffiliated-nontheists (UNT) base their religious disaffiliation primarily on the absence of belief, faith, and anything religious from their cognitive perspective; for example, in any notion of divinity, Gods, or spirits. This type involves “atheists” and “antitheists.”

Atheists included in UNT typology can be intellectual or militant. The former commonly develop their position through consumption and production of intellectual references: books, videos, magazines, blogs, and other dissemination media and debate of ideas. The latter are proactive, and their minimal activism goes from confronting their ideas with family or other close groups to more collective manifestations, such a meetings with other atheists or skeptical-freethinking groups.

Additionally, other individuals show a more assertive position: antitheist. In a sense, they regard religion – or any element derived or closed to it – as damaging factor for “human flourishing.”

This last group within UNT has also been categorized as “new atheists.” McGrath (2016) reminds us that they regularly hold three points of view: (1) there is a continual belligerence among discourses of religion and science. (2) Atheism is a “higher” position in regard to religion, because it is justified in “scientific” arguments. Therefore, they recognize the adoption of science as “the last standard and arbiter of all matters of human interest”. (3) And the only quality of religion is the “corruption” it has made of human capabilities. It means, therefore, that religion is the “cultural other” or, in other words, “the enemy.”

UU and UNT show, in general, some degree of intersection with religious practices and beliefs, even though they are unaffiliated. Therefore, beyond their agnostic or atheistic position, they can attend religious services and maintain elements of the religious worldview, since they may consider them “socially relevant,” that is to say, with benefits for socialization in the lifeworld.

This tendency can certainly be presented more easily among UU, because they do not rule out the validity of religious elements as several UNT; even though, it is also possible to find trajectories with a predisposition of indifference to the social manifestations of religion, beyond a rigorous position contrary to religious dogmas.

## Cross-References

- ▶ [Secularization in the Indigenous Mexican Context](#)

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## All Souls' Day

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### Keywords

Catholicism · Souls · Death · Popular religion · Popular Catholicism · Syncretism · Purgatory