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[Research] Atheism in Greek society: Breaking the chain of religious memory and the emergence of atheist identity

*What are atheists like in Orthodox Christian countries? In this post, **Alexandros Sakellariou***



(https://nonreligionandsecularity.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/photo_sakellariou.jpg) explores this question by examining Greek atheists. His analysis shows that Greek atheists choose to be atheists as a result of breaking the chains of religious memory. At first, formation of their atheist identity is largely to reject their Orthodox identity, but Greek atheists gradually find their own positive identity with atheist beliefs and morality.

Even until very recently the dominant perception has been that more than 95 per cent of the Greek population is Orthodox Christian and some polls (2006) have supported it (Orthodox Christians: 96.9 per cent; Atheists: less than 2 per cent). However, according to a recent poll (2015) 81.4 per cent are Orthodox Christians while 14.7 per cent are atheists (Chiotis 2015), which is quite a significant change. The international revival of atheism, especially what has been called “new atheism”, has influenced Greek society as well. Greek translations of all the major works of the protagonists of the international movement (Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris); articles about atheism published in mainstream media; websites, forums and blogs that support and disseminate atheist ideas; and the establishment of the Atheist Union of Greece in 2012 are the most important outcomes.

For a long time atheists were, quite stunningly, almost completely ignored by sociologists (Le Drew 2013, 1 (<http://socrel.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/04/03/socrel.srt014>)), but contrary to international interest, atheism in Greece has still attracted no attention among social scientists. Bearing that in mind, in 2012 I started qualitative research on atheism resulting in 63 semi-structured interviews with people self-characterized as atheists. The purpose was to answer the following questions: Who are the Greek atheists in contemporary Greek society? In which family environment were they born and

raised? How did they de-convert from the Greek Orthodox traditional and dominant religious paradigm and how did their families react to this rupture with their past? What are their beliefs about religion, morality and life?

With the exception of few interviewees who were raised in rather atheist or secular family environments and some raised in mixed families (e.g. Orthodox and Protestant), all the others grew up in families where the Orthodox religion was the dominant paradigm and was practised by either both parents or mainly by the mother who was usually the parent with the strongest religious affiliation. Living within a Greek-Orthodox society, especially in the past, meant that it was almost inevitable that they followed their parents' religious beliefs and practices, the family chain of religious memory (Hervieu-Leger 2006).

As a consequence, many of the interviewees in their childhood were close to the Church and they observed the family's practices like fasting and praying, while some of them attended Mass and Sunday school. In many cases, though, Sunday school and Church attendance were social obligations and practices of social inclusion, not necessarily a manifestation of strong faith, even though at the same time they were not atheists either:

I went to Sunday school from the age of 5 to 8 because all my friends were going and I had nothing else to do during the weekends. (Sotiris)[1]

Most of the interviewees characterized their families as typical Orthodox, middle-class families, not very religious – (below) average – that preserved those teachings and customs the family considered as good and didn't follow what they considered as wrong or bad.

Greek atheists frequently frame their prior religious identity as something forced upon them by the family rather than a genuine religious belief, a finding confirming other studies ([Chalfant 2011, 51-54](https://wakespace.lib.wfu.edu/bitstream/handle/10339/33473/Chalfant_wfu_0248M_10090.pdf) (https://wakespace.lib.wfu.edu/bitstream/handle/10339/33473/Chalfant_wfu_0248M_10090.pdf)).

In my early childhood, like every Greek child of my times, I was inculcated by my parents and my environment with the dogma of the Orthodox faith. Because of limited knowledge and without the development of critical thinking, I was persuaded that the God of our religion was something true. (Paraskevas)

But sometimes this chain breaks and interruptions in religious continuity are observed ([Bengtson 2013, 131-144](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eTiaAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Families+and+Faith:+How+Religion+is+passed+down+across+generations) (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eTiaAAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Families+and+Faith:+How+Religion+is+passed+down+across+generations>)). There is a variety of reasons behind the rupture with the dominant religious paradigm both at the family and social levels (e.g. book reading, scientific documentaries, social observations, self-reflection, etc.), but the common thing is time, since for the vast majority the starting point was between early childhood or puberty and their 20s.

I had doubts from a very early age; I was in my mother's village, 6-7 years old...I came across my mother's uncle who was a priest; I went near him to kiss his hand and I asked him about other religions. He replied that all the others are wrong and only we [the Orthodox] have the true religion. To my childish mind this was irrational, because every religion believes that, so either they are all right or all wrong, you can't base your faith on this kind of argumentation. (Xrysanthi)

For the majority of the interviewees this process of de-conversion took some time. As one of them described it:

It is like a ship leaving port and gradually distancing itself from the coast. (Dimitris)

Besides breaking this chain of religious memory atheists seem to form an atheist identity through the expression of their own views regarding morality, life meaning and personal beliefs. When asked to comment on the Church's argument that atheists are immoral because religion is the only way to moralise human society, or the Dostoevskian saying that "without God everything is permitted", they completely rejected it, arguing that religions have been extremely immoral and referring to a number of issues like violence (e.g. the Crusades, the Islamic State), financial scandals, child abuse, etc. They argued that they help other people not because a divine power is watching and judging them or because of the fear of hell. They claimed that they as atheists are also moral, because morality is a social construction and religion has nothing to do with it, confirming the findings of other studies ([Bengtson 2013, 155](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eTiaAAAAOBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Families+and+Faith:+How+Religion+is+passed+down+acr) (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eTiaAAAAOBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Families+and+Faith:+How+Religion+is+passed+down+acr>)). As one of them wondered,

Am I immoral because I don't go to Church? Am I immoral because I have premarital sex? (Themis)

All the interviewees were asked to say what they believe in, i.e. their *raison d'être*. They all rejected every supernatural power power influencing people's lives or any power that has created the universe. As in other studies ([Bengtson 2013, 155](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eTiaAAAAOBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Families+and+Faith:+How+Religion+is+passed+down+acr) (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=eTiaAAAAOBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=Families+and+Faith:+How+Religion+is+passed+down+acr>)) some of them said that they value science and scientific and technological achievements, others said that they believe in human beings, in society, in nature or animals and others in themselves and in freedom. This last point was also common to other qualitative studies in which atheists stated that they have stopped worshipping God and they now worship freedom ([Zuckerman 2012, 11](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277758388_Contrasting_irreligious_orientation_Atheism_and_even_if_worshipping_in_this_case_has_a_metaphorical_meaning) (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277758388_Contrasting_irreligious_orientation_Atheism_and_even_if_worshipping_in_this_case_has_a_metaphorical_meaning)).

The outcome of my research is that Greek atheists having brought up as Greek Orthodox Christians decided to break this chain of religious memory and change their ethnic nominal Orthodox identity at some point of their life course following a variety of paths. However, as it came out, after an initial stage of rejecting their Orthodox identity they gave moved towards a positive formation of an atheist identity. This means that the vast majority of them reflected on a number of issues, particularly life meaning and morality, building this way a distinct atheist identity which is not any more identified exclusively with anti-Orthodox attitudes. It is not easy to argue whether there are more atheists in Greece now, or that they have started to speak out, or both. The truth is that atheism in Greece is still in its infancy compared with other western societies and which also applies to its scientific study.

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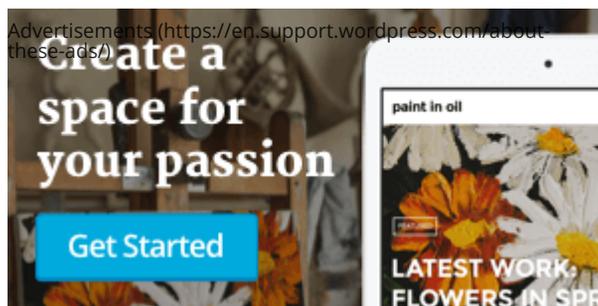
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[1] All names used are pseudonyms.

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