

Formerly Religious People Face Challenges in Finding Sense of Belonging

A recent study published in *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* has shed light on the struggles faced by formerly religious individuals in terms of concealing their nonreligious identity and experiencing a sense of belongingness.

The study, which analyzed data from various countries, underscores the importance of faith as a significant aspect of personal and social identity.

Lead author Cameron D. Mackey, a PhD candidate in social psychology at Ohio University, explained that religiously unaffiliated individuals who were previously religious ("religious donees") exhibit distinct psychological characteristics compared to those who have never identified as religious ("religious nones"). Notably, religious nones hold more negative attitudes toward God, whereas religious donees fall between currently religious individuals and never religious individuals in terms of their attitudes.

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The research also delves into social identity threat, which refers to the feeling of not belonging due to group membership.

The study highlights that atheists in the United States often feel a sense of social identity threat, particularly in regions with heightened religious populations, such as the American South. This awareness of stereotypes regarding atheism, which portray atheists as immoral and untrustworthy,

leads atheists to conceal their nonreligious identity.

To investigate these dynamics, the researchers analyzed two existing data sets from participants in the United States, the Netherlands and Hong Kong.

The United States represents a religious Western context, the Netherlands is known for its high levels of secularism and Hong Kong provides a unique blend of religious practices and beliefs within an Eastern cultural context. Participants were categorized as currently religious, religious donees or religious nones, allowing for a comparison of social identity threat and the concealment of religious identity across these cultural settings.

The study findings indicate that formerly religious individuals, specifically religious donees, are more likely to conceal their nonreligious identity in religious contexts compared to never religious individuals. This observation underscores the need for understanding the challenges faced by formerly religious individuals and their distinct experiences of concealment.

Interestingly, the study also reveals that both religious donees and religious nones in Hong Kong, a predominantly secular Eastern context, experience lower levels of belongingness and are more inclined to conceal their identities than currently religious individuals. The researchers suggest that this could be attributed to nonreligious individuals in Hong Kong participating in culturally important religious practices without subscribing to their theological underpinnings, resulting in a disconnect between public behavior and private beliefs.

While the study provides valuable insights, it is important to note that further research is needed to establish causality. Additionally, exploring additional sociocultural contexts and majority-Muslim environments would deepen understanding of

nonreligious identity and the extent of concealment and belongingness experienced by religious ones and nones.

For Christians who believe that faith is an integral part of their identity, the study's findings can serve as a reminder of the significance of faith in providing a sense of belonging and purpose.

The Bible emphasizes the redemption and acceptance Christians find through their faith. Romans 8:1 states, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit," assuring believers that they are accepted and loved in Christ.

Similarly, Ephesians 2:8-9 affirms, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one should boast." These verses teach all who are looking for hope and purpose of the freedom and acceptance they experience through their relationship with God. {eoa}

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