

Spontaneous aversion to religion: Preliminary approaches

András Máté-Tóth

Kinga Povedák

Réka Szilárdi

The issue of spontaneous emotional or cognitive aversion concerns problems of stereotyping and prejudice in the humanities. It has been discussed primarily in relation to such concepts as group formation, ingroup-outgroup, and personal and social identity construction. From the Festinger model of social comparison (1954), or the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner (1980) to the empirical studies of experimental psychology (Sherif, 1966; Tajfel, 1970, etc.), social psychology has examined this issue extensively. In the last century's social science discourse, group identities and their boundaries have been elaborated in more ways, either specific cases of large group identification (e.g., national identity) or small group identification against majority groups (e.g., ethnic, religious, worldview minorities).¹ Religious self-identity and related prejudices can thus provide a broad set of both large-group and small-group identification, as well as segregation.

The model of spontaneous aversion to religion was inspired by the fact that there are aspects of atheism and nonreligion in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that cannot be investigated or explained through a rational approach. In this paper, we try to conceptualize what we call spontaneous aversion to religion and explain what is behind this concept. If we understand the mechanism of this phenomenon and the emotions and feelings associated with it, pastoral care can also benefit and can focus on spontaneous aversions rather than philosophical rational atheism debates. Our paper aims to raise the issue of spontaneous aversion to religion and develop a new methodology that can approach this novel concept.

There is a conventional Europe division into Eastern and Western subregions in social sciences and European public thinking. This division can mainly be traced back to the political decisions that followed World War II, dividing Europe into the American and Soviet zones, which significantly influenced the development of economic, military, and political relations. The division ceased to exist to some extent between 1989 and 1991, and with the enlargement of the European Union to the East, a period of fundamentally different beginnings began. Nevertheless, the East–West divide still exists in public discourses and in social sciences, no matter how much research has shown that neither the West nor the East parts of Europe form a homogeneous unit.

¹ See: Wohl – Branscombe, 2005 (North American – Jewish – German), 2008 (Israeli – Palestinian), Bilali, 2012 (North American – Japanese), Cehajic – Brown, 2010 (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Andrighetto – Mari – Volpato – Behluli, 2012 (Kosovo).

In our paper, we deal with the characteristics of CEE atheism. By CEE, we mean a geographical location: the European countries of the former Soviet zone. Regarding the region, we argue that despite the political and economic changes of the 1990s, nonreligion and atheism in particular of the region can be distinguished from the atheisms experienced in Western European countries. We focus primarily on Central European countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary). In the first part of this paper, we illustrate fewer atheists in CEE countries than in Western Europe and support this argument based on survey data. In the next step, we provide an explanation of this, based primarily on historical contexts. Finally, we report on the observation of spontaneous aversion to religion, a new concept we propose to research. In our view, the possibility of dialogue with atheists in the CEE region is primarily limited by spontaneous aversion. Understanding this phenomenon can make a significant contribution to the increasing dialogue.

Atheism in CEE – data analysis

If we look at atheism in CEE, we agree that “publications presenting recent research results from different Central and East European countries reflecting on the relation between religion and nonreligion concerning the socialist period are relatively rare” (Vorpahl and Schuster 2020, 2). However, the statistics on the prevalence of atheism in Europe provide data for analysis. To provide a deeper understanding of data regarding atheism in CEE, the results of several independent studies (Aufbruch, Pew Forum, EVS) will be presented.

The EVS research results show that CCE countries have a higher degree of religiosity than Western European countries. Among the CCE countries, the Czech Republic and Estonia stand out. Furthermore, although there are societies with a high level of non-believers in God, this does not usually mean that they can be characterized as atheists.

Below the answers to the question: *Do you believe in God* (answers in %)?

Country	Yes	No	N
Czech Republic	38,9	61,1	1624
Estonia	51,4	48,6	801
Sweden	53,4	46,6	884
Netherlands	61,1	38,9	980

France	61,5	38,5	1472
Slovenia	65,2	34,8	959
Bulgaria	66,2	33,8	875
Germany	67,8	32,2	1859
Hungary	68,1	31,9	952
Denmark	68,9	31,1	921
Russia	70,3	29,7	2108
Belgium	71,4	28,6	1776
Great Britain	71,8	28,2	839
Luxembourg	73,2	26,8	1125
Latvia	79,5	20,5	893
Ukraine	80,3	19,7	1039
Finland	82,5	17,5	928
Slovakia	82,8	17,2	1216
Belarus	82,9	17,1	871
Iceland	84,4	15,6	882
Lithuania	86,5	13,5	822
Spain	86,7	13,3	1122

Austria	86,8	13,2	1334
Croatia	91,6	8,4	976
Northern Ireland	93,2	6,8	946
Italy	93,5	6,5	1880
Greece	93,8	6,2	1101
Ireland	95,5	4,5	989
Romania	96,3	3,7	1090
Portugal	96,4	3,6	964
Poland	97,3	2,7	1082
Malta	99,5	0,5	999

Source: EVS Third Wave (2001, 86)

Based on research by the PEW Forum, it can be stated that there are significantly fewer people in the CEE countries who do not believe in God than in Western European countries.

Belief in God more widespread in Central and Eastern Europe

% who say they ...

	Believe in God	Believe in God, absolutely certain	Believe in God, less certain	Do not believe in God
Georgia	99%	73%	24%	1%
Armenia	95	79	16	4
Moldova	95	55	40	3
Romania	95	64	30	4
Bosnia	94	66	28	4
Greece	92	59	33	6
Serbia	87	58	29	10
Croatia	86	57	29	10
Poland	86	45	38	8
Ukraine	86	32	51	9
Belarus	84	26	58	9
Portugal	83	44	38	13
Bulgaria	77	30	47	17
Lithuania	76	34	41	11
Russia	75	25	48	15
Italy	73	26	46	21
Latvia	71	28	41	15
Ireland	69	24	44	26
Slovakia	69	37	31	27
Austria	67	13	53	29
Spain	64	25	38	31
Switzerland	62	11	51	33
Germany	60	10	50	36
Hungary	59	26	33	30
Finland	58	23	34	37
UK	58	12	45	36
France	56	11	45	37
Denmark	51	15	36	46
Norway	49	19	30	47
Estonia	44	13	31	45
Netherlands	44	15	28	53
Belgium	42	13	29	54
Sweden	36	14	22	60
Czech Republic	29	13	16	66

Note: Orange labels are Central and Eastern European countries. Blue labels are Western European countries. Don't know/refused responses about belief in God or certainty of belief not shown. Muslim respondents in Western European countries were not asked this question.

Source: Surveys conducted 2015-2017 in 34 countries. See Methodology for details.

"Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues"

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However, these results highlight even more clearly the differences between the four countries we have highlighted in terms of a lack of faith in God. The proportion of non-believers in God is 8% in Poland, 27% in Slovakia, 30% in Hungary, and 66% in the Czech Republic.

The second wave of the Aufbruch research reached similar results. In interpreting the data, the researchers distinguished the group of atheists, the group of atheizing (between full atheists and believers), from the group of convinced atheists by their responses to various questions. Between 1997 and 2007, the latter's proportion increased significantly in Hungary, mainly in the Czech Republic, while it decreased slightly in Slovakia. Among the possible explanations for the growth of the atheist option, researchers suggested that many people in the older generation may have felt a return to the pre-communist order after the regime change and answered the question about faith – mostly with yes – as they would have answered in pre-communist time. However, this visioned restoration was worn out during the second wave of freedom (Máté-Tóth 2013), and today there are more atheists because, on the one hand, the need for a rearrangement of the past has passed, and people have met the realities of religion, especially through their religious institutions, which deterred them from religious beliefs.

Different trajectories of Western and Eastern European Atheisms

When we speak of an atheist worldview, it is an expansive and complex reality. Sociological research using survey methods can capture certain dimensions of this complex reality. Typically, respondents are asked to answer which group they associate with concerning religion, whereas one group is called an “atheist” or a “convinced atheist.” On the other hand, in the question of faith in God, they offer an alternative to rejecting faith in God: “there is no God,” “I do not believe in God,” and so on.

When discussing atheism in this study, we do not address two social groups, the non-believers and the agnostics. People not associated with any religious community are often associated with atheist positions, although the range of non-believers is much wider than that of atheists. Those who consider the question of God indecisive cannot be considered atheists but agnostics.

Respondents of atheistic backgrounds whom the sociological surveys can grasp have opinions comparable to those of committed believers regarding several religious aspects, e.g., the social impact of religion, the role and significance of religious institutions, the priesthood, the responsibilities of believers, and so on. Atheism is predominantly present in Christian culture, while the literature on the phenomenon and characteristics of Jewish atheism is also rich, especially with respect to the Holocaust. The atheism of China or India is very different from the atheism observed in European culture. In this study, we only deal with atheism found in the Christian social environment.

The atheist worldview expresses a way of thinking in a philosophical or sociological approach to knowledge, the main points of which can be summarized as the atheist mindset. This includes the following axiomatic statements contributing to the “canon” of the atheist mindset:

- There is no God.
- Religion is destructive and retrograde.
The church is anti-science and anti-progress.
- The main contributors to this canon include Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, and later the so-called “New atheists” – Dawkins, Harris, Dennett, Hitchens.

These theses are present in both Western European and CEE public thinking. The traditions of the social history of the two parts of Europe, in this sense, are partly common and partly different. The differences are mostly marked by communist doctrine and dictatorship in CEE.² With regard to atheism in particular, the nationalization of schools, the harsh attacks on churches, the emphasis on the retrograde aspects of religion, and the building and positioning of a new materialist and atheist-minded elite were the measures that characterized the CEE atheist mindset.³

Although the change of regime around 1990 showed a significant increase (up to 25-30%) in the data on religious affiliation in this region, in many of its mostly Orthodox majority countries, the confession of denominational affiliation does not mean a change of mindset, but rather a break with the past and can be interpreted as a symbolic confession of national identity.

Today's atheism in CEE is not primarily manifested in an outright and loud denial of God, but in a kind of ideology called new humanism, in which human is the measure of all things, especially in moral decisions, and in which the outlook on life based on scientific knowledge is the center of personal orientation. Today's atheism protests univocally against belief in biblical creation history and against homeopathic remedies because none of these have a scientific explanation. Moreover, similarly, reject the churches' competence in the field of morality (primarily sexual and medical ethics) and all other ethical options that refer to tradition. In the past 30 years, post-communist atheist public thinking has moved away from the atheism imposed and violently demanded by the state and the party. It is increasingly feeding on atheist positions without region-specific traits through free European and global communication channels.⁴

In 2014, two American non-academic specialist authors compiled a book about what the "10 Commandments of Atheism" could be. The book entitled *Atheist Mind, Humanist Heart* by Lex Bayer and John Figdor summarizes the command proposals received at the call of the authors; a jury selected the most relevant answers, the result can be read below:

Atheists' new Ten Commandments⁵

1. Be open-minded and be willing to alter your beliefs with new evidence.
2. Strive to understand what is most likely to be true, not to believe what you wish to be true.
3. The scientific method is the most reliable way of understanding the natural world.
4. Every person has the right to control of their body.
5. God is not necessary to be a good person or to live a full and meaningful life.

² For further analysis see: Bubík, T., Rimmel, A., & Václavík, D. and Bullivant, S., & Ruse, M.

³ Here, with some restrictions, we can refer to the so-called homo sovieticus, as its specific features can be learned from the works of the Belarusian writer Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich.

⁴ Followers of New Atheism are presumably more numerous in Central Europe, especially in the post-regime socialized generation, than followers of the "old atheism" of communism.

⁵ <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/19/living/atheist-10-commandments/index.html>

6. Be mindful of the consequences of all your actions and recognize that you must take responsibility for them.
7. Treat others as you would want them to treat you and can reasonably expect them to want to be treated. Think about their perspective.
8. We have the responsibility to consider others, including future generations.
9. There is no one right way to live.
10. Leave the world a better place than you found it.

Without interpreting the individual commandments, there are a few aspects to note. In the commandments, the basic voice of the thinking, responsible person is the leading voice. Proven fact-based thinking and responsibility for your own life, body, and nature. It does not include an explicit denial of God, only a relativization of its significance for life management. (5) It does not include history (unless the reference to new evidence indirectly refers to Galileo and Giordano Bruno) and the church (unless the freedom to decide on one's own body indirectly refers to the Christian churches' moral teachings on sexuality and abortion).

We can argue that the qualitative differences between atheisms in Eastern and Western parts of Europe are not necessarily embedded in the "traditional atheistic" approach than "newer atheist" approaches. While the former has a high degree of synchronization, the latter has a large degree of difference.

There are two fundamental features to which we would like to draw particular attention to.

- 1) The contemporary culture of the CEE region is not dichotomous, but plural, meaning the broader social and cultural environment in which we study the phenomenon of atheism, and including pluralism within atheism itself.
- 2) The contents and reactions of atheism and contemporary atheist positions are closely related to the CEE region's wounded collective identity (Máté-Tóth 2019), social borderline syndrome (Szilárdi et al. n.d.), as well as ontological (Giddens 1991), individual (Butler 2009) and social (Turner 2006) uncertainty. Consideration of these defining framework theories is important in looking at the nature of communication that social and individual agents dealing with atheists can open. On the other hand, they also shed light on the boundaries that rational approaches point to and open up interest in atheist understanding's non-rational dimensions. With the methods of public opinion research (whether quantitative or qualitative) in atheism research, it is necessary to develop items or interview guidelines that include these dimensions and contexts.

As also articulated by Bubík et al. (2020):

There was a shift during the 20th century that could be characterized as a shift from explicit, analytical, usually institutionalized atheism to deinstitutionalized indifferentism or apatheism [...] a typical "atheist" or "unbeliever" at the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century is no longer a person with conscious and active opposition to religion and the institutions that represent

religion. However, rather someone who ignores religion does not consider it important and, in some ways, actually does not understand it.

Preliminary approaches toward spontaneous aversion to religion

In addition to the above, which focus on dimensions that can be recorded partly through opinion polls and partly described along the lines of atheist mindset theses, we consider it important to draw attention to the irrational, non-reflected dimension of the atheistic worldview. The system of prejudices can be traced through spontaneous statements, while ideologies and views are reflected along rational arguments and resolutions. The emotional presence of prejudices in atheism is rarely the subject of research, even though these prejudices play a larger role in human behavior and decision making than the reactions and patterns of behavior that result from deliberations and reflection. This type of atheism is called spontaneous atheism, a spontaneous aversion to religion and its various dimensions. We hypothesize that there is no complete overlap between responses to worldview questions under different circumstances and spontaneous reactions. Furthermore, by looking at the different dimensions of religion, further dimensions are revealed within the atheist position. Exploring, researching, and analyzing these can greatly contribute to getting to know those who reject religion and thus increase the chances of social coexistence, which is also burdened by ideological tensions.

Spontaneous aversions and reactions to Smart's (1999) seven dimensions of religion (ritual, narrative, experiential, institutional, ethical, doctrinal, and material) and to Glock's (1969) five dimensions of religiosity (belief, experience, practice, theology, and ethics) presumably differ. There is a need to apply a research method that focuses on the irrational appearance of religion on the one hand and can record spontaneous reactions on the other. According to our plans, we elaborate an original method using picture elicitation, which, due to the above conditions, also easily enables international and comparative research in the CEE region and beyond.

Spontaneous aversion to religion in our provisional definition is an innate and/or socio-culturally inherited aversion, a non-reflective and emotional attitude that inherently influences religion's relationship to and opinions. It is an aversion that is experienced on the individual level but remains unconscious and non-reflected. The implicit marker is meant to express the non-reflection of resentment, and the aversion is meant to express the negative position of rejection without a decision.

The source of a spontaneous dislike can derive from the personality and/or the socio-cultural environment such as religiously related negative experiences. The emotional charge of the feeling may be related to the severity of the trauma. A spontaneous aversion does not depend on demographic variables (age, gender, social status, educational level).

Spontaneous aversion is articulated mainly in sudden reactions to religious issues. As soon as this spontaneous reaction is articulated, the spontaneity of the dislike is shadowed by explanations. Spontaneous aversion is articulated in communication primarily during

spontaneous, intrinsic or implicit manifestations. In case of interviews or texts on religion, the implicit nature of aversion is rarely observable due to communication's corrective control.

Similar to spontaneous aversion to religion is the concept of "religious phobia," a political attitude especially in the United States, against the increased presence of the combination of right-wing politics and traditional Christianity. The term religious phobia (religiophobia) in the above sense was coined by the American rabbi and political activist Michael Lerner, founder of the magazine *Tikkun*. He has summarized his political views in his book *The Left Hand of God* (Lerner 2006).

Another type of spontaneous aversion to religion is Islamophobia. But in the very roots of the contemporary phenomenon, both phobia to Muslim immigrants and Right-wing Christians can be detected in the same "fear from the return of religiosity to the public life's decision-making circles." The difference between the two kinds of religiophobia is "in terms of degree and circumstances, not in terms of roots and epistemic foundations" (Awad 2013). Scientific atheism can also be considered as a type of religiophobia.⁶ With its clear objective to underpin the novelty and originality of the Bolshevik movement and then the communist vision through dissociation from everything that was considered tradition.

Today's spontaneous aversion in CEE is partly similar to the religiophobia in Western societies. People react spontaneously negatively to the emergence of the presence and influence of religion in the public sphere, however, along with the historical roots of religiophobia in CEE, the combination of the communist anti-religious sentiment with the import of the Western liberal's anti-religious sensitivity led by the interest to save the freedom and autonomy of the liberal democratic system.

The political interpretations of the spontaneous aversion to religion in the East and the West may have their own insights and rights, but they focus only on the religiophobia's public dimension. For a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, it seems to be necessary to take a closer look into the private psychological logic and dynamic of the religiophobia. In psychology, a phobic attitude is defined as "a behavior pattern apparently characterized by disruptions in the awareness of and attention to experience in the present. An example is engaging in a fantasy of the future to escape a painful present reality."⁷ An aversion, however, is "a physiological or emotional response indicating dislike for a stimulus. It is usually accompanied by withdrawal from or avoidance of the objectionable stimulus." (American Psychological Association, n.d.)

In addition to the psychological interpretation of phobia, it is also worth considering the socio-psychological aspects of understanding the minority-majority relationship. In terms of the issue, the psychological background of automatic rejection of positions in power/majority

⁶ The Slovak author Martin Dojčár organized a scholarly conference in 2015 under the title: *Religiofóbia: Realita, prevencia a edukácia*. (See the edited volume Dojčár 2016.)

⁷ Defined by German-born U.S. psychiatrist Frederick (Fritz) S. Perls (1893–1970). Source available: <<https://dictionary.apa.org/phobic-attitude>>

belonging to a minority attitude can provide handles (e.g., Bar-Tal, Antebi, 1992; Connerton, 1989).

One of the reasons for this is that the marginalized existence, especially the victim role against the oppressor, is integrated into the collective identity of the group members (László, 2012; Fülöp-Kővágó, 2018), and for generations, the group's victimhood narrative can become a relevant explanatory force in case of group formations based on religion or worldviews as well. (e.g., Cairns, Mallet, Lewis, & Wilson [2003] large-scale research on intergroup conflicts between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland). In this interpretation, spontaneous aversion to Christianity (especially concerning the role of the Catholic Church) may also become an interpretive framework for non-Catholic / non-Christian and atheist groups, given the dominant position of the Catholic Church in European history or recent ecclesiastical/political regional entanglements and the identity constructs connected to them (Szilárdi, 2017).

In the victimization dynamics, the spontaneous reaction to the perpetrator's dominant position may be associated with the actual or perceived arrogance assigned to the outgroup and the threat experience experienced in the in-group. It may create specific implicit emotional patterns that may also be worthy of further investigations of spontaneous religious aversion.

In our research, we focus on a unique aspect of atheism: spontaneous aversion to religions. Along with Bubík et al (2020) we also believe that there is a need

to reevaluate methods used to study the phenomenon of nonreligion in this region. The majority of studies [...] base their understanding of the phenomenon mostly on various forms of historical methods or combine them with discourse analysis of text [...] such methodology, however, is capable of adequately addressing only certain types of atheists and nonreligion: for example, the aforementioned analytical atheism or institutionalized forms of secularity.

The novelty of our approach lies in our research methodology. A methodological approach is still under development through which we believe we might deepen our understanding of spontaneous aversion to religion and, more broadly, atheism in CEE. Although we have a wealth of data on CEE atheism, we could explore several new aspects using qualitative social scientific methods. Our research intends to involve the practice of photo-elicitation, which is rarely used in religious studies or the anthropology of religion. With the help of the photo-elicitation method, we will be able to concentrate on spontaneous aversion to religion by using images evoking feelings regarding respective dimensions of religion. Since this method grasps the level of emotions, the reflected analytical knowledge is pushed into the background. Reflective listening – a unique interviewing technique – will be utilized in order to shed light on the emotional domains of aversion to religion. In “reflective listening” conversations, one does not seek to gain a kind of knowledge or information from the informants but rather inspire them to share experiences, feelings, and emotions through the so-called mirroring method. This method is a unique method of interviewing. Furthermore, to prove and underline the plausibility of our qualitative research data, we intend to carry out cognitive, laboratory-based

experiments, along with the Affect Misattribution Procedure (Payne and Lundberg 2014) proves to be the most promising methods in measuring prejudice. Pilot studies have to be designed and implemented to see whether these methods can bring us closer to understanding spontaneous aversion to religions.

This paper intended to introduce the concept of spontaneous aversion to religion and highlight the need for new methodological approaches leading to a deeper understanding of atheism in CEE. The elaboration and further analysis of spontaneous aversion to religion might lead to knowing those who reject religion and thus increase the chances of social coexistence and peaceful communication in a pluralistic society.

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