

Rethinking the Risks of Rejecting Religion

Secular Speculations and the Construction of Nonreligious Risk Narratives

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“A sky empty of angels becomes open to the intervention
of the astronomer and, eventually, of the astronaut.”

- PETER BERGER, *THE SACRED CANOPY*, 1969

While social theorists have raised concerns about a variety of risks and uncertainties in modernity—including risks related to economic instability, climate change, political polarization, technological advancements, and global pandemics—one of their longest standing concerns relates to the risks related to secularization and the presumed increase in *existential* uncertainty that comes with modernity. To be existentially uncertain means to question one's beliefs about the purpose or meaning of life, which includes uncertainty about whether or not there is an afterlife or some kind of creator or god.¹ And it is often argued that individuals are more existentially uncertain in modern societies because modernization is typically presumed to be associated with secularization and the loss of once taken-for-granted religious certainties.² While there is plenty of evidence that religion has maintained a strong presence in the modern world, there *has* been a notable increase in religious disaffiliation in once highly religious countries like the United States, Canada, and the U.K.³ And the growth of these newly nonreligious⁴ populations has raised a host of concerns among academics, politicians, and religious leaders about the risks that are presumed to come with rejecting religion.⁵

In this essay, I will briefly describe these risk narratives surrounding secularization and then I will draw on my research with atheists, agnostics, and transhumanists in the United States to suggest ways that we might reorient our thinking about the presumed risks that come with rejecting religion. Social scientists typically theorize religion as a key source of stability, certainty, and risk-reduction, and so they presume that the *loss* of religion that is theorized to come with modernization will result in a disorienting and anxiety-inducing existential uncertainty.⁶ However, my research reveals that the loss of religion does not lead to a singular conception of risk or uncertainty. Instead, nonreligious people are constructing a variety of risk narratives, many of which embrace risk and uncertainty rather than avoid them.

I will also describe how these nonreligious risk narratives are contested and politicized. As nonreligious people speculate about a future in which they believe there is no god or afterlife, their perceptions of the “riskiness” of modernization often clash with religious-based risk narratives. Using nonreligious transhumanists as an example—a growing movement of people who are seeking to extend human lives and “hack” evolution with technology—I show how these contested conceptions of existential risk are shaping important debates about more this-worldly risks like climate change, genetic modification, artificial intelligence, and political polarization. And I argue that scholars of risk need to pay more attention to perceptions of existential risk and uncertainty, as they are key factors in how risk narratives are produced and politicized in modern contexts.

Pascal's Wager and Reducing Existential Risk

The loss or rejection of religion is believed to be risky for a variety of reasons. For one, there is the risk of punishment or eternal damnation. A key aspect of many of the world's dominant religions is that a failure to conform to the tenets of a religious belief system will result in punishment. Depending on one's religious belief system, one could be punished by being sent to an eternal hell, being placed in a temporary purgatory, or being reincarnated into a lower form of being. In order to avoid this risk, many people choose to be religious and do their best to follow the rules of their chosen religion in order to avoid punishment. While many religious people do sincerely believe in the supernatural forces doing the punishing, it is also the case that religious people often do a sort of risk analysis when considering whether or not to be religious. This relates to what is known as Pascal's Wager, a philosophical argument put forth by philosopher Blaise Pascal in the 17th century. Pascal argued that we are unable to determine the existence of a god based on reason alone, so rational people should act *as if* a god exists just to be safe. If a god ends up not existing, then there is no real loss aside from perhaps missing out on some worldly pleasures, but if a god does exist, then one risks divine punishment if they are not properly religious. From this perspective, then, rejecting religion is existentially risky because nonreligious people are risking a potentially unpleasant afterlife.

Another reason being nonreligious is considered risky is because it is commonly assumed to be associated with a disorientating and anxiety-inducing existential uncertainty. Religion continues to be one of the primary mechanisms through which individuals reduce uncertainty and find meaning,⁷ and so it is often assumed that nonreligious people are in a constant state of anxiety and uncertainty about their futures because they no longer have certainty-filled religious explanations for existential questions about the purpose of life and what happens when we die. And this uncertainty has been found to be detrimental for individual and social well-being. When compared to the nonreligious, people who are actively religious are often found to be healthier, happier, and more embedded in identity-affirming social networks, which is often attributed to the existential certainty provided by religious belief systems.⁸ Thus, being nonreligious is not only considered risky because nonreligious people risk having an unpleasant afterlife, it is commonly assumed that nonreligious people are *currently* leading unpleasant lives due to the existential uncertainty that can come with rejecting religion and that this is putting their mental, physical, and social health at risk.

Politicizing Uncertainty and Embracing Risk

In previous work, I have shown how the common assumptions I outline above about the relationship between risk, uncertainty, and rejecting religion are not entirely accurate.⁹ In an analysis of the identity narratives of 50 nonreligious Americans, I found that atheists and agnostics express a range of certainties and uncertainties surrounding their nonreligious beliefs and identities, as well as a range of positive and negative responses to those certainties and uncertainties. Rather than a constant and anxiety-filled search for certainty, many nonreligious people find meaning in uncertainty and prefer the uncertainty of their nonreligion over the existential certainty provided by religion. I show how this is in part because certainty has become part of a politicized narrative within the nonreligious community in the United States. There are influential atheist organizations and spokespeople that are espousing a certainty-filled identity politics that calls on nonreligious people to aggressively critique religious people and policies and to wholly reject anything that smacks of religion or the supernatural. In other words, many nonreligious people *are* certain about their nonreligious beliefs, and they are creating political identities based in that certainty. However, some nonreligious Americans feel misrepresented by these certainty-filled identity politics and instead seek out meaningful forms of uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding their existential beliefs. Many of my research participants told me that they find existential uncertainty comforting or exhilarating rather than anxiety-inducing or socially isolating, and they feel that approaching any belief system with certainty—including atheism—only inhibits progress and social change.

These findings have important implications for research on the social construction of risk and the ways that speculations about the future can influence present day cultures and communities. My focus on the nonreligious opens up new avenues for thinking about the kinds of futures that modern individuals envision, both in this life and after. Whether or not someone thinks there is going to be an afterlife, and the level of uncertainty someone has surrounding this question, plays an important role in their assessment of various risks and whether or not they experience uncertainty surrounding those risks as a positive or negative thing. For many, the risk of eternal damnation is too high to reject religion, but for others, rejecting a belief in the afterlife allows them to live the one life they are certain they have to the fullest. Relatedly, rather than constantly trying to avoid or resolve uncertainty and risk, like much of our research and theorizing would predict, many

nonreligious people embrace existential risk and uncertainty because they believe that uncertainty and risk lead to progress and positive social change.

Secular Speculations and Nonreligious Futures

An illustrative example of the ways that nonreligious risk narratives shape present day discussions and social policies is the growing cultural and philosophical movement of transhumanism. Transhumanists promote the development of new technologies that will allow humans to “hack” evolution and enhance or transcend the human form through the use of things like nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and gene editing.¹⁰ While very few nonreligious people are transhumanist, a majority of transhumanists are nonreligious.¹¹ This is because transhumanist beliefs are centered around a faith in science and technological advancement rather than a supernatural deity, and transhumanists’ primary goal is to improve and extend human life on Earth rather than wait for eternal life after death. Some of the technologies that transhumanists promote include mind-uploading that would allow for our brains to survive without our bodies, “bio-hacking” or implanting artificial devices into the human body to enhance human abilities, cryogenics as a means of life extension, and gene editing techniques like pre-implantation genetic diagnosis that will allow parents to select embryos based on desired traits. Transhumanists believe that these technologies will one day allow humans to live longer, to evolve beyond the human form that we have today, and, eventually, to become immortal.

As you might expect, transhumanists have encountered a lot of resistance to their ideas, and much of that resistance is based on perceptions of the risks that transhumanist technologies might produce in the future. As sociologist Stephen Lilley (2013) explains, transhumanists and their opponents operate from different “rhetorics of risk” surrounding technological advancement and human enhancement.¹² Opponents of transhumanism are concerned about numerous risks that could result if transhumanist goals are realized, including technological disasters that could be incurred if humanity is too reliant on technology, social inequalities that could be created or deepened when some humans are enhanced and others are not, and environmental disasters that could result from overpopulation caused by life-extension technologies. There are also concerns raised from religious perspectives regarding transhumanism’s devaluing of the human body and desires to improve it or transcend it entirely. Christians, for example, believe that humans were made “in God’s image” and to tinker with that risks angering God, again going back to Pascal’s Wager.

As a result, opponents of transhumanism are often considered to be operating from what many call a “risk management schema” based in the “precautionary principle.”¹³ The precautionary principle states that “when an activity raises threats of harm to human health or the environment, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause-and-effect relationships are not fully established scientifically.”¹⁴ Rather than create new, unknown risks by pursuing human enhancement technologies, opponents of transhumanism argue that it is best to maintain the status quo and respect the limits that nature and/or god(s) have placed on the human form.

However, transhumanists believe that there are no rewards without risks, and that innovation, evolution, and risk-taking are central to human nature. Philosopher and transhumanist Max More (2005) developed the “proactionary principle,” a risk management schema that accounts for both the potential risks of an activity and the potential risks of *inactivity*.¹⁵ For example, proponents of the proactionary principle argue that without taking risks and having faith in scientific advancement, we would not have modern medicine, transportation, or communication technologies. For transhumanists, the costs of inactivity and stagnation are greater than the potential costs that might be incurred with human enhancement technologies. They believe that it is only through taking risks with technology that humans can solve pressing social issues like climate change, drought, food insecurity, and the threat of disease. Like many nonreligious people more generally, transhumanists’ belief that there is no spiritual afterlife translates into an openness to risk and uncertainty and a felt urgency to take on risks in this life in order to reap the potential rewards before it is over. The global population of transhumanists is quite small, but the transhumanist movement has numerous well-resourced and influential members, including many academics, scientists, and tech workers, and they are making an impact on global conversations about the risks involved with technological advancement. Importantly, transhumanist risk narratives and visions of the future are shaped by their perceptions of existential risk and their (largely) nonreligious beliefs and values.

Transhumanism is just one example of the ways that nonreligious risk narratives are being produced and contested in modern contexts, and I encourage scholars of risk and uncertainty to explore the ways that religious beliefs (or the lack of them) shape modern risk narratives and the ways that people envision better futures, both for themselves and for society as a whole.

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