



Understanding Unbelief

Atheists and agnostics around the world

Interim findings from 2019 research in Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States

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Cover photos of atheists and agnostics in Brazil, Japan, and the United Kingdom
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Eight key findings

1. *Atheists* (i.e., people who ‘don’t believe in God’) and *agnostics* (i.e., people who ‘don’t know whether there is a God or not, and don’t believe there is a way to find out’) exhibit significant diversity both within, and between, different countries. Accordingly, there are very many ways of being an *unbeliever* (i.e., atheists/agnostics combined). (All)

2. In all six of our countries, majorities of unbelievers identify as having ‘no religion’. Nevertheless, in Denmark fully 28% of atheists and agnostics identify as Christians; in Brazil the figure is 18%. 8% of Japan’s unbelievers say they are Buddhists. Conversely, in Brazil (79%), the USA (63%), Denmark (60%), and the UK (52%), a majority of unbelievers were brought up as Christians. (1.1, 1.2)

3. Relatively few unbelievers select ‘Atheist’ or ‘Agnostic’ as their preferred (non)religious or secular identity. 38% of American atheists opt for ‘Atheist’, compared to just 19% of Danish atheists. Other well-known labels – ‘humanist’, ‘free thinker’, ‘sceptic’, ‘secular’ – are the go-to identity for only small proportions in each country. (1.3)

4. Popular assumptions about ‘convinced, dogmatic atheists’ do not stand up to scrutiny. Atheists and agnostics in Brazil and China are less confident that their beliefs about God are correct than are Brazilians and Chinese as a whole. Although American atheists are typically fairly confident in their views about God, importantly, so too are Americans in general. (2.1)

5. Unbelief in God doesn’t necessarily entail unbelief in other supernatural phenomena. Atheists and (less so) agnostics exhibit lower levels of supernatural belief than do the wider populations. However, only minorities of atheists or agnostics in each of our countries appear to be thoroughgoing naturalists. (2.2, 2.3)

6. Another common supposition – that of the purposeless unbeliever, lacking anything to ascribe ultimate meaning to the universe – also does not bear scrutiny. While atheists and agnostics are disproportionately likely to affirm that the universe is ‘ultimately meaningless’ in five of our countries, it still remains a minority view among unbelievers in all six countries. (2.4)

7. Also perhaps challenging common suppositions: with only a few exceptions, atheists and agnostics endorse the realities of objective moral values, human dignity and attendant rights, and the ‘deep value’ of nature, at similar rates to the general populations in their countries. (3.1)

8. There is remarkably high agreement between unbelievers and general populations concerning the values most important for ‘finding meaning in the world and your own life’. ‘Family’ and ‘Freedom’ ranked highly for all. Also popular – albeit less unanimously so – were ‘Compassion’, ‘Truth’, ‘Nature’, and ‘Science’. (3.2)

About the authors

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Introduction



This report presents emerging findings from the core research project of the **Understanding Unbelief** programme (2017-2020). *Understanding Unbelief: Across Disciplines and Across Cultures* (ADAC) seeks to map the nature and diversity of the varied phenomena traditionally – albeit problematically and contestedly (see below) – labelled as ‘unbelief’, across different national settings.

This multi-year research programme is motivated by the growing public, scholarly, and media interest in atheism, nonreligion, and secularity, fueled by the growing proportions of religious ‘nones’ and ‘unbelievers’ in many countries, the flourishing of secularist activism and nonreligious cultures such as ‘New Atheism’, and urgent policy debates around the status and rights of atheists, agnostics, humanists, and related groups. While the last decade has seen a rapid expansion in research on these topics – see, most notably, the flourishing of the international *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network* (NSRN) – understandings of these topics have typically focused on narrow (and arguably unrepresentative) groups within the ‘nonreligious milieu’, and with a very heavy focus on the North Atlantic world. This leaves us with many unanswered questions:

- To what extent does not believing in God correlate with not believing in other supernatural phenomena?
- What ranges of worldviews do such people have?
- How does unbelief relate to religious and/or secular identities, meaning, and values?
- What does unbelief look like outside of western (and disproportionately Anglophone) countries, and/or within minority groups within those countries?
- How do people from different countries, religious backgrounds and socio-demographic groups understand such central terms as ‘God’, ‘religion’ and ‘atheism’ — terms frequently used in international surveys?

The Understanding Unbelief programme – led by an interdisciplinary team from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and psychology – will address all of these questions, among many others, in a more systematic and comprehensive way than has hitherto been attempted. Our overarching methodology combines in-depth, face-to-face interviews ($n = 30$ per country, across three separate regions in each) and conceptually linked, nationally representative surveys ($n = 1100$

per country) across six geographically, culturally, linguistically, politically and religiously diverse settings: Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States. This allows us to ask more detailed questions than large, general social surveys not designed for probing the nuances of these specific topics.

This report is the first publication presenting some of our emerging, interim findings. All analyses in what follows are based on surveys, conducted in April/May 2019, with representative samples of both ‘unbelievers’ (i.e., atheists and agnostics, as defined below) and – for comparative purposes – the general population in each of our six countries.

Note on terminology

‘Unbelief’, ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’

Our use of the term ‘unbelief’ follows that provided in *The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (Bullivant and Lee 2016): ‘The state of lacking (especially religious) faith or belief... unbelief is often used in a wide sense, implying a generalized lack of belief in a God or gods.’ It is chiefly employed, along with its cognates (unbelievers, unbelieving) as a convenient shorthand term, incorporating much of what is commonly termed atheism and/or agnosticism.

More specifically, for the purposes of this report – and the methodology of the research underlying it – we operationalise ‘unbelievers’ as those giving either the first (‘atheists’) or second (‘agnostics’) response to the following widely used social survey question:

Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God? (ISSP 2008)

1. *I don’t believe in God. (atheists)*
2. *I don’t know whether there is a God, and I don’t believe there is any way to find out. (agnostics)*
3. I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.
4. I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others.
5. While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
6. I know God really exists and I have no doubt about it.
7. Don’t know.

‘God’

While ‘God’ is a common concept in Brazil, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States, it is less common and less relevant in China and Japan. For the ADAC survey methodology, we have followed the World Values Survey in using the following terms for ‘God’ in China and Japan, for the purposes of determining atheism and agnosticism.

China

佛祖、真主、上帝 或者神明

Fózǔ, zhēnzhǔ, shàngdì huòzhě shénmíng

Buddha, Allah, God, or Spiritual phenomena

Japan

神

Kami

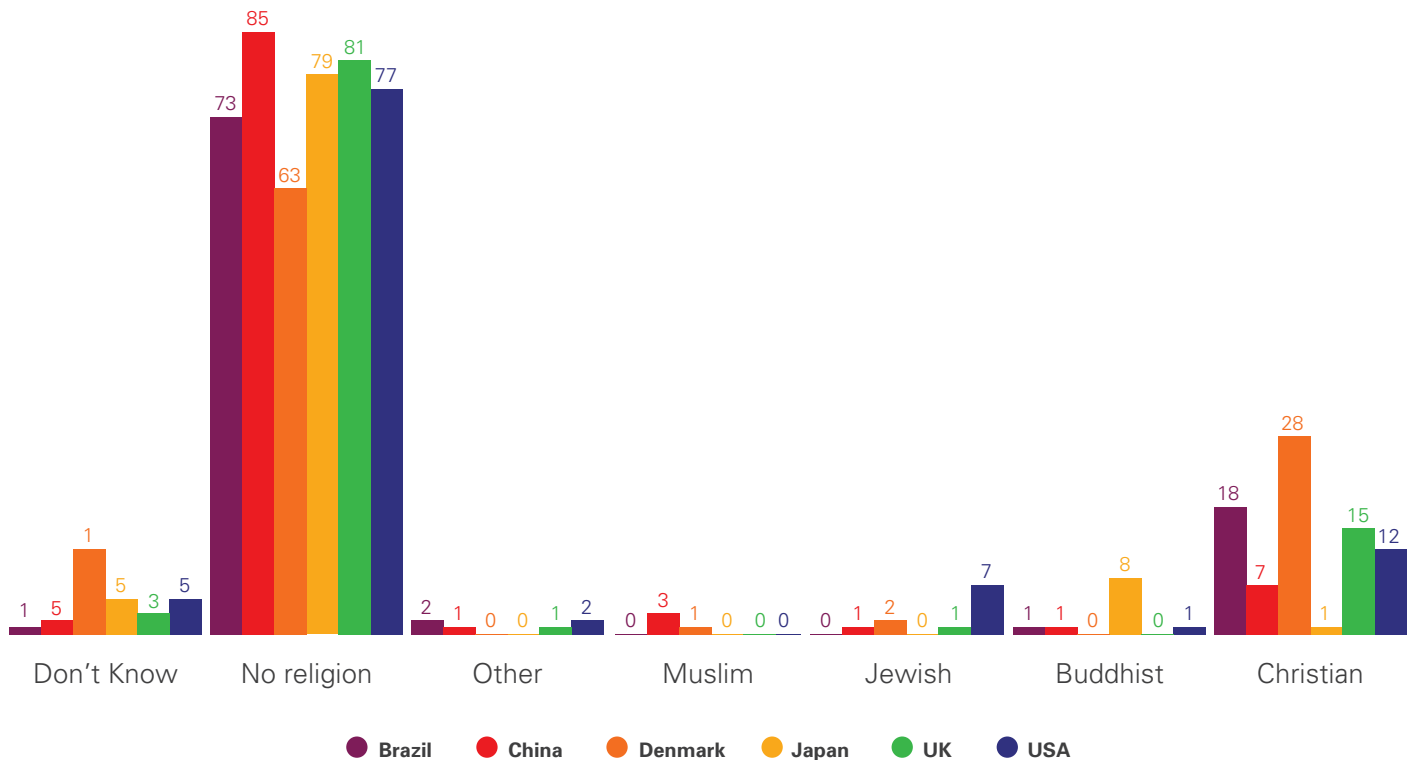
Traditional Japanese term designating deity or spirit

1. Unbelief, identity and religion

1.1 Current religious affiliation of atheists/agnostics (combined)

(q: 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to a particular religion? If yes, which?')

Shown in percentages



It has long been known that by no means all of those who identify as 'nones' or as having 'no religion' on surveys are, in reality, atheists or agnostics.¹ As we see above, this also works both ways: not all atheists or agnostics would describe themselves as having no religion.

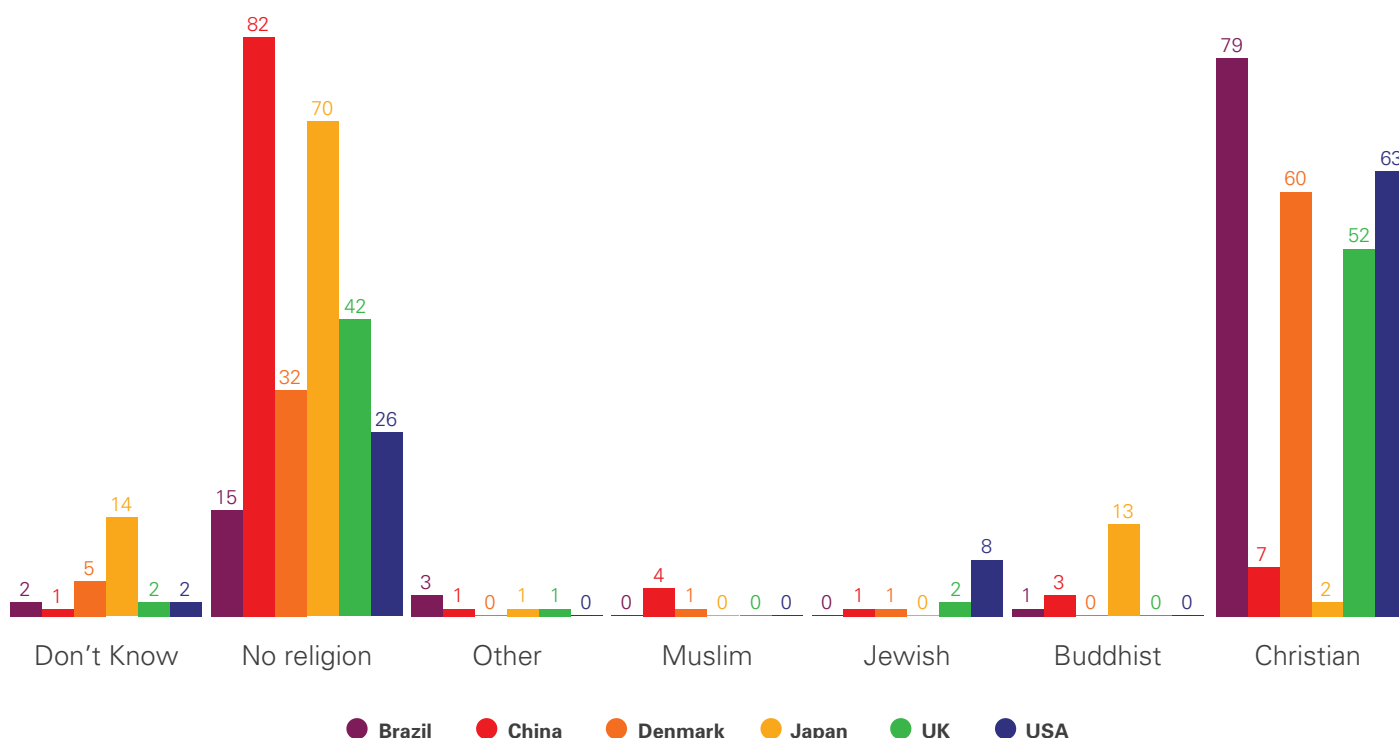
Across our six countries, between 63% (Denmark) and 85% (China) of unbelievers answer our widely used religious affiliation question with 'no religion'. In all countries, a significant minority opted for a religious identity, with Christian labels being most popular in Brazil (18%), China (7%), Denmark (28%), the United Kingdom (15%), and the United States (12%), and Buddhist ones most popular in Japan (8%).

1.2 Religious upbringing of atheists/agnostics (combined) in each country (q: 'What religion, if any, were you raised in?')

With the clear exceptions of China and Japan, a majority of atheists and agnostics in our countries say that they were brought up within a religious tradition. Four in every five Brazilian unbelievers, three in five Danish and American unbelievers, and half of all UK unbelievers, say that they were brought up as some kind of Christian.

Other religions are also well-represented in unbelievers' backgrounds. Most notably, 8% in America were raised Jewish, 13% in Japan were raised Buddhist, and 4% in China were raised Muslim.

Shown in percentages



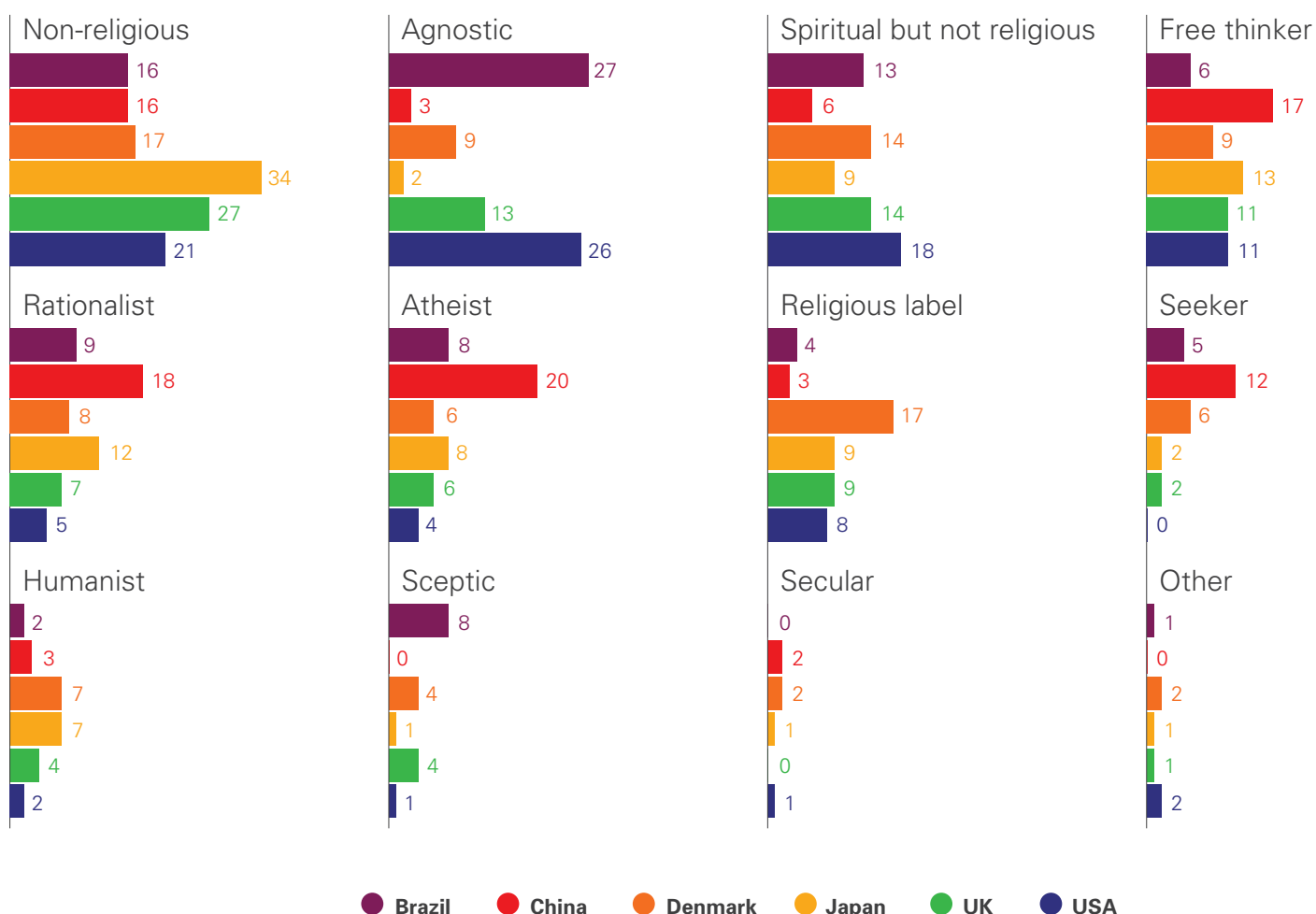
Conversely, a nonreligious upbringing predominates among Chinese (82%) and Japanese (70%) unbelievers, but not among those in the United Kingdom (42%), Denmark (32%), the United States (26%), and Brazil (15%).

1.3 Preferred (non)religious identities of atheists and agnostics in each country

(q.: 'Here are some examples of how different people who do not believe in God or gods identify themselves. If you had to pick a label, which of these comes closest to how you identify yourself?')

Shown in percentages

Agnostic

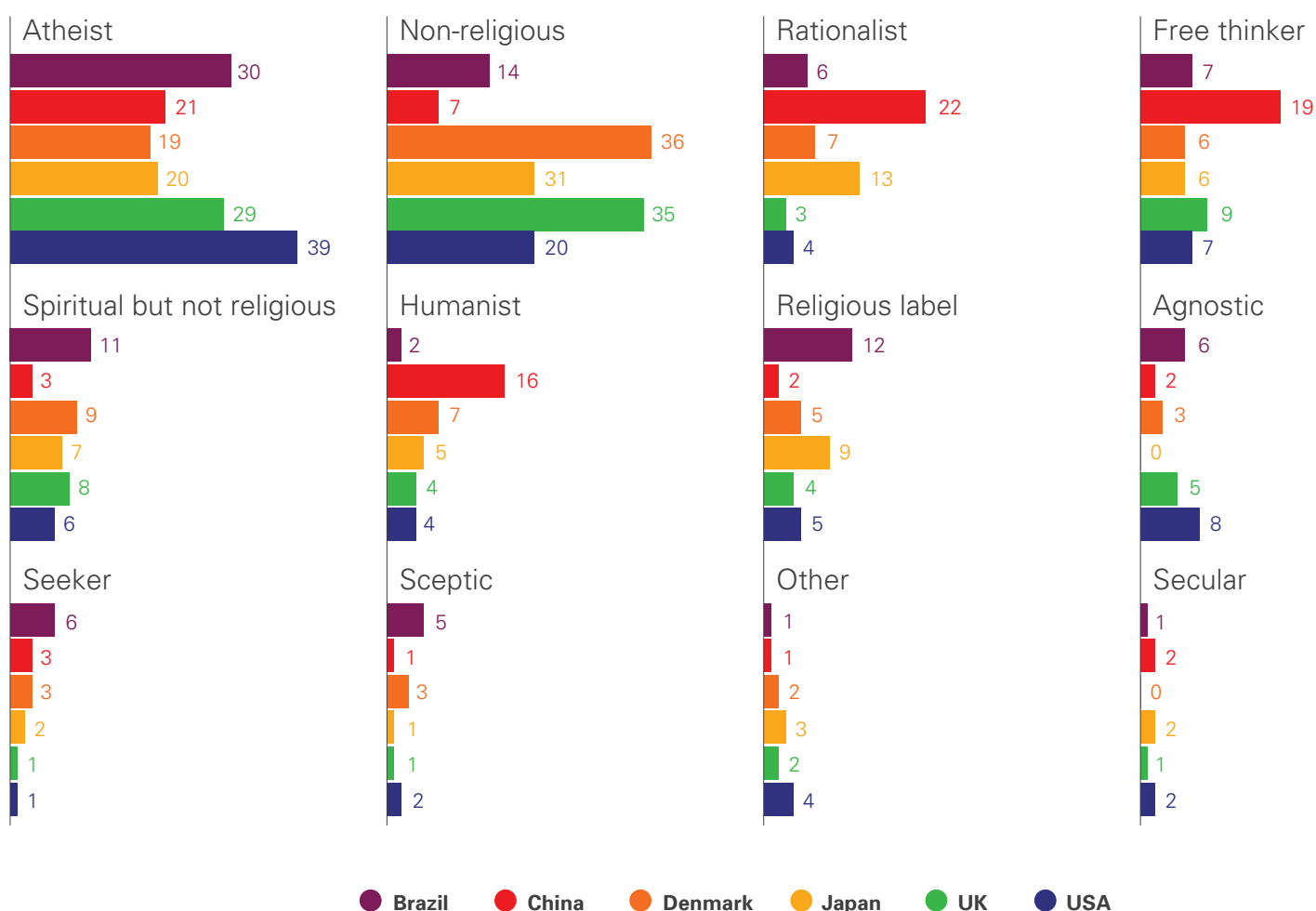


As explained earlier in this report (see 'Note on terminology'), this report uses i) *atheist* and ii) *agnostic* to describe those respectively answering i) 'I don't believe in God' and ii) 'I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is any way to find out' on the commonly used seven-option survey question: 'Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?'. We are using *unbelievers* to refer to atheists and agnostics together.

As previous studies have shown, many people who are *de facto* atheists or agnostics do not choose to identify themselves, either primarily or at all, by these terms. (There are many reasons for this, which are being explored in the qualitative research undertaken within ADAC.)

Our data strongly reinforces this. In none of our countries is 'Atheist' or 'Agnostic' the preferred identity of atheists or agnostics. The country with the highest percentage of 'Atheist'-identifying atheists is the USA (39%), in Denmark, it is only 19%. Meanwhile in Brazil, 27% of actual agnostics identify as such, compared to just 2% in Japan.

Atheist



There is a great diversity of *preferred* self-descriptors both within and across the six countries. Among all the possible options, only ‘Atheist’ (among Brazilian, UK, and US atheists), ‘Non-religious’ (among Danish, Japanese, and UK atheists, and Japanese and UK agnostics), and ‘Agnostic’ (among UK and US agnostics) attract more than a quarter of unbelievers from any one country.

Other, historically important designations are markedly less popular. With the single exception of Chinese atheists (17%), ‘Humanist’ was the preferred identity of fewer than one in ten atheists or agnostics in each of our countries. (See also ‘sceptic’ and ‘secular’.)

Small but non-trivial numbers of atheists and (especially) agnostics in all our countries *primarily* identified with a religious designation. This includes 12% of Brazilian atheists and fully 17% of Danish agnostics.

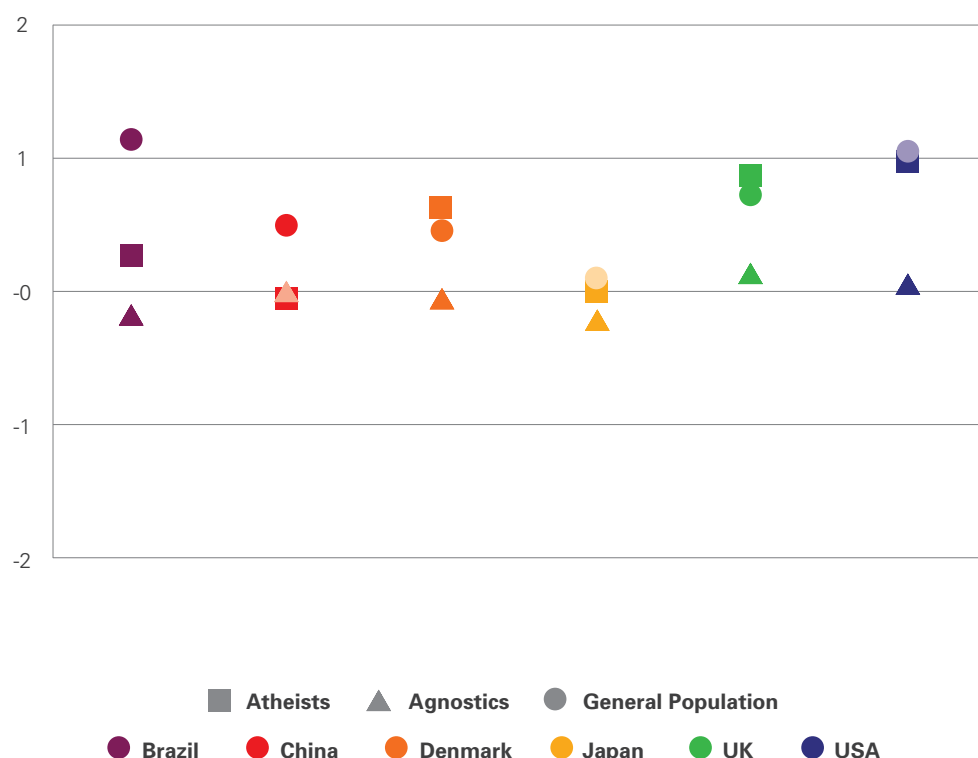
All of this is important for two main reasons. Firstly, it means that social-scientific studies of atheists or agnostics which focus only on those who *self-describe* in this way – e.g., typically as a write-in option on a survey’s ‘Other (please specify)’ category – are limited to only a very small, and likely atypical, subset of *de facto* atheists and agnostics. Secondly, it underscores the point that there is no single term – or discrete set of terms – for referring to these people which a majority of them would actively choose for themselves. We acknowledged in the introduction the contested nature of the terms *unbelief* and *unbelievers*: there does not, however, appear to be any self-evident candidate to replace it.

2. (Un)Belief, science and naturalism

2.1 Different groups' mean strength of agreement with the statement

'I feel confident that my beliefs about God's existence are the right ones'

(-2 = strongly disagree; -1 = somewhat disagree; 0 = neither agree nor disagree; 1 = somewhat agree; 2 = strongly agree)



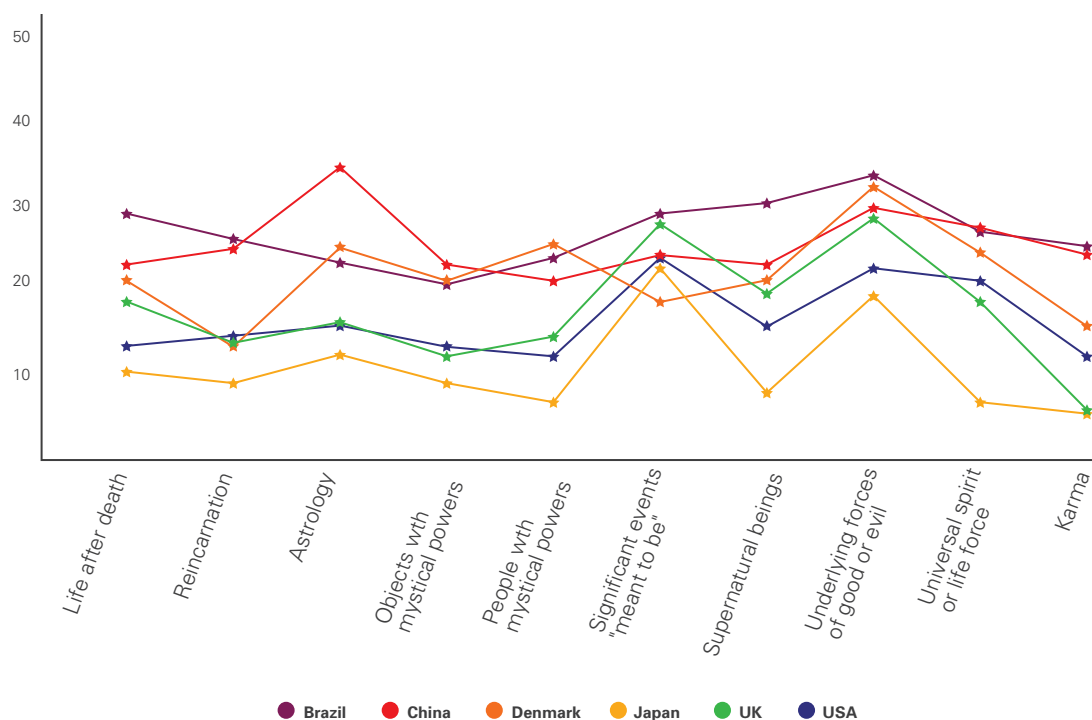
On a scale from -2 (strongly disagree) to +2 (strongly agree), we asked both our samples to rate their agreement with a statement expressing confidence 'that my beliefs about God's existence are the right ones'. This produced several interesting results.

First, agnostics tend to have the least confidence in their views (from -0.21 in Japan to +0.13 in the UK). This is perhaps not wholly surprising, given that not knowing is, etymologically speaking, agnosticism's defining characteristic.

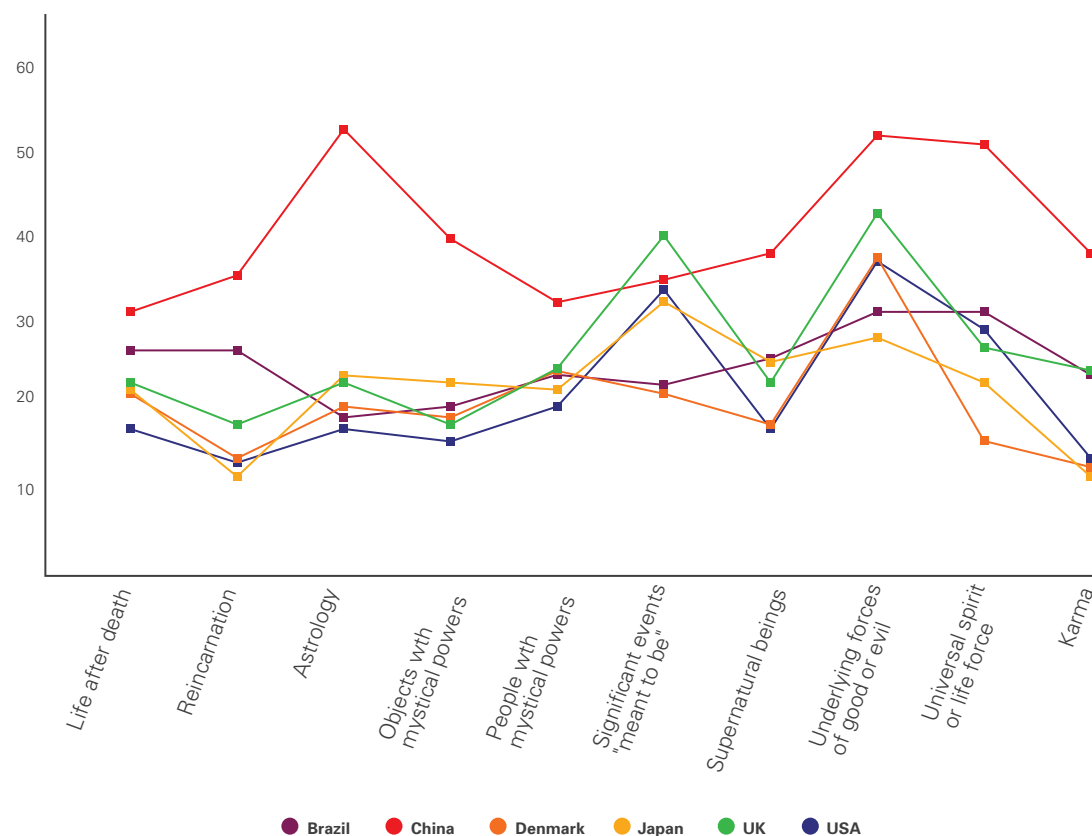
Second, and contrary to some popular suppositions, being an atheist does not necessarily entail a high level of confidence or certainty in one's views. All six of our countries' atheists express overall levels of confidence in their beliefs about God's existence either notably lower than (Brazil, China), or broadly comparable to (Denmark, Japan, UK, US), the general population's. For instance, the comparatively high level of confidence exhibited by America's atheists matches more-or-less exactly the high 'religious confidence' of Americans-in-general. Overall, among American atheists, 45% 'strongly agreed' and 20% 'somewhat agreed' with our question's statement; among our general population sample, these proportions were 44% and 24% respectively.

2.2 Proportions of i) *atheists*, ii) *agnostics*, and iii) the *general population* ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreeing with the existence of various supernatural beings/phenomena

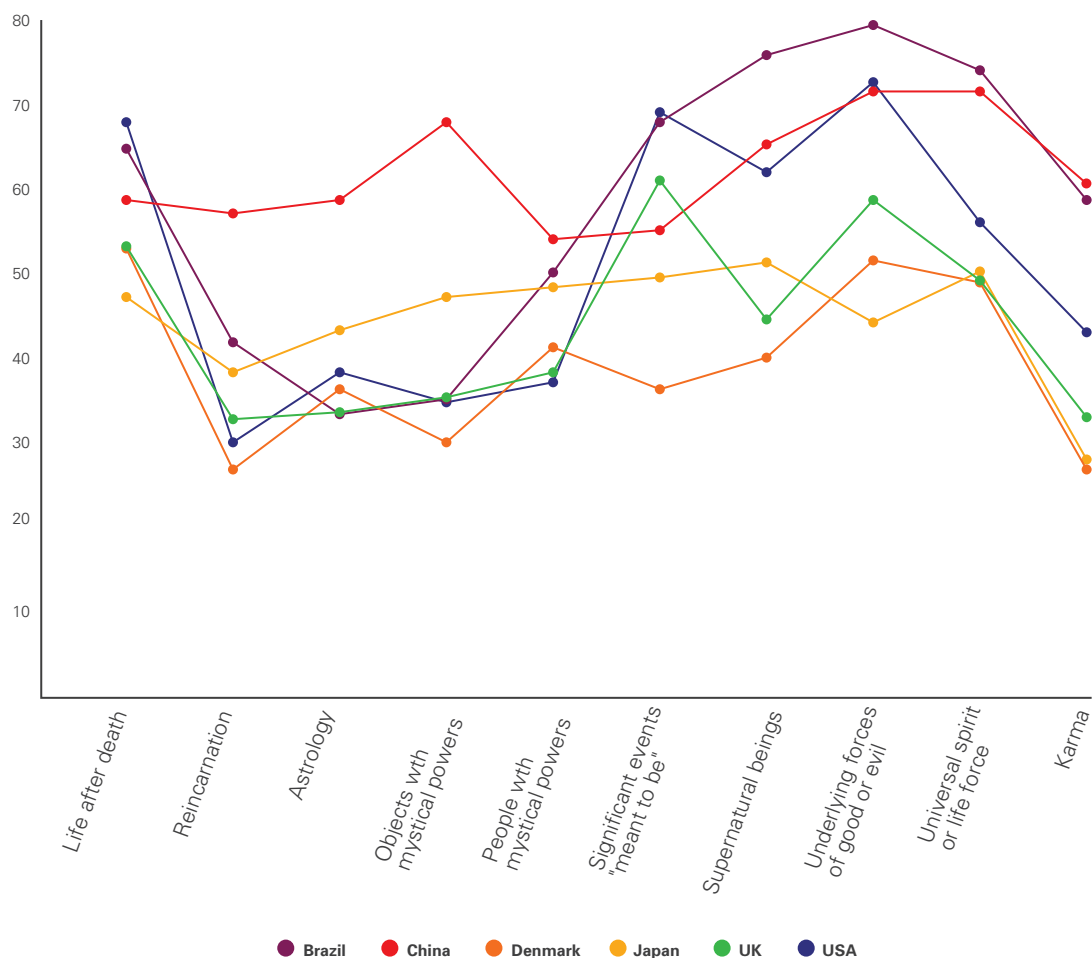
i) Atheists



ii) Agnostics



iii) General population



While ‘belief’ and ‘unbelief’ are normally used in relation to God (or gods), there are many other supernatural beings and phenomena that substantial percentages of the general population believe to exist. Logically, unbelief in God need not entail unbelief in these other things. Accordingly, our survey probed the extent to which unbelievers agree that various supernatural phenomena either exist (e.g., ‘objects with mystical powers to heal or harm’) or are true (e.g., astrology).²

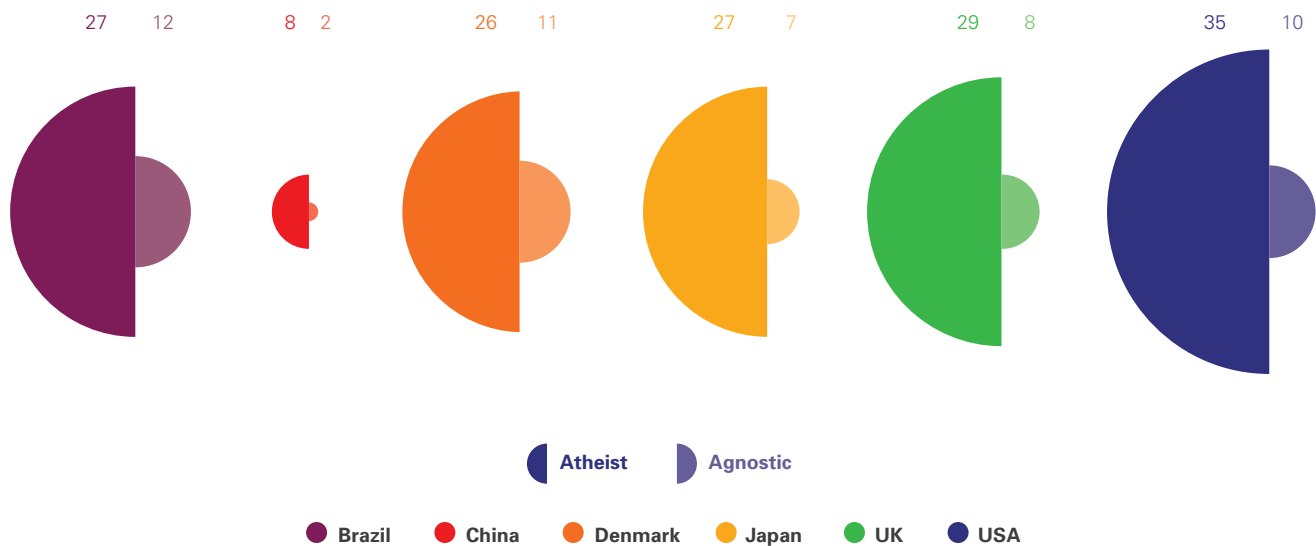
On the whole, and across all our countries, atheists show the lowest levels of supernatural belief; agnostics show slightly higher levels; and within the general population such beliefs are typically rather prevalent.

While there is substantial variation both within and between countries on unbelievers’ most/least believed-in phenomena, a few points stand out. First, the beliefs that there are ‘underlying forces’ of good and evil, that ‘there exists a universal spirit or life force,’ and that ‘most significant life events are meant to be and happen for a reason’ are the most endorsed among unbelievers globally.

Second, among our atheists, Japanese are the least, and Brazilian and Chinese the most, ‘supernaturally inclined’. Chinese agnostics, meanwhile, are strikingly more likely to believe in supernatural phenomena than those from other countries.

2.3 Proportions of atheists and agnostics who are naturalists (i.e., who ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ disagree with all ‘existence of supernatural beings/phenomena’ questions)

Shown in percentages



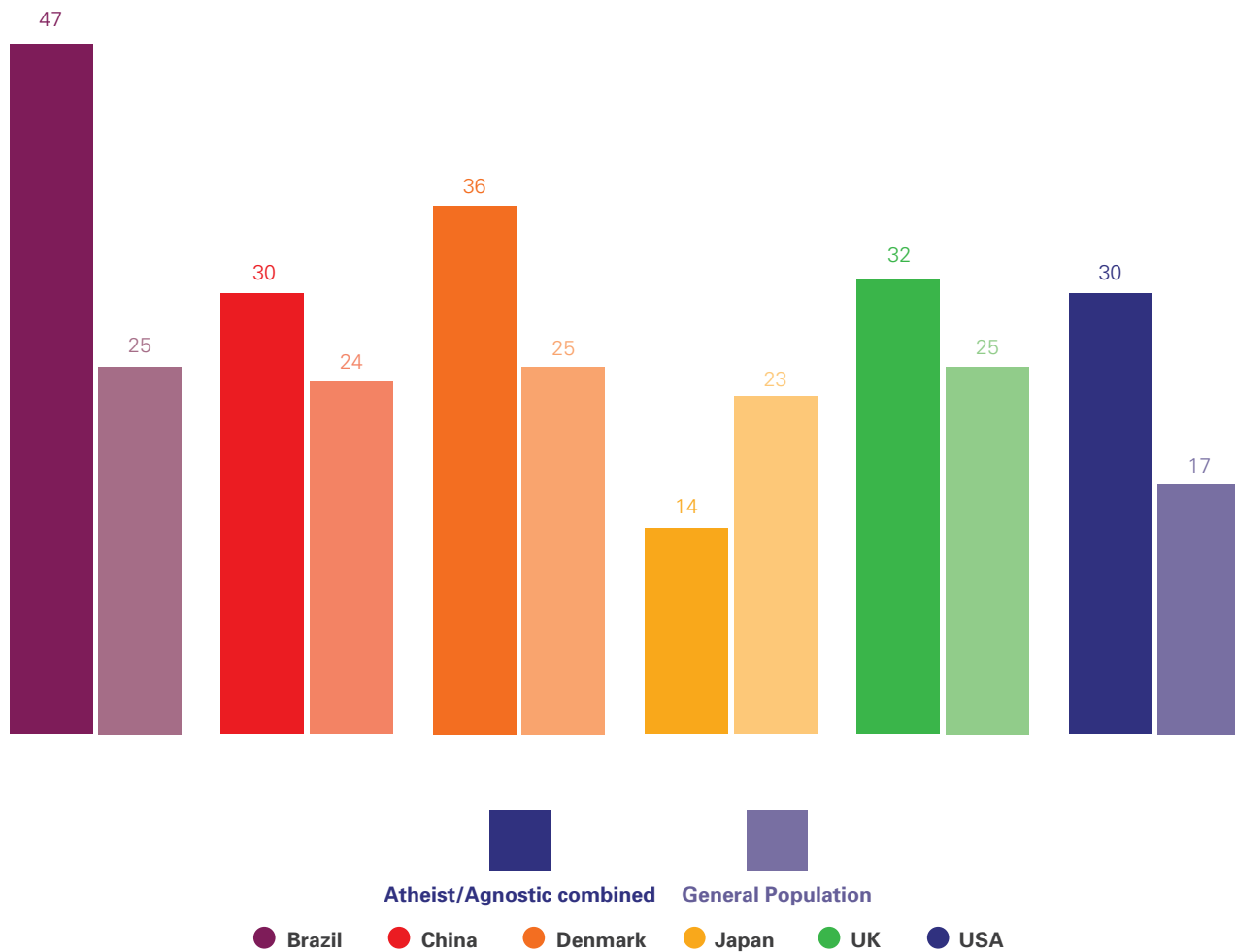
While Figure 2.2 reveals the percentages of unbelievers (in God) who nonetheless believe in other specific supernatural phenomena, there is also the question of the proportion who don’t believe in any supernatural phenomena at all. Here, we present the percentage of unbelievers who are thoroughgoing naturalists.

For the purposes of this report, we are using a consistently negative answer to each and every supernatural phenomenon as a proxy for naturalism.

As can be seen above, in none of our six countries surveyed does the percentage of unbelievers who qualify as naturalists approach 50%. Even among American atheists, the most naturalistic group across our surveyed countries, only a third seem to have a wholly naturalistic world view. Among Chinese atheists meanwhile, fewer than one in ten does.

As one might predict from the previous graphs, agnostics are consistently less likely to be naturalists than atheists. In no country does more than one in ten agnostics qualify; in China, it is more like one in fifty.

2.4 Proportions of atheists/agnostics (combined) and the general population ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreeing with the statement ‘The universe is ultimately meaningless’



For many centuries, there has been substantial scholarly and public discussion regarding the wider implications of not believing in God – debates which continue to the present day. For example, it has often been argued that for those without a belief in the existence of a God, the universe can possess no ultimate meaning or purpose.

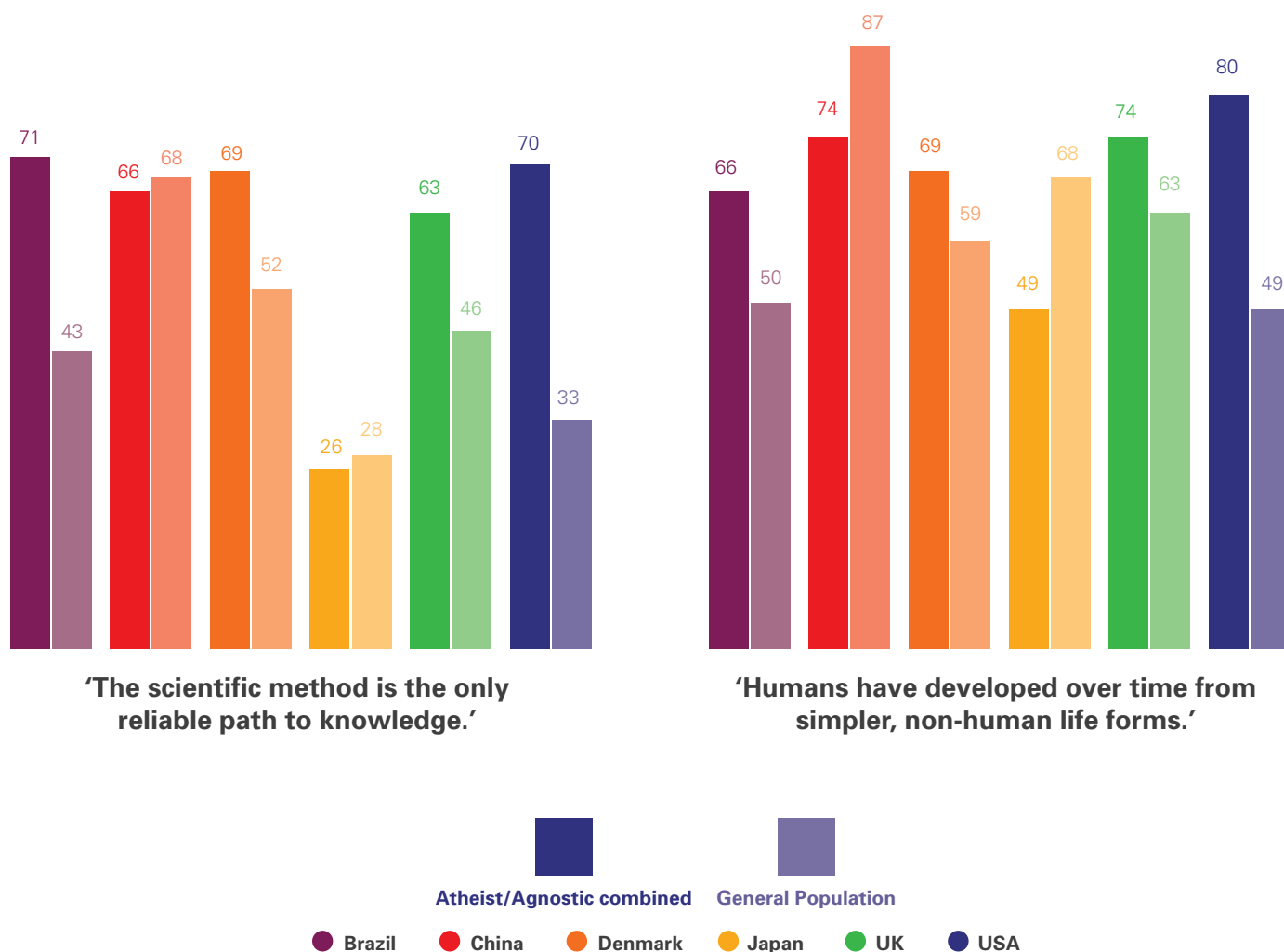
While this is normally discussed at the level of abstract argument, our data allow us explore whether or not, as a matter of empirical fact, unbelievers do regard the universe as ‘ultimately meaningless’.

While there is some variation across countries, two points stand out. First, in no country surveyed does the proportion of either unbelievers, or the general population, affirming a meaningless universe reach 50%.

With the exception of Brazil, where 47% endorse such a view, only around a third of unbelievers in each country regard the universe to be ultimately meaningless. While unbelievers are admittedly more likely to take this view than the population at large, curiously this is not so in Japan.

2.5 Proportions of atheists/agnostics (combined) and general population ‘strongly’ or ‘somewhat’ agreeing with selected science items

Shown in percentages



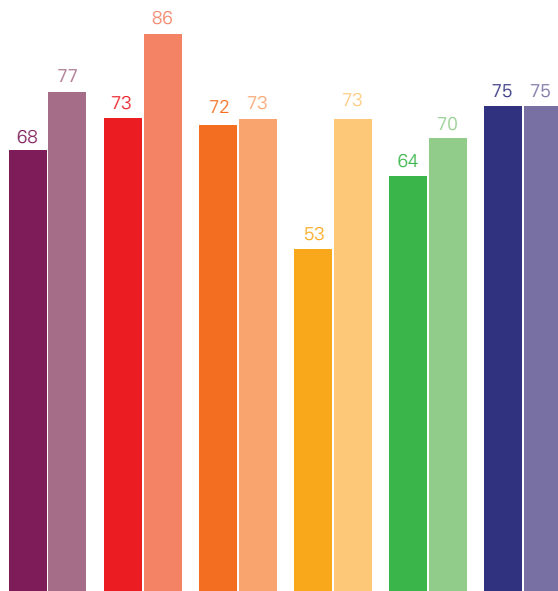
Discussions of unbelief often involve discourse on ‘science’ vs. ‘religion’. Consequently, we aimed to examine the extent to which atheists and agnostics would endorse a scientific account of human origins, as well as a strong statement of science as the only reliable path to knowledge.

The data appear to show a divergence between East Asian (China, Japan) and other countries (Brazil, Denmark, the United Kingdom, the United States). In both China and Japan, the percentages of unbelievers and the general population who regard science as the only reliable path to knowledge are nearly identical. By contrast, the percentages of unbelievers in Brazil, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States endorsing this statement are substantially higher than the general population. Further, in both China and Japan, members of the general population are more likely to endorse an evolutionary account of human origins than the unbelieving subgroup. This relationship is reversed in Brazil, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States.

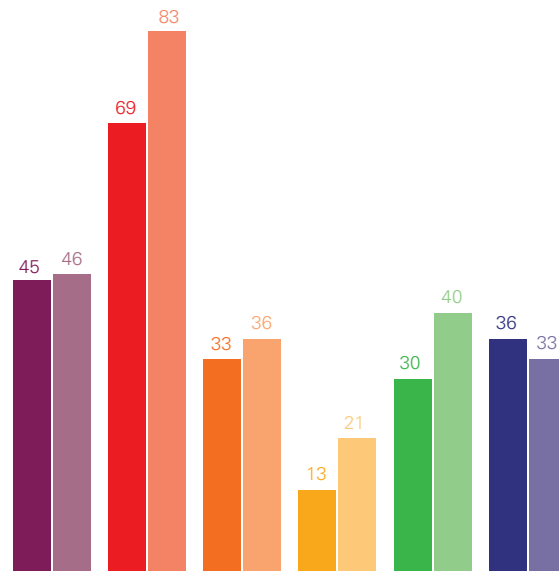
While those figures may suggest a united East Asian approach to science and religion, it is also important to note the substantial difference between China and Japan in relation to the status of science. Seven-in-ten of Chinese participants agree that science is the only reliable path to knowledge, compared to only three-in-ten of Japanese participants.

3. The Values of Unbelief

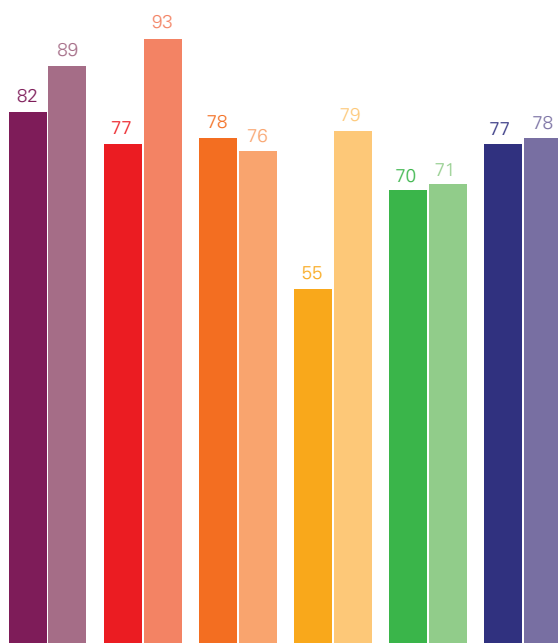
3.1 Proportions of atheists/agnostics (combined) and general population 'strongly' or 'somewhat' agreeing with selected worldview items



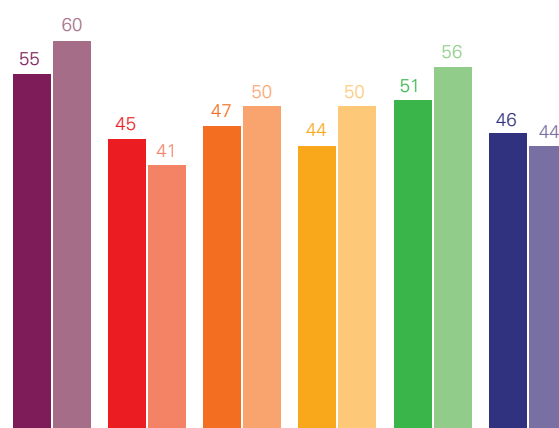
'All human beings, regardless of where they are born, are born with dignity and a special set of rights.'



'In the long-run, society becomes better over time.'



'Nature has deep value beyond its usefulness for human beings.'



'What is right and wrong is up to each person to decide.'



Perhaps the most debated implications of unbelief in the existence of God concern morality and values. In relation to moral relativism and objectivism, we asked participants to rate their agreement with the statement ‘What is right and wrong is up to each person to decide.’

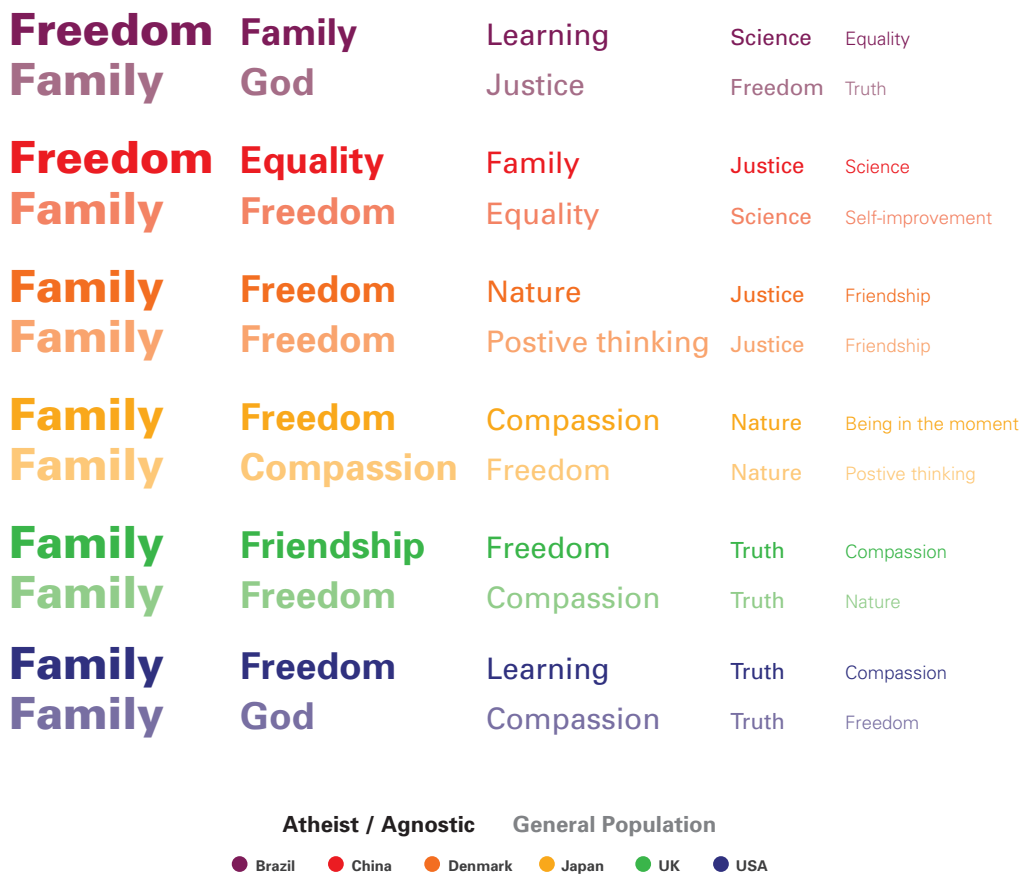
Our findings suggest no consistent difference between unbelievers and the general population. Percentages agreeing with this statement ranged from 41% among the general population of China, to 60% among the general population of Brazil. While unbelievers are more likely to endorse this statement in China and the United States, members of the general population are more likely to endorse it in Brazil, Denmark, Japan, and the United Kingdom.

As to human dignity and the objective existence of human rights, unbelievers are typically less likely to affirm these than are the general populations – although note Denmark and the United States, where the proportions are near-exactly the same, and the fact that affirmation of dignity and rights is the majority position among unbelievers in all surveyed countries.

In relation to the ‘deep’ value of the natural world, regardless of its usefulness to humans, in half of the countries surveyed (Denmark, the United Kingdom, the United States) our unbelievers and general samples endorsed it at near-identical levels. In the other half (Brazil, China, and Japan), unbelievers were less likely to endorse the statement (82% vs. 89% in Brazil, 77% vs. 93% in China, and 55% to 79% in Japan). Across all countries and across both samples, however, the majority of participants endorse the claim of the inherent value of the natural world.

By contrast, a belief in progress – that ‘in the long-run, society becomes better over time’ – shows a huge amount of cross-national variation. In Japan, just 13% of unbelievers and 21% of the population as a whole affirmed this statement. The Chinese figures are vastly different: 69% of unbelievers, and 83% of the general population.

3.2 Five top-ranked ‘values’ choices by atheists/agnostics and general population (from 43 options)



‘When it comes to finding meaning in the world and your own life, which of the above are most important to you? Please select the five items most important to you.’

In figure 2.4, we saw that the majority of unbelievers disagreed with the statement that the universe is ultimately meaningless. This raises the questions of what makes the universe meaningful for unbelievers, and to what extent might this differ from the general population.

To address these questions, we presented participants with a list of 43 words and short phrases (e.g. ‘Beauty’, ‘Art’, ‘Family’, ‘Romantic love’, ‘Nature’, ‘Justice’, ‘The connectedness of everything’, ‘A higher power’, plus ‘Other (please specify)’) and asked them to select the *five* items most important to them for finding meaning in the world and in their own lives. Despite all items being chosen by at least one person in every country, we found very high levels of agreement across our samples. Out of the possible 43 options, only 14 made it into the overall Top Fives for any of our six countries’ unbeliever or general population samples.

Figure 3.2 shows a remarkable level of similarity between unbelievers and the general population across our countries in what makes the world and life meaningful. ‘Family’ was the most frequently chosen item in all general population samples, and in four of the six unbeliever samples. Further, where it was not the most frequently chosen item, it came either second (Brazil) or third (China). ‘Freedom’ was also a frequently chosen item across all samples. It was the most frequently chosen item by Brazilian and Chinese unbelievers, ranked second behind ‘Family’ in half of our samples, and never fell out of the Top Five chosen items in any sample.

Other items frequently appearing in the Top Five across both samples are ‘Compassion’ (6), ‘Truth’ (5), ‘Nature’ (4), ‘Science’ (3), ‘Friendship’ (3), and ‘Equality’ (3).

Endnotes

- ¹ For example, Pew data from 2017 shows that 17% of US nones ‘believe in God as described in the Bible’, and a further 53% believe in a ‘God, higher power, or spiritual force’. See: https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/04-25-18_believingod-00-04/
- ² For brevity’s sake, our graphs give shorthand descriptions of the phenomena in question. The actual wording used on the (English language) survey were as follows: Life after death: ‘There is some sort of life after death.’; Reincarnation: ‘Sometime after I die, I expect that I’ll be born again in another body.’; Astrology: ‘The positions of the stars and planets affect people’s lives.’; Objects with mystical powers: ‘Some objects have mystical powers (e.g. to heal, harm or bring good luck).’; People with mystical powers: ‘Some people have mystical powers (e.g. to heal, harm or bring good luck).’; Significant events ‘meant to be’: ‘Most significant life events are meant to be and happen for a reason.’; Supernatural beings: ‘There exist supernatural beings, who might be good, evil or neither, such as angels, demons, ghosts or spirits.’ [NB: culturally appropriate entities were suggested for each country]; Underlying forces of good and evil: ‘There are underlying forces of good and evil in this world.’; Universal spirit or life force: ‘There exists a universal spirit or life force.’; Karma: ‘There is a power in the universe that causes good things to happen to people who behave morally and bad things to happen to people who behave immorally.’

Appendix: Survey methodology

All data were gathered through the Qualtrics Panels service in April-May 2019

For each country (Brazil, China, Denmark Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States), we gathered two samples. The first is a sample composed only of unbelievers ($n = 900$), which is made to be representative of the unbelieving population of each country in relation to Age, Sex, and Region. The other is a General Population sample ($n = 200$), made to be representative of the general population in relation to Age, Sex, and Region, which we use for the purpose of comparison. Our total global sample for ADAC will be $n = 6600$. Please note, however, that these interim findings are based on a sample of $n = 5285$, broken down like so: Brazil ($n = 846$), China ($n = 903$), Denmark ($n = 593$), Japan ($n = 1016$), UK ($n = 1109$), and USA ($n = 818$).

In order to develop representative samples of unbelievers in our chosen countries, we utilised the most recently available data from two largescale, highly respected survey programmes: the World Values Survey (WVS; 2010-2014) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP; 2008) to establish a demographic picture of unbelievers according to three variables (Age, Sex, and Region). We then set demographic quotas for our own survey based on this picture. For example, if our data from the WVS indicates that 40% of the unbelievers in a particular country are female, we then set quotas of 40% female and 60% male for our own sample of said country.

Based on our analysis of existing WVS and ISSP data regarding belief in the existence of God, we established the following quotas for our unbelieving samples.

Continued overleaf

	Age	Sex	Region
Brazil	50% - 18-29 25% - 30-49 25% - over 50	75% - men 25% - women	50% - Southeast 25% - Northeast 25% - South
China	25% -18-29 45% - 30-49 30% - over 50	55% - men 45% - women	15% - North China 10% - Northeast 25% - East 30% - South Central 10% - Southwest 10% - Northwest
Denmark	20% - 18-29 35% - 30-49 45% - over 50	60% - men 40% - women	30% - Capital Region 15% - Sealand 20% - Southern Denmark 20% - Central Denmark 15% - Northern Denmark
Japan	15% - 18-29 35% - 30-49 50% - over 50	55% - men 45% - women	35% - Kanto 15% - Kansai/Kinki 15% - Kyushu/Okinawa 10% - Chubu 10% - Tohoku 5% - Hokkaido 5% - Chugoku 5% - Shikoku
UK	20% - 18- 29 40% - 30-49 40% - over 50	60% - men 40% - women	10% - Greater London 10% - Scotland 5% - Northern Ireland 5% - Wales 30% - East Anglia, Southwest, Southeast 25% - North, North West, Yorkshire 15% - West, East Midlands
USA	30% - 18-29 40% - 30-49 30% - over 50	75% - men 25% - women	10% - New England 10% - Middle Atlantic 20% - South Atlantic 5% - West South Central 15% - East North Central 10% - West North Central 10% - Rocky Mountains 20% - Pacific



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