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# WHAT IS NONBELIEF? AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON THE CONCEPT OF NONBELIEF\*

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## Abstract

Nonbelief is a topic recently began to attract interest in the field of psychology of religion. The number of studies on this issue have started to rise. However, when we look at researches on nonbelief, it seems to have ambiguity on what is nonbelief, and who is considered as nonbelievers. Are nonbelievers nonreligious or nonspiritual? Does being an atheist mean to be a nonbeliever? In this study, we aim to empirically examine the concept of nonbelief. The current study was carried out with 2548 participants who identify themselves with at least one type of nonbelief in the United States in 2014. The findings indicate that the majority of nonbelievers are estimated to say "I do not believe in God", namely 85.6% of the nonbelievers do not believe in God and 12.3% think the existence of God cannot be known; 88.07% identified themselves as atheists; 60.8% of nonbelievers who say "I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out" self-labeled themselves as agnostic, while 60.2% of them self-labeled themselves as atheist at the same time; 87.8% of them are nonreligious-nonspiritual; 2.07% of them are spiritual in terms of vertical transcendence. The current study concludes that there are three main indicators to consider in order to

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\* This article has been derived from first authors' dissertation entitled "Formation and Development of Unbelief from Psychosocial Perspective".

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identify an individual as a nonbeliever: absence of belief in God, being nonreligious-nonspiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence, and self-declaration as nonbeliever, atheist, and agnostic or else.

**Anahtar Kavramlar:** Nonbelief, atheism, agnosticism, nonreligious, nonspiritual.

## İNANÇSIZLIK NEDİR? İNANÇSIZLIK KAVRAMI ÜZERİNE EMPRİK BİR ARAŞTIRMA

### Öz

İnançsızlık, son zamanlarda din psikolojisi alanında ilgi çekmeye başlayan bir konudur. Bu konuda yapılan araştırmaların sayısı artmaktadır. Fakat inançsızlık konusunda yapılan araştırmalara bakıldığında, inançsızlığın ne olduğu ve kimin inançsız olarak kabul edileceği hususunda bir muğlaklık olduğu görülmektedir. İnançsızlar dinsiz midir yoksa maneviyatsız mı? Ateist olmak inançsız olmak anlamına gelir mi? Bu çalışmada inançsızlık kavramı emprik olarak ele alınmaktadır. Bu araştırma, 2014 yılında ABD’de, kendisini en az bir inançsızlık biçimiyle tanımlayan 2548 kişinin katılımıyla gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bulgular, inançsızların çoğunluğunun “Tanrı’ya inanmıyorum” dediğini göstermiştir. İnançsızların %85,6’sı Tanrı’ya inanmamakta, fakat %12,3’ü “Tanrı’ya inanmıyorum” demek yerine Tanrı’nın varlığının bilinemeyeceğini düşünmektedir. İnançsızların %88,07’lik kesimi kendisini ateist olarak tanımlamıştır. “Bir Tanrı’nın olup olmadığını bilmiyorum ve bunun bir yolu olduğuna inanmıyorum” diyenlerin yalnızca %60,8’i kendisini agnostik olarak tanımlarken, bu kişilerin %60,2’si kendisini aynı zamanda ateist olarak isimlendirmiştir. Katılımcıların %87,8’i ne dindar ne spiritüeldir. Fakat inançsızların %2,07’si dikey aşkınlık anlamında spiritüeldir. Bu çalışma, bir kişinin inançsız olarak tanımlanabilmesi için üç temel göstere olduğu sonucuna ulaşmıştır: Tanrı’ya inancın olmaması, ne dindar ne de dikey aşkınlık anlamında spiritüel olma ve kendini inançsız, ateist, agnostik veya benzer bir biçimle tanımlama.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** İnançsızlık, ateizm, agnostisizm, dinsiz, maneviyatsız.

## Introduction

The first question in studies on nonbelief is probably will be the question “what is disbelief”? Nonbelief is defined briefly as “lack of belief in something, especially religion” (www.oxforddictionaries.com, 2016). However, this definition is not sufficient. Some people who self-declared themselves as nonbelievers, have religious affiliation, or they are continuing belief in some supernatural agents. When we looked at the studies on nonbelief examined, it is seen that there are some difficulties on the definition of nonbelief and it is a complex concept.

Religious affiliation or religious attendance can be used as a criteria or indicator of whether a person is believer or nonbeliever. Keysar's (2014) classification shed light on the question of what is nonbelief. Keysar interprets religiousness in three dimensions: *belonging*, *behavior* and *belief*. A person's self-identification with a religious identity, engagement in religious rituals and belief in God are three different cases and they can be separately experienced by an individual. In other words, a person can articulate that he/she does not believe in God although he/she identifies himself as a Jew. Or a person may not participate in any religious rituals or services, even though he says he believes in God. It is concluded that religious affiliation and religious beliefs are different facts. There are people who are *believing without belonging* (Davie, 1994) and *belonging without believing* (Davie, 1994; Keysar, 2014; Sherkat, 2011).

**Table 1**  
**Believing and Belonging Rates**

Country	Belonging (Christian, Muslim, Jewish)	Belief in God
Belgium	56.5% (Catholic) 10.8% (Other Rel.)	37.2%
Denmark	60.9% (Protestant) 12 % (Other Rel.)	27.7%
Germany	34% (Catholic) 29% (Protestant)	44.6%
Greece	93.6% (Orthodox)	78.9%
Spain	67.8% (Catholic)	58.6%
Finland	70.9% (Protestant)	33.1%
France	41.2% (Catholic)	27.1%
Ireland	82.6% (Catholic)	69.8%
Italy	87.1% (Catholic)	74.4%
Luxemburg	67.8% (Catholic)	45.7%
Netherlands	22.2% (Catholic) 16.6% (Protestant)	27.8%

Austria	78.7% (Catholic)	44%
Portugal	84.1% (Catholic)	69.8%
Sweden	40.3% (Protestant) 10% (Other Rel.)	18.3%
UK	24.9% (Protestant) 33.6% (Other Rel.)	37.4%
Cyprus	92.8% (Orthodox)	87.6%
Czech Rep.	29.6% (Catholic)	16.1%
Estonia	36% (Christian)	18.2%
Hungary	53.4% (Catholic) 11.7% (Other Rel.)	44.8%
Latvia	63.9% (Christian)	38.1%
Lithuania	80% (Catholic)	46.9%
Malta	95.7% (Catholic)	94.2%
Poland	90% (Catholic)	79.6%
Slovakia	66.7% (Catholic) 12.8% (Other Rel.)	62.7%
Slovenia	64% (Catholic)	32.3%
Bulgaria	83.8% (Orthodox)	35.5%
Romania	86.2% (Orthodox)	92.1%
Iceland	49.6% (Protestant) 10.5% (Other Rel.)	30.8%
Croatia	82.4% (Catholic)	69%
Switzerland	40.4% (Catholic) 34.8% (Protestant)	44%
Norway	38.8% (Protestant) 10.4% (Other Chr.)	21.6%

Source: Eurobarometer (2010, s. 170).

Table 1 demonstrates the significant difference between the rate of belief in God and belonging to a religion in many countries. Results show that some people do not believe in God, although they belong to a religion. It can be explained by the role of religion as an identity or a cultural system. Moreover, some people, who do not believe in God, attend to religious services. Silver (2013) describes this group of people as *ritual atheists/agnostics*. Sherkat (2008) has determined in his research that 12% of nonbelievers go to church once a year, 5% once a month, and 6% every week. Some of the nonbelievers continue to celebrate Christmas or other religious rituals. These findings suggest that a person's religious affiliation, religious attendance or participation in religious rituals are not sufficient indicators to show that this person is not a nonbeliever.

Well then, are all people without any religious affiliation nominately nonreligious? There has been a bulk of research focusing on this issue. According to Hout and Fischer (2002),

very few of the unchurched individuals are nonbelievers in the true sense. Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993) show that 22% of the apostates believe in God. In several studies, it was determined that only about 30% of nonbelievers do not believe in God (Vernon, 1968; Hout and Fischer, 2002; Baker and Smith, 2009; Cragun *et al.*, 2012). Aforementioned studies also indicate that being nonreligious is not a sufficient criteria for considering a person as a nonbeliever.

Some individuals are not affiliated to a religion or do not believe in a personal God, yet believe in some supernatural agents or an ultimate reality. Such beliefs can be defined as spiritualism. In a research conducted by Zinnbauer *et al.* (1997), the data on the participants' self-defining themselves as religious or spiritual are as follows: (1) both religious and spiritual (74%), (2) spiritual but not religious (19%), (3) religious but not spiritual (4%), (4) neither religious nor spiritual (3%) (p. 554-555). It can be said that a significant portion of the people who are nonreligious but not nonbeliever, are spiritual. Question to be asked at this point is whether the nonbelievers are nonreligious and nonspiritual. Research on this subject have shown that about 80% of nonbelievers define themselves as nonreligious-nonspiritual (NR & NS) (Baker and Smith, 2009; Silver, 2013; Fuller, 2001). That is, the vast majority of nonbelievers were both nonreligious and nonspiritual, and did not accept any supernatural reality. Meanwhile, some nonbelievers define themselves as nonreligious but spiritual (S&NR). How can a nonbeliever be spiritual? According to Streib and Klein (2013), it is necessary to divide spirituality into two parts. The first part is spirituality in the sense of *vertical transcendence*. In the vertical transcendence, there is no belief in a personal God and affiliation to an institutional religion, but a supernatural reality is still accepted. Vertical transcendence contains a symbolization of deity above human beings. The second part is spirituality in the sense of *horizontal transcendence*. In the horizontal transcendence, environmental awareness, pursuit of social justice, animal rights, LGBT rights, political advocacy and similar kind of understanding of transcendence are in question. Horizontal transcendence is the glorification of something from the world. Nonbelievers are nonspiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence (Hood *et al.*, 2009). Furthermore, according to Coleman *et al.* (2016), S&NR nonbelievers are spirituals only horizontally.

Another way of defining nonbelief is self-declaration. Some people declared themselves as atheist, agnostic, humanist, secular, skeptical, nonreligious, nonbeliever, apatheist and with similar labels. Does a person's self-declaration with these labels directly mean that he or she is a nonbeliever? Most of the nonbelievers express their views about existence of God by saying that they do not believe in God. This view is commonly known as atheism. On the other hand, some think that the existence of God cannot be known. This view is called as agnosticism. Although there are different types of nonbelief (See Baker and Smith, 2009; Silver, 2013; Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2006; Oser *et al.*, 1994; Hadaway, 1989; Keysar, 2014), the most obvious two types of nonbelief are atheism and

agnosticism. Even, it can be said that the majority of nonbelievers are atheists. However, there are two different definitions of atheism. The first definition is absence of belief in a personal God (non-acceptance of theism), and the other is to deny all religious and spiritual beliefs. The first is called as atheism in *narrow sense* and the second in the *broad sense*. The narrow sense atheism is only to be non-theists or anti-theist, which are described as disbelief in a personal God. In a broad sense, atheism is not to accept any supernatural reality (Martin, 2007; Rowe, 1979). Describing someone as a nonbeliever might cause a misconception when self-declaration of atheism is in a narrow sense. Therefore, naming/calling/a person atheist is not enough to approve him as nonbeliever. There is a similar ambiguity about agnosticism. Agnosticism is an epistemological stance about that the existence and absence of God cannot be known. At the point of claiming that the absence of God cannot be known, agnosticism differs from atheism. Living as if there is no God and claiming that the existence of God cannot be known are what make agnosticism a type of nonbelief. At this point agnosticism is merged into atheism. In some typologies, these are seen as two separate types. However, in other typologies, atheism is used synonymously with nonbelief and agnosticism is considered as a type of atheism (See Silver, 2013). Namely, even though a person self-declares himself as agnostic, whether or not he sees himself as atheist it does not inform us about his view on existence of God. Thus, self-declaration cannot be considered as an only indicator of nonbelief.

When we look at the studies on nonbelief, we can conclude that there can be three indicators of nonbelief:

1. Absence of belief in God
2. Being nonreligious and nonspiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence.
3. Self-declaration as nonbeliever, atheist, agnostic or else.

In this study, the majority of nonbelievers are expected to say "I do not believe in God" (Hypothesis 1). But this is not enough to identify a person as a nonbeliever. Because some people who do not believe in God is considered by us as they are spiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence (Hypothesis 2). We predict that the most commonly used label by nonbelievers is "atheist" (Hypothesis 3). In this study, it is investigated whether "atheist" and "agnostic" labels were used together or separately.. Also the preferences of those who use the "atheist" and "agnostic" labels on the belief in God were searched. , Finally, the levels of nonreligiousness-nonspirituality of those have been researched..

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants are from all around the US. Due to the fact that sometimes nonbelievers experience discrimination, they hesitate/deny to declare their nonbelief. Thus, they can refrain to be participant in the survey. To overcome this problem, we used purposive and

snowball sampling. First, an electronic questionnaire has been created. Then the electronic questionnaire was emailed to atheist, humanist, agnostic, freethinker etc associations/NGOs from all around the US and they were asked to share the survey with their members. After elimination of incomplete/invalid forms, 2548 completed form were taken into consideration.

The survey was taken by 2548 participants who self-declared themselves as nonbeliever or labeled themselves with any type of nonbelief in the US in September, 2014. About 65% of participants were male. Almost half of respondents (51.8%) were in the 25-44 age range. The average age of participants was 40 years (SD = 13.60). The majority of the participants (37.7%) graduated from university (4 years). Annual income of 62.8% of the participants were over 35,000 dollars. About 44.9% of the participants were single.

### **Procedure and Measures**

In this study, a questionnaire was used to collect data. It is devoted to questions to detect demographic data in the first part of the questionnaire. Then, it is given place to the questions which try to determine people's view on belief in God, show usage of labels. Later, a scale is used for the detection of NR&NS level of participants. The data obtained thus are compared.

After the review of literature, the most widely used 14 nonbelief labels were detected (atheist, agnostic, apatheist, humanist, naturalist, secular, skeptic, nonbeliever, nonreligious, anti-theist, anti-religious, nontheist, scientism, and freethinker). Participants were asked which one or ones of these best describes them. Then, the options which are used in several surveys conducted in worldwide, are presented to the participants. Options about belief in God was formed as follows:

- a. I don't believe in God.
- b. I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.
- c. I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.
- d. While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
- e. I know God really exist and I have no doubts about it.
- f. Don't know.

Source: (Baker and Smith, 2009; ISSP, 2008).

The first two of the above options about belief in God are considered as to be nonbelief and the next three were evaluated to be belief. Here the concept of belief includes not only religious belief but also spiritual belief in the sense of vertical transcendence. A person who ticks the option "I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind", cannot be considered to be a nonbeliever, because he doesn't

believe in a personal God but believes in some supernatural agents or in an ultimate reality. In the same way, people who ticked the options “while I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God” and “I know God really exist and I have no doubts about it”, are considered as believers. People who selected the option “don’t know” are not considered as believers or nonbelievers. Participants’ preferences about belief in God and their nonbelief labels were compared with each other.

At the final stage preferences of participants on religiosity and spirituality were asked and their nonreligiousness-nonspirituality levels are measured by NRNSS (Cragun *et al.*, 2015). Nonbelief is not an orientation with single dimension and type. Its definitions contain some differences and a bit of ambiguity. A Buddhist who doesn’t belief in a personal God, can label himself as an atheist and he can declare himself as a nonbeliever in the sense of being non-theist. In addition, those who believe in a supernatural power or an ultimate reality, can put themselves in the category of nonbelievers in the sense of not belonging to an institutional religion. Therefore, in the survey, it is asked to participant whether or not religious or spiritual, and their nonreligiousness-nonspirituality levels measured.

*NonReligious-NonSpiritual Scale (NRNSS)*: It has been developed by Cragun *et al.* (2015) for measuring the nonreligiousness and nonspirituality levels of participants. The scale consists of 16 items. The first eight items measure nonreligiousness and the last eight items measure nonspirituality. Brief explanations take part prior to each part. The first description is about what was meant by the concept “religion”, and the second explanation is providing information for showing that the concept “spiritual” is used in the sense of vertical transcendence. The scale is a five-point Likert-type. While 5 is the highest score, the lowest score is 1. The low score means strong religiosity and spirituality, and high scores represents strong nonreligiousness and nonspirituality. In three separate research, internal consistency, reliability, known group validity, convergent validity, clarity, and confirmatory factor analysis of the scale were performed. As a result of analysis of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha value was significantly higher ( $\alpha = .95$ ).

After the survey, for the suitability of data of NRNSS for the factor analysis, we did Bartlett and Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin tests. KMO value (.874) and Bartlett value ( $\chi^2=11783.541$ ,  $p=.000$ ) show that the scale was suitable for factor analysis. According to factor analysis, the scale consists of two factors. Cronbach Alpha value which shows internal consistency of the scale, was found to be  $\alpha=.747$ . NRNSS measures about 41% of the case. Cronbach Alpha values indicating the internal consistency of the factors were found to be  $\alpha=.463$  for dimension of nonreligiousness and  $\alpha=.841$  for dimension of nonspirituality.

## Results and Discussions

Firstly, to examine the relationship between demographics, nonbelief, and labels, we looked to descriptive statistics and frequency distributions. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to measure the relationship between variables. To determine if there is a significant relationship between different groups, independent sample t-test and Chi-square test were used. The internal consistency analysis and exploratory factor analysis of the scale have been made.

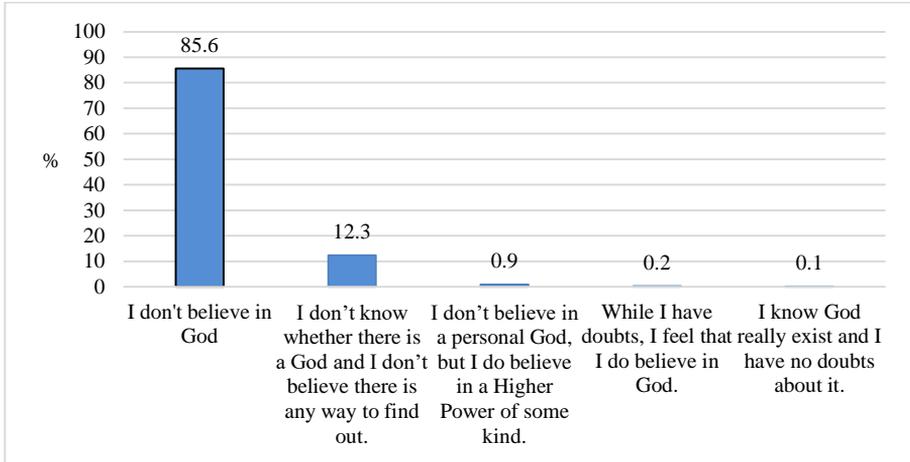
### Belief

The statements “I don’t believe in God” and “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out” show two basic types of nonbelief. The first statement is considered as atheism and second as agnosticism. As seen in Table 2, most of participants who marked these options, namely 97.9% of them, are nonbelievers. About 85.6% of the sample do not believe in God and 12.3% do not believe there is a way to know about God’s existence (Chart 1).

**Table 2**  
**Belief in God**

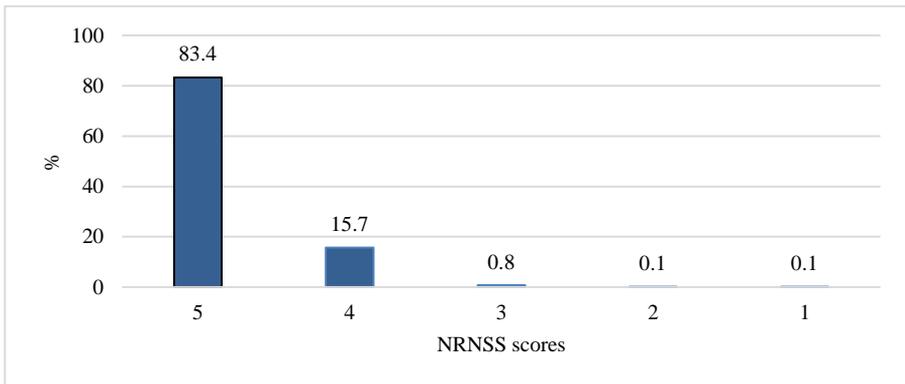
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Nonbeliever	2495	97.9	98.8	98.8
	Believer	31	1.2	1.2	100
	Total	2526	99.1	100	
Missing	System	22	.9		
Total		2548	100		

**Chart 1**  
**Belief in God**



NRNSS was expected to show a significant correlation with belief in God. Accordingly, nonbelievers were expected to score higher than believers. Also, the percentage of people who get high NRNSS score were expected to be relatively close to the percentage of people who marked the options first and second about belief in God. As shown in Chart 2, the percentage of 5 scores are 83.4% and the percentage of the participants scored is 15.7%. Hence, the rate of high NRNSS scores (4 and higher) (99.1%) is very close to rate of nonbelievers (97.9%). In addition, there is negative correlation between belief in God and NRNSS ( $r = -.391, p = .000$ ).

**Chart 2**  
**Scores of Nonreligiousness-Nonspirituality**



**Table 3**  
**Belief in God & NRNSS Crosstabulation**

		NRNSS Scores					
		1	2	3	4	5	Total
I don't believe in God.	Count	0	1	7	256	1917	2181
	% within Belief in God	0%	0%	.3%	11.7%	87.9%	100%
	% within NRNSS	0%	50%	38.9%	64.8%	90.9%	86.3%
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.	Count	0	0	3	123	188	314
	% within Belief in God	0%	0%	1%	39.2%	59.9%	100%
	% within NRNSS	0%	0%	16.7%	31.1%	8.9%	12.4%
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.	Count	0	0	5	16	3	24
	% within Belief in God	0%	0%	20.8%	66.7%	12.5%	100%
	% within NRNSS	0%	0%	27.8%	4.1%	.1%	1%
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.	Count	1	0	3	0	0	4
	% within Belief in God	25%	0%	75%	0%	0%	100%
	% within NRNSS	50%	0%	16.7%	0%	0%	.2%
I know God really exist and I have no doubts about it.	Count	1	1	0	0	1	3
	% within Belief in God	33.3%	33.3%	0%	0%	33.3%	100%
	% within NRNSS	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%	.1%
Total	Count	2	2	18	395	2109	2526
	% within Belief in God	.1%	.1%	.7%	15.6%	83.5%	100%
	% within NRNSS	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

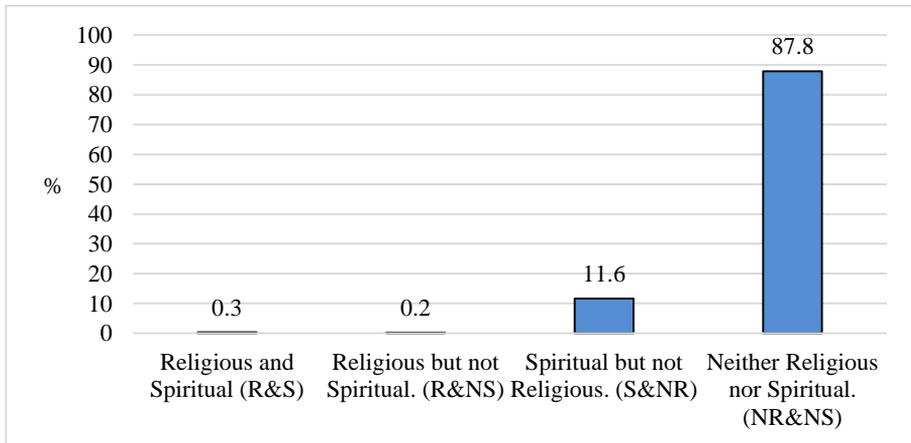
In Table 3, NRNSS scores are compared with belief in God. It is seen that 90.9% of people who get 5 NRNSS score, do not believe in God. The percentage of those who get 5 score among participants who marked that “I don’t believe in God” is 87.9%. However, the rate of 5 scores among those who believe that they cannot know the existence of God, is only 59.9%. As we noted earlier, the first is expression of an atheistic thought and the second represents an agnostic thought. So, the rate of 4 scores among agnostics is 39.2% and among atheists is 11.7% ( $\chi^2=1823,701$ ;  $p<.001$ ).

When we look to the labels, it is seen that average score of those who marked “agnostic” label (4.76) is significantly lower than average score of those who marked “atheist” label (4.84) ( $p<.001$ ). Whereas average score of those who marked “atheist” label (4.86) is significantly higher than average score of those who did not mark “atheist” label (4.47) ( $p<.001$ ). This shows that nonreligiousness-nonspirituality level of those who marked agnostic label or marked the agnostic option about belief in God is lower than those who do not believe in God.

#### NR&NS

In this study, participants were asked where they see themselves between religiosity and spirituality. As shown in Chart 3, 87.8% of respondents are “neither religious nor spiritual” (NR&NS) and 11.6% of them are “spiritual but not religious” (S&NR).

**Chart 3**  
**Religiosity & Spirituality**

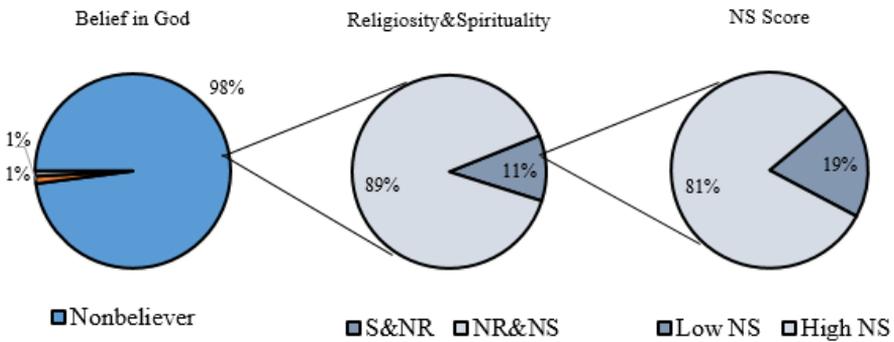


Baker and Smith (2009) have showed in a research that majority of nonbelievers (93%) are “not religious” (NR), but less of them (78%) are “not spiritual” (NS). So some nonbelievers are spirituals. But it has not been studied that whether they are spiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence or in the sense of horizontal transcendence. If these nonbelievers, who are S&NR, are spiritual in the sense of horizontal transcendence, they

must have lower nonspirituality score. Otherwise, these people are not spiritual in the sense of horizontal transcendence but in the sense of vertical transcendence and they are nonbeliever in the sense of being nonreligious but they are not nonbeliever in the sense of nonbelief in supernatural being or an ultimate reality.

As seen in Chart 4, 19% of nonbelievers who ticked the option “spiritual but not religious”, have low NS scores. It is seen when we analyzed the data that 10.96% of total sample is S&NR; 8.88% is spiritual in the sense of horizontal transcendence; 2.07% is spiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence. That is to say, 2.07% of people, who self-declared themselves as non-believer, believe in some supernatural beings. However, the vast majority of nonbelievers are nonreligious and nonspiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence. This finding is important for description of nonbelievers and definition of nonbelief.

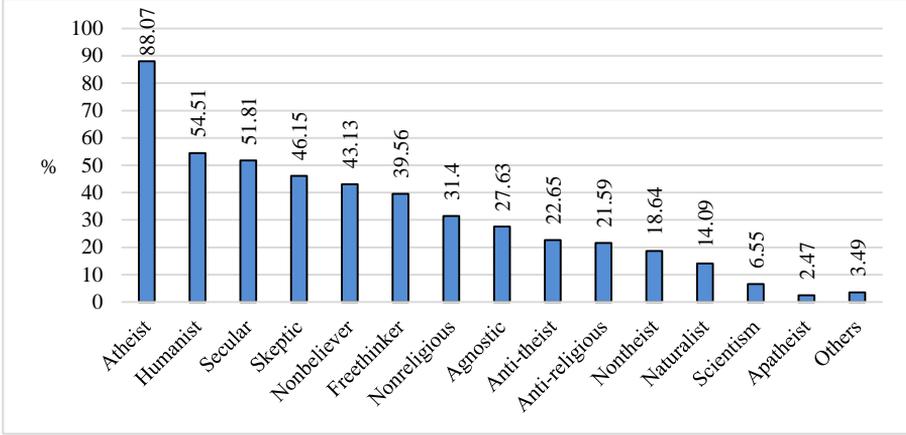
**Chart 4**  
**Low NS Scored S&NR Participants**



### Self-declaration

There are different types of nonbelief and according to hypothesis 3, the majority of nonbelievers self-declared themselves as “atheist”. For determining the case, it is investigated that by which labels nonbelievers use to identify themselves. Participants stated their preferences with multiple selection. When we look at the survey results, it is seen that (Chart 5) the most commonly used label among nonbelievers are “atheist”. 88.7% of nonbelievers use this label alone or in combination with other labels for self-declaration. After “atheist”, the labels “humanist” (54.51%), “secular” (51.81%), and “skeptical” (46.15%) follow respectively. Most of the nonbelievers identified themselves as “secular humanist atheist”.

**Chart 5**  
**Labels**



The most widely known type after atheism is agnosticism. Because of that it is estimated that second most widely used label would be “agnostic”. But as seen Chart 5, only 27.63% of nonbelievers used the label “agnostic” for self-declaration. The labels “nonreligious”, “nontheist”, and “skeptical” are used most frequently with the label “agnostic”.

When we look at the relationship between labels, we found that there are positive correlation ( $p < .005$ ) between “nonreligious” and “nonbeliever” ( $r = 473$ ); “anti-religious” and “anti-theist” ( $r = 534$ ); “nonreligious” and “nontheist” ( $r = 556$ ); “secular” and “humanist” ( $r = 425$ ); and “nonbeliever” and “nontheist” ( $r = 403$ ). Participants identify themselves with 4.7 labels (average). These findings show us self-identification is a complex phenomenon. Namely, nonbelievers mostly self-declared themselves as atheist, but the label “atheist” is not enough for identification and so nonbelievers use different labels in addition to the label atheist. So two people who self-declared themselves as atheists may not mean exactly the same thing.

In order to better understand self-declaration, it is analyzed the relationship between belief in God and labels. The first five labels preferred by participants who ticked the option “I don’t believe in God” are as follow: “atheist” (93.4%), “humanist” (55%), “secular” (52.4%), “skeptical” (46.7%), and “nonbeliever” (44.4%) respectively. Namely, “I don’t believe in God” is expressed most starkly as atheism.

The rate of using the label agnostic of participants who ticked the option “I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out” is only 60.8%. The rate of using the label atheist of these participants is 60.2% (Table 4). This is unexpected result. Only 60.8% of those who think God’s existence is unknowable is self-declared themselves as agnostic, but this rate would be expected to be higher. So, what about the preferences about belief in God of those who self-declared themselves as “agnostic”?

**Table 4**  
**Belief in God & Labels Crosstabulation**

		Agnostic			Atheist		Total
		Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	
					Yes	No	
I don't believe in God.	Count	487	1694	2181	2038	143	2181
	within Belief in God	22,3%	77,7%	100,0%	93,4%	6,6%	100,0%
	within Label	70,6%	92,3%	86,3%	91,3%	48,5%	86,3%
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out.	Count	191	123	314	189	125	314
	within Belief in God	60,8%	39,2%	100,0%	60,2%	39,8%	100,0%
	within Label	27,7%	6,7%	12,4%	8,5%	42,4%	12,4%
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.	Count	10	14	24	3	21	24
	within Belief in God	41,7%	58,3%	100,0%	12,5%	87,5%	100,0%
	within Label	1,4%	,8%	1,0%	,1%	7,1%	1,0%
While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.	Count	1	3	4	0	4	4
	within Belief in God	25,0%	75,0%	100,0%	,0%	100,0%	100,0%
	within Label	,1%	,2%	,2%	,0%	1,4%	,2%
I know God really exist and I have no doubts about it.	Count	1	2	3	1	2	3
	within Belief in God	33,3%	66,7%	100,0%	33,3%	66,7%	100,0%
	within Label	,1%	,1%	,1%	,0%	,7%	,1%
Total	Count	690	1836	2526	2231	295	2526
	within Belief in God	27,3%	72,7%	100,0%	88,3%	11,7%	100,0%
	within Label	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

As seen in Table 4, 70.6% of those who self-declared as “agnostic” do not believe in God, and only 27.7% of them think it is unknowable. This is a very interesting result. Hence, it can be concluded that if a person self-declared himself as agnostic, it does not demonstrate that he is an agnostic about belief in God or he thinks we cannot know there is a God or not. So, self-declaration may not be used alone as a criteria for determining a person as a nonbeliever or not.

### Conclusion

Nonbelief is a phenomenon which is multidimensional and has different types. In studies about nonbelief, we need to decide who should be considered nonbeliever. What will be the main criteria in this regard? In our research, we see the answer to this question is not so easy. Nonbelief in God is not a single indication of being “nonbeliever”. Because some individuals may believe in some supernatural agents, even though they say they do not believe in God. Or some self-declared themselves as atheist, even though they have agnostic thoughts.

Research findings support the idea that three indicators should be utilized for determining nonbelievers. People’s attitude towards belief in God, self-declaration, and being NR&NS are three basic indicators of nonbelief. If a person does not believe in God or if he/she thinks that God’s existence is unknowable, and he has higher NR&NS score, and self-declared himself as atheist or else, then we can easily say he is a nonbeliever. In this perspective, nonbeliever can be defined briefly in a way that a nonbeliever is a nonreligious and at the same time a nonspiritual in the sense of vertical transcendence and a person who self-declared it. Nonbelief is absence of belief in God *and* any sort of supernatural agent.

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