**Introduction**

There is a great deal of distrust of those who do not believe in God. For example, American voters report being less likely to vote for an atheist presidential candidate than a Black, Jew, Muslim, or homosexual (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2008). Is this distrust grounded in reality such that nonbelievers are indeed less moral than believers? For certain attitudes and behaviors, such as those connected to religious teachings (e.g., abortion or homosexuality), research does suggest more permissiveness among nonbelievers (Woodrum, 1988). However, the two groups appear to be similar in their attitudes toward lying, cheating, and helping (Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). If nonbelievers are not less moral than believers, distrust of nonbelievers may be driven simply by stereotypes.

The present study was conducted to determine if distrust of nonbelievers is justified, given their lower moral standards, or is simply a view held by believers toward those who do not share their views. We hypothesized that believers and nonbelievers would report similar levels of morality, but that believers would rate nonbelievers as particularly non-moral.

**Evaluation of Own, Believers’, and Nonbelievers’ Moral Standards**

“[P]romises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no effect on an atheist.” (John Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration, 1689)

**Methods**

Participants and Procedure: One hundred ninety-eight undergraduate students participated in exchange for extra credit in psychology courses. Participants arrived to the laboratory and were asked to complete a packet that contained questions pertaining to moral behaviors and personal beliefs concerning their religious affiliation and the existence of God. Upon completion of the packet, participants were thoroughly debriefed, thanked, and provided with evidence of participation.

Materials & Measures: Participants completed a thirty-one item questionnaire (Rettig & Pasamanick 1959) assessing their own moral beliefs and those of believers and nonbelievers in God (1 = least wrong, 10 = most wrong, α = .94).

- “Not giving to charity when able”
- “Having illicit sex relations after marriage”
- “A doctor allowing a badly deformed baby to die when s/he could save its life but not cure the deformity”

Additionally, participants indicated their religious affiliation, if any, and their belief in God (1 = strongly disbelieve, 9 = strongly believe). Participants who identified with a religion and indicated a strong belief in God were included in analyses as believers (n = 112); those who identified as atheist or agnostic and indicated a strong disbelief in God were included in analyses as nonbelievers (n = 30).

**Results**

Inconsistent with our hypotheses, believers reported higher (self) moral standards than nonbelievers, F(1, 140) = 9.59, p < .003.

Consistent with our hypotheses, believers reported higher moral standards for fellow believers than did nonbelievers, F(1,140) = 9.59, p < .002, and believers reported marginally lower moral standards for nonbelievers than did nonbelievers, F(1,140) = 2.96, p < .09.

Also consistent with predictions, believers rated nonbelievers as less moral than believers rated themselves, t(111) = 12.25, p < .0001.

However, nonbelievers ascribed higher moral standards to believers than nonbelievers ascribed to themselves, t(111) = 20.00, p < .0001.

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**Discussion and Conclusions**

Our findings suggest that distrust of nonbelievers may, in part, be due to actual lower moral standards among nonbelievers than believers. Contradictory to our hypotheses, believers rated themselves as more moral than nonbelievers rated themselves.

At the same time, our data appear to suggest that both groups, and particularly believers, endorse exaggerated beliefs about their own and the others’ moral standards. Believers, more than nonbelievers, rated believers in a particularly glowing light. Likewise, believers, and to a lesser extent nonbelievers, tended to view nonbelievers as morally ambiguous.

We were somewhat surprised that nonbelievers expressed the view that they were less moral than believers. Given our design, we are not able to determine whether these differential moral attitudes translate into differential moral behavior.

It may be the case that differences in self-ratings stem from psychological processes rather than actual differences in standards or behavior. For example, believers may choose to view themselves and their group as possessing exemplary morals for enhancement of self-esteem or social status. Conversely, nonbelievers may internalize the societal distrust directed toward their group, thus displaying lower moral standards (particularly when asked to evaluate their own standards against those of believers). Anecdotally, several of our nonbeliever participants appeared to fit this pattern. Particularly, nonbelievers who noted that they were “ex” or “recovering” adherents of religion (but who met our nonbeliever criteria) evaluated themselves and fellow nonbelievers as particularly non-moral. At the same time, these participants placed believers on a moral pedestal (that they perhaps once shared?).

We intend to continue this line of research in an effort to disambiguate actual differences in moral attitudes from differences that may emerge as a result of self- and other-stereotypes. Furthermore, we plan to consider whether differences in moral attitudes result in differences in moral behaviors. Finally, we plan to conduct an online study in an effort to obtain a sample more representative of the population.