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# Reaching for a new sense of connection: soft atheism and ‘patch and make do’ spirituality amongst nonreligious European millennials

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## ABSTRACT

This article draws on interviews with 67 nonreligious millennials across 25 European towns and cities, part of a research programme (Understanding Unbelief) which aims to map the global diversity of nonreligion. We contribute by examining the presence of paranormal, superstitious, magical, and supernatural (PSMS) beliefs and a sense of immanent moral structure to the world among a substantial minority (34%) of our interviewees. Beliefs relating to luck, fate and a sense of cosmic interconnection are widely distributed and often use a shared New Age-influenced vocabulary. Others vary by national context, for example relating to folklore in Romania and superstition in Poland. The prevalence is higher in Eastern than in Western Europe, and we discuss possible reasons for this. Many interviewees express discomfort or tension around a sense of inconsistency in holding these beliefs alongside a rationalist-materialist cognitive framework. We investigate how they articulate this tension, and consider explanations for the persistence of these beliefs, particularly in terms of their ongoing social and psychological role in the lives of many young nonreligious Europeans.

**KEYWORDS** Nonreligion; millennials; PSMS beliefs; code-switching; soft atheism; relational supernatural

## Introduction – situating ‘soft’ atheism and connective nonreligious beliefs: secularisation, religious visibility, and ‘hard’ atheist reactions

Nonreligion is a growing field of intellectual enquiry (Bullivant 2020), particularly salient in Europe where in eight countries (in the European Social Survey (ESS), 2016) a majority claim to have no religion, with the proportion higher amongst younger age groups almost everywhere<sup>1</sup> and reaching a majority in eleven cases (Bullock and Bullivant 2021). This decline in religious

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identification and belief has followed longer though varying periods of reduction in organised religious participation, and broadly fits with the expectations of secularisation theory (Bruce 2016). Sociologically, these declines raise questions about what, if anything, takes over religion's social roles such as social integration and producing moral order (Durkheim 1915); while from a psychological perspective loss or absence of religious belief raises questions about what takes the place of the meaning, identity and values previously provided by religion (Horton 1924). The question of a sense of meaningful connection to others, the world and the cosmos traverses social and psychological fields; what, if anything, takes the place of religiously mediated senses of connection? Do existing secular discourses – social and environmentalist, for example? Or do new distinctive nonreligious forms arise?

Secularisation theory (e.g. Bruce 2016) has tended to assume roles once performed by the religious sphere are taken over by pre-existing secular spheres, and due to its influential role in the sociology of religion, nonreligion's salience as a positive phenomenon had been largely neglected until relatively recently. But in the last decade the field has developed (Lee 2015), with studies, the formation of research networks (the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network [NSRN]), new journals (*Secularism & Nonreligion*) and a recent research programme (*Understanding Unbelief*) dedicated to mapping and understanding the diversity of nonreligion and secularity. Yet there are still areas that remain relatively unexplored – including the beliefs, value orientations and social formations that are the focus of our project. In this paper we focus on beliefs and value orientations associated with a sense of connection which don't fit easily into a rationalist-materialist worldview, both of the 'paranormal, superstitious, magical, and supernatural' (PSMS, Lindeman and Aarnio 2007) variety, and those which suggest a sense of moral connection to the world or cosmos.

Across Europe, while religious overall participation is falling overall almost everywhere, in the public sphere religion is visible and often controversial, for example in relation to immigration into Europe from Africa and Asia (Bruce 2016), anxieties around Islam and forms of Islamic militancy, and nationalist-populist mobilisation of Orthodox and Catholic Christianity (Herbert 2015), especially in Eastern Europe, where religion is also sometimes politically influential (e.g. on abortion restrictions in Poland) and where atheism can be thought of as problematic and political (Trzebiatowska 2018). These developments, together with the transatlantic spill-over of US culture wars have triggered, amongst other reactions, a New Atheist movement whose materials are widely circulated across Europe, including amongst many of our interviewees. This has contributed to an increased self-consciousness amongst some nonreligious and stimulated the growth of arguably the first mass nonreligious social movements since the French Revolution, with atheist organisations linked to wider and more expansive political activism (Kettell 2016). As Schröder comments in the German case:

in contrast to the widespread opinion that organized nonreligion is constituted of small competing splinter groups, ... we may observe the development of an international or even transnational movement, which is heckling its religious opponents from different directions (2017, 33).

However, militant atheist movements are not the only focus of nonreligious mobilisation, and atheism itself is diverse. Here we focus rather on 'soft' forms of atheism – defined as atheism open to non-materialist ways of thinking – and other kinds of nonreligion. Having no religion does not necessarily mean that one's beliefs fit comfortably within a 'hard atheist' or rationalist-materialist cognitive framework. For example, amongst the non-religious in Europe the most popular answer to the question 'which statement comes closest to your belief?' was 'spirit or life force', higher in most countries than the atheist option 'there is no personal God, spirit or life force', or the agnostic 'don't know' (EVS 2014).

Further support for the prevalence of nonreligious spiritual beliefs comes from a Pew study (2017, 79), which sampled from 18 Central and Eastern European countries regarding religious belief and national belonging. This found that 'religiously unaffiliated adults are less likely than Catholics or Orthodox Christians to say they use traditional religious healers, the three groups are about equally likely across the region to say they consult horoscopes or use fortune tellers.' Furthermore, many religiously unaffiliated adults express belief in supernatural phenomenon, for example, 'in Latvia, for example, 60% of unaffiliated adults say they believe in fate (i.e., that the course of one's life is largely or wholly preordained), while 54% say they believe in miracles and 62% believe in the existence of the soul. And in the Czech Republic, 32% of religious "nones" believe in fate, while 27% believe in miracles and 30% in the existence of the soul' (Pew 2017, 86).

The scope of beliefs that extend beyond the rational materialist is not limited to PSMS 'paranormal, superstitious, magical, and supernatural' (Lindeman and Aarnio 2007) beliefs, but also includes the grounding of moral or ethical beliefs. Thus, people who do not believe in God often believe nonetheless in a sense of immanent justice (e.g. answer 'yes' to the question 'confident that justice always prevails over injustice', ESS 2018), which seems to imply faith in some kind of intrinsic moral order in the world.

Such evidence suggests that in many European societies many people – more in the younger age groups – consider themselves nonreligious, yet either are not atheists or combine atheism with beliefs in PSMS phenomena and/or in some kind of moral order. As Woodhead describes this population in the British context:

'no-religion' does not simply equate to 'secular' and 'atheist'. Whilst only 16 % of nones believe in God, most are indifferent about the issue of God's existence, rather than certain about his non-existence. Similarly, just 7 % of the population say they are influenced by humanism or secularism (43) ... a large and growing number of people now think of themselves as having 'no religion', for by this

they mean the packaged, dogmatic religions of modern societies. They are rejecting something very particular, ... They do not necessarily become atheists, or abandon the belief that there are things beyond this life which give it meaning. (2016, 45)

In facing existential challenges in their lives such people draw neither on the structured teachings of religious institutions nor their humanist and atheist equivalents – but rather on a variety of sources of knowledge, opinions, and beliefs in ways that are not necessarily well captured by individualist or consumerist metaphors such as ‘pick n’ mix’ (ibid.). For in addition to their family and peer group resources and individual enquiries, they may reach out in various ways, including via social media platforms, to like-minded others, for discussion, sharing and support.

Furthermore, while surveys have identified a wide range of non-rationalist /materialist connective beliefs amongst the nonreligious, we know little about how they use them, reflect on them, and articulate them with other aspects of their worldview. An investigation into these uses, reflections and articulations may shed light on our research question of whether religion’s social and psychological roles are readily taken over by pre-existing secular forms, or rather morph into new ones.

This, then, is the rationale for our project ‘Reaching for a New Sense of Connection’ from which the evidence presented in this paper draws – ‘connection’ in the dual sense of meaningful connection in and with life and the universe without any formal religious affiliation, and in the sense of social connection with others sharing a similar approach – we focus on the former aspect here.

## **The emerging field of nonreligion: differentiation from and entanglement with religion**

How then does this approach relate to the developing field of nonreligious studies, and to understandings of nonreligion within it?

First, it should be noted that there is as yet no definitive consensus on how to define the term or field of nonreligion – as a recent review comments:

Scholars studying religion’s other have yet to reach universal agreement as concepts old and new continue to take shape in their collective thinking. (Smith and Cragun 2019, 321)

Nonetheless, there does seem to be some emerging consensus on four features, each of which resonates with our own approach. First, the nonreligious is a larger category than atheism (itself diverse), because it includes both some who consider themselves atheists and others who hold a range of metaphysical views or express uncertainty in this area. This is both apparent in surveys, where, as we have seen, more people say they have no religion

then declare themselves atheists (Woodhead 2016), but also comes through in qualitative work, where, as Lee states:

Respondents use generic nonreligious categories to identify with substantive nonreligious and spiritual cultures more commonly than scholars and even respondents themselves appreciate (2015, 467)

Second, it is a less inclusive category than *everything* that not religious (Quack 2014: 441). Rather, it includes only phenomena that are *defined relationally* to religion, and not those that are not related to religion at all ('areligious'; *ibid.*: 446). Third, it is a term that is best defined relationally – in relation to other concepts, especially to religion (inspired by Bourdieu's 1971 field theory approach) – rather than substantively, as its meaning may shift as the meaning of religion shifts within and across cultural fields. As Lee states in an early contribution (relative to the recency of intensive work on nonreligion), nonreligion is '[s]omething which is defined *primarily* by the way it differs from religion' (2011, 2, emphasis in original).

However, as Quack argues, a relationship of *difference* to religion is too narrow to define the scope of non-religion; rather a number of other possible relationships, including mirroring, or imitation – also constitute forms of nonreligion. Thus, Quack suggests, whereas rationalists (or, one might add, atheists) tend to define themselves through their *difference* to religion:

the primary feature of many humanist groups in Europe is not how they "differ" from religion but how they "*mirror*" religious offers (for example life-cycle rituals, youth work, hospice work). (2014: 447, emphasis added).

An advantage of defining nonreligion in relation to the religious field is thus that this enables a range of possible relationships to religion to be considered (as well as a range of possible meanings of religion). Nonreligion then may be understood in relation to how religion is understood in a particular context. Quack acknowledges that this approach may cause difficulties in cultural and historical circumstances where it is difficult to clearly distinguish a religious field from other social fields:

the very idea to distinguish (sic) different "fields" implies to accept (sic) prior judgments about "religion" and can itself be analyzed as a product of secularization processes, as premised on a particular conceptualization of "religion" with a genealogy that some call "protestant" (Mahmood 2006, 843-844) or "modern" (Asad 2003: particularly 1-8). (Quack 2014, 454)

However, we contend that these concerns have little force in contemporary Europe, where both the Protestant Reformation and various dimensions of modernity have had a longstanding and deep influence (Therborn 2000), the latter projected eastwards by the imposition of Communist ideologies and institutions), such that the differentiation of a religious field is a commonplace emic conceptual category, albeit with different meanings in different contexts.

At any rate, as we shall explain in the next section, our method of sampling meant we interviewed young people who each identified themselves as nonreligious, and in the narratives they articulated in interviews positioned themselves in relation to religion (both in rejection of and difference to religion, as well as mirroring) in one or sometimes several ways.

A fourth development in discussions of the emerging field of nonreligious studies is the recognition that while nonreligion is defined in relation to and as distinct from its religious other, nonetheless the activities of individuals and groups across the spheres of cognition, emotion and action categorised as religious and nonreligious share substantial similarities. Hence as Smith and Cragan argue:

a small but growing number of influential scholars are suggesting that we move away from the religious/nonreligious terminology entirely and instead describe the sociology of religion and nonreligion as the sociology of existential cultures (Lee 2015) (2019, 321)

This is useful, because the notion of 'existential cultures' brings us back to the animating concerns of the project – an attempt to understand how the substantial proportion of European young people who don't identify with a religion nonetheless make sense of the existential challenges they face – and reach out to or make common cause with others in so doing. This may seem a contradictory position, having made so much of nonreligion being defined as other than religion; yet such a position well mirrors our findings in the field – our interviewees both distinguished their beliefs and practices clearly from those they identified as religious, yet also expressed responses to existential challenges which appealed to a sense of moral order or (in some cases) non-material connection which in many ways resemble religious responses.

In other words, while the nonreligious and religious are dialogically constructed categories, they are not necessarily (and certainly not for all nonreligious) opposites – rather they are entangled in people's attempts to make sense of and relate to the world. Non-materialist beliefs in reincarnation, karma, fate, meaningful coincidences, life after death, and the efficacy of magic, fortune-telling, luck and charms were found amongst more than a third of our interviewees. On this basis and that of supporting survey evidence (below) we suggest that religion and nonreligion are best viewed as situated on a continuum of belief from religious to nonreligious (or vice-verse) rather than as discrete phenomena, and entail similar psychological and social processes; for example, playing an important role in the individual's search for existential meaning. The categories of myth and storytelling, drawn from literary studies and philosophy, are also useful for understanding this process of meaning-making, and we draw on some resources which enable this understanding.

So, to use Quack's words, we see our project as an attempt to document and understand better 'religious-nonreligious entanglements in the contemporary

world and the heterogeneity of nonreligious ways of being in the world they produce' (2014, 442).

### **Conceptualising nonreligious senses of connection and PSMS beliefs**

How then to conceptualise the senses of (immanent, non-social) connection to others, the world and the cosmos expressed by the nonreligious? Reflecting on their study of magical thinking amongst nonreligious in Orkney and Cyprus, Irvine and Kyriakides (2018) argue that societal rationalisation does not eliminate non-materialist modes of thinking and may even create a 'space of unknowing – which can, under certain circumstances, be occupied by forms of magical thinking.' (205). To make sense of their findings Irvine and Kyriakides invoke Weber's concept of rationalisation ([1917] 1946), arguing that scientific knowledge, especially its combination of comprehensive scope in principle and differentiation into specialist sub-systems, provides:

[A] form of certainty which generates its own doubt: the universe is deemed completely knowable, yet the nature of knowledge from any given point of view is so fragmentary that a void opens up between this transparent and knowable universe and the tiny scope of knowledge that any given individual can possess (218-219).

However, while we find this to be an intellectually cogent explanation, we are not convinced that it reflects the thinking of our interviewees – while many subscribe to the perspectivism of the Weberian stance – accepting the limits imposed on individuals' personal knowledge by it – some respondents' statements suggest that they do not subscribe to either the transparency or knowability premises of the Weberian position. We will return to this in the discussion when we have reviewed our evidence.

Research has highlighted a lack of clarity in another of our key categories, PSMS beliefs, with negative consequences for the development of the research field: lack of conceptual clarity has hampered theory formation and research, according to Lindeman and Aarnio (2007, 731). In response, and drawing on evidence from developmental psychology, these researchers propose that according to 'dual process theory' early intuitive attribution tendencies are not displaced but rather co-exist with analytic cognitive processes. Thus, both types of processes and knowledge exist and develop through life, enabling two logically incompatible beliefs to coexist without a sense of dissonance unless both are activated together. For example, the latent intuitive belief 'The soul continues to exist though the body may die' may co-exist with the analytic belief 'Death is final' (735), with the former activated in situations of uncertainty or stress through the cognitive practice of 'code-switching'. Code-switching enables the intuitive mode to be activated without necessarily producing



dissonance, as the analytic intuitive mode is temporarily switched off while the intuitive mode is activated (735). A further trigger – some cause for reflection (like an interview question, but also a life experience) – is needed to prompt a sense of dissonance.

We find this account useful for delineating those beliefs held by the nonreligious which may replace beliefs once woven into religious narratives; and a plausible account of what may be happening developmentally and cognitively. Our focus however is on examining what these beliefs ‘do’, emotionally and relationally, for the nonreligious who evidence them, and on how they are negotiated in relation to other aspects of their worldview.

While freely admitting to such beliefs, few of our interviewees felt entirely comfortable with them. Rather, most expressed some tension or sense of inconsistency in holding them alongside a predominantly rationalist-materialist cognitive framework. Few studies have explored qualitatively how these beliefs sit other alongside aspects of worldview, and how they are deployed and put into practice in daily life. Those that have, do so either in relatively isolated rural communities (Irvine and Kyriakides 2018) or amongst a younger age group in one national setting (Day 2009); our work complements these by interviewing people from a range of towns and large cities across six European countries.

### **Research design, sampling and analysis**

The article reflects on fieldwork conducted across 25 cities and towns in six countries: the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Poland and Romania. We conducted 67 (42 male and 25 female) semi-structured interviews with self-identified nonreligious Millennials (Generation Y) born from 1982–1999, making them between 19–37 years old when interviewed. We feature three of the eleven European countries where a majority of young people (under 30) claim no religion (the UK 72%, Netherlands 74%, Norway 57%, ESS 2016); but also include cases where nonreligion is less common (Poland 6.6% and Romania 5.2% ‘religion not important at all’; World Values Survey [WVS 2015], under, 30).

We selected this diversity sample to obtain a sense of the range of conditions facing the nonreligious across Europe. Other dimensions of difference include: post-Communist societies with contrasting levels of religious participation (Eastern Germany (high), Poland (high), Romania (high)); locations with strong pressures to religious conformity – both familial and societal (Herbert and Bullock 2021) (e.g. Poland, Romania) and with lower religious socialising pressures (e.g. Eastern Germany, Netherlands); with strong welfare states (e.g. Norway, Netherlands), and in less economically secure contexts (e.g. Romania, Poland). In terms of religious traditions, we interviewed in mixed Christian heritage environments (UK, Netherlands, Germany), and with different majority religious heritages (Protestant (Norway), Catholic (Poland), and Orthodox (Romania)).

Participants were found using social media and snowballing (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Reddit), for example in Poland the *Narodowa Apostazja* (National Apostasy) Facebook group was created as an online movement against clericalisation in Poland and the tightening of the abortion law. We reached out to nonreligious organisations like the Norwegian Humanists (*Human-Etisk Forbund*), Humanists UK and the Polish *Kazimierz Lyszczyński* Foundation which both promote a secular state and ethics, and to platforms such as *Liberté!* who advocate an open society and liberal culture in Poland. Thus, much of the sample can be described as comprising ‘engaged unbelievers’, i.e. those who are active in an overtly nonreligious organisation or social network. This purposive sampling was used because we wished to investigate how and why nonreligious reach out to one another, and the kinds of organisations and networks they form when they do.

However, our focus on associations explicitly identified as nonreligious, often with a campaigning purpose and including militantly atheist organisations, might be thought to bias the sample in favour of those with a ‘harder’ secular, mostly atheist and rationalist-materialist, worldview. Hence, we were surprised at how many (just more than a third) volunteered PSMS beliefs. In all, 8 Romanians from Timișoara and Constanța (6 male and 2 female out of 14 participants),<sup>2</sup> 9 Polish from Warsaw and Kraków (6 female and 3 male out of 10 participants) and 6 participants in total out of 43 participants from the remaining countries – Norway (Kristiansand), Netherlands (Rotterdam, Amsterdam), Germany (Leipzig, Frankfurt) and England (London), two of whom originated from Morocco now living in the Netherlands and Norway (2) and one from Ukraine now living in Germany (1), This high incidence in Eastern Europe matches survey findings (Pew Research Center 2017) and may reflect the lower existential security levels found here, and hence fit with Norris and Inglehart (2011) theory for religious belief – that levels are driven by the extent of societal insecurity, alongside path-dependent and cohort factors. A second noteworthy feature is gender balance, especially given our 63% male total sample. Again, this fits with the Pew finding that ‘as is true for many other aspects of religious belief, women across the region [18 Eastern and Central European countries] are more likely than men to believe in the existence of the soul, miracles and fate’ (86).

The data were analysed thematically, with the theme ‘cosmic interconnection’ comprising: meaningful coincidences (yuan fen), luck, karma, synchronicity, fate, magic, folklore, cognitive dissonance, charms, signs, divination, reincarnation, global consciousness, hexes, occultism and superstition. The findings support the view that the diversity of nonreligion is far greater than simple breakdown categories such as agnostic, atheist and humanist would suggest. Undoubtedly, there does exist a nonreligious rationalist population interested in debunking all things paranormal and mystical as found by

Quack's (2012) research on Indian rationalists. However, our sample suggests a strong presence of PSMS beliefs, even amongst a committed, self-identified group of nonreligious including a likely oversampling of 'militant atheists'. We now describe our findings in detail.

### **Findings: meaningful coincidences and the unexplained; interconnection, agency and moral structure**

Participants related unexplained events involving supernatural phenomena including books flying off shelves, dreams appearing to come true, having an unexplained feeling when a family member has died without being informed of the death, and strange affinities with numbers, including waking up at a specific time. The most common though was a belief in cosmic justice relating to karma, found in 11 participants (16%). A larger group 17 (25%) spoke of karma as being 'psychological rather than supernatural', loosely expressing the 'golden rule' that being nice to people will generally attract the same in return without supernatural interference and invoked karma as an ethical framework on that basis. The second-largest category was meaningful coincidences, which was expressed by eight interviewees (12%). We found that while some participants held these PSMS beliefs, they often tried to rationalise what they had experienced using scientific explanations, thus creating cognitive dissonance between the experienced event and how to explain it.

For example, Greg a 30-year-old Polish man who lives on the outskirts of Krakow recounted a story when he collapsed in a church with chest pains before passing out. Before the paramedics came Greg spoke of how a priest helped him take a breath and told him everything will be alright. Greg later recovered in hospital but found out that the caring priest he remembered so vividly who helped him while he waited for the paramedics was not real. When his grandmother contacted the church, they wanted to speak to him about his experience. A priest from out of town was visiting for the day and offered to see Greg – it was at this point Greg recognised the priest as the same one who had helped him when he could not breathe – yet, there was no priest when he collapsed. We asked Greg if he had tried to explain how this event was possible. He replied:

I don't know, maybe it was chemistry in my brain, that I took the first priest I saw as it was this one. It's possible by psychology, yeah? But at that moment, I believed it was him. Maybe I wanted to see someone powerful.

Greg also expressed a desire to explain things scientifically, remarking, 'I want to believe in science, because if it was a miracle there is something more, and if there is something more, I cannot understand that'. If Greg was to believe that this event could not be explained scientifically it would cast doubt on his rationalist framework for understanding the world. Pew Research (2017) found that in Poland and Romania there is no significant association between age and

believing in miracles, but a substantial minority (19.3%) of people who say that religion is not at all important in their lives still believe in miracles. Nonetheless, this suggests a significant minority of the nonreligious<sup>3</sup> believe some events are not explicable by natural or scientific laws, though whether they attribute this to a supernatural being or magical beliefs needs more investigation.

Some participants who believed in unseen energies didn't experience the cognitive dissonance Greg did. For example, Joupin (Dutch Moroccan, aged 37) was open to there being more than just coincidences. Joupin believed 'some things don't just happen for no reason' as he discussed his belief in an energy, and while he no longer believed in God, he did believe in something 'mystical'. Joupin recounted a story about returning a large amount of money he found in the street to find a larger amount later whilst out that evening. He tried to explain how this could be possible and stated:

These things didn't happen [just] once or twice. They happened so many times in my life that I'm like saying, what is that? What kind of explanation you can give to that? I'm saying, okay, can it be just coincidence? Or is it some kind of karma? Because many times it happened directly after I did something also good that I get some kind of reaction.

Being rewarded for doing moral acts was also recounted by Kesh, who is a British Indian (aged 32) from London. Despite putting it down to more of a coincidence, he recounted a story of seeing the northern lights after helping a couple who were stranded with their car. He recalled:

about three minutes driving [after helping], we caught the lights and we were literally like, that's karma, you know? We did something good, so we're getting almost like a gift from the Gods. But again, it's really anecdotal.

The last example comes from Elena, a 24-year Romanian woman living in London. Elena, who describes herself as an atheist, agnostic, sceptic and a humanist, expressed some tension while talking about horoscopes. When we asked her about superstitions, she discussed how she finds horoscopes entertaining but also 'disjuncting' because she doesn't necessarily believe them. Yet, when Elena discusses how she relates to them on a daily basis – if she were to plan a holiday and she had consulted the horoscope, she would choose to go on the day where the 'stars aligned ... but not in a superstitious way'. So, we see participants still act in ways that reflect (often contradictory) PSMS beliefs, despite them not matching with their analytic frameworks. Furthermore, Elena discussed a series of coincidences involving living near to someone her entire life without realising despite several relocations:

My best friend we met four years ago, but after we met, we found out that we've been living within 200 metres of each other our entire lives. So, I moved six times, and whenever I moved, this other person moved. We never met until I moved to Switzerland, so literally another country. Where I was not even trying to meet anybody, but it was at university and this person overheard me

speaking Romanian. We were like, I've met you before. And it was like we'd never actually met, but we somehow had the memory of seeing another person crossing on the street or so. And sometimes it feels like all this was meant to happen or so.

This kind of experience – in which events are perceived as meaningful, designed or somehow arranged ('almost like a gift from the gods'; 'feels like this was meant to happen'; 'some kind of karma') fits with the PSMS categorisation because it involves the attribution of agency (however tentative, or cautiously framed) to the environment as a whole – reflecting a belief that events have in some way been arranged for individual benefit. This might be described as a kind of agnostic or atheistic version of providence – because beyond the idea of karma, in which there is some kind of cosmic mechanism for the delivery of just deserts – these cases each imply a kind of benign intention on behalf of the universe, setting things up in a way that is helpful for us as individuals.

We suggest that this kind of belief is likely to have emotional, psychological and social benefits. Emotionally, such beliefs provide reassurance that in some sense the universe has our interests at heart and provides a source of meaning by giving us some significance in the cosmic scheme. Psychologically, they may help towards maintaining a positive mental attitude in the face of adversity; even if such events are perceived as rare, their occasional occurrence may give hope. Socially, they may incline us towards pro-social behaviour, if our positive actions towards others, though unreciprocated and humanly unobserved, are somehow rewarded – particularly if reinforced by a second set of beliefs – in human interconnectedness as part of a broader cosmic interconnectedness, of which more below.

### ***A relational supernatural?***

This sense of a benign, purposive universe has some similarities with Abby Day's (2009) concept of the 'sensual supernatural'. In her interviews with secondary school students, Day found that:

Young people have shifted the meaning of belief to describe affective relationships [to] which they feel they belong . . . Such a shift necessitates a relocation of the transcendent to the everyday and social. That shift is particularly evident as young people discuss how they continue their relationships with [their] deceased loved ones (263).

In the same way that Day's interviewees expressed a sense of positive affective continuity with 'deceased love ones', so our respondents who experienced meaningful coincidences report a positive affective connection to the universe – they feel gifted, that they receive a good reaction back, that things are 'meant to happen'.

There is also a common shift from belief as a proposition (true or false?) to belief as describing experience. However, we would not go far as Day appears to in claiming that 'belief' has been entirely transposed from propositional to relational planes in the discourse of our interviewees. Rather, our respondents' express reservations about their beliefs which imply precisely the kind of evaluation of their truth as propositions that Day claims to be absent from the discourse of her interviewees. Thus, they express a tension, and caution, about their PSMS beliefs as propositions, indicated in phrases such as 'it's really anecdotal' and questions such as 'can it be just coincidence?'

This is where we find Lindeman and Aarnio's (2007) concept of code-switching helpful. We suggest that our respondents have both analytical and intuitive modes of reasoning in their cognitive repertoires, mostly switching between them as situations require without any great sense of dissonance (the meaningful coincidences they reported were mostly rare, after all – but could still provide considerable reassurance or hope if drawn on occasionally as a resource). However, when we ask them explicitly about their PSMS experiences and beliefs both codes are activated, producing a sense of dissonance. In the case of Agnes (30 years old in Frankfurt) described having two sides of her personality, one the very rational (analytic) and the other side which she describes as being very emotional (intuitive) which Agnes engages when she experiences coincidences that she cannot explain by sheer chance. Respondents reported this sense of dissonance independently of our questions, occasioning a range of responses including puzzlement (Greg, above), but also discomfort and frustration. We shall return to this below.

A further difference from Day's data is that whereas Day found that:

My finding about young people's belief narratives resonate ... with what Savage et al. (2006, 170) described as the 'happy midi-narrative', where young people do not reflect a 'mini-narrative' of individualism, or a 'metanarrative' of grand theory, but a space 'communal on a small scale' populated by friends, family and close associates (268-269).

... our interviewees did reflect, at times, at the 'metanarrative' scale. They were concerned with their place in the 'grand scheme of things' and gave evidence of this as a frequent matter for reflection in some cases. Possibly these contrasts reflect age and sampling differences from Day – older and more 'engaged' nonreligious interviewees may be expected to reflect on such matters more.

### ***Global consciousness and reincarnation***

Four (6%) of the participants mentioned the idea of 'global consciousness' in which they felt connected either humans or life on the planet in general. A further ten (15%) discussed a belief in reincarnation with around half of

these doubting its truth, but nonetheless sourcing comfort from it as wishful thinking. For example, Marcu a 34-year-old man from Timisoara, a city in the West of Romania, identified as nonreligious, having left his previous Orthodox faith. Yet, the first comment he made as we sat down was 'I know something exists'; he paused, then continued:

And, I'm not sure that we're different people, I have a spiritual belief in a way, I guess you could call it that. We're all part of the same consciousness. . . . If I hurt you, then I hurt myself in some way, that's what I believe in, and not just in a practical [or physical] way, like I hurt you then maybe in some years you're going to get revenge and I'll turn into a bad person because of that.

Marcu also referred to the idea of metempsychosis; when asked if he considered his beliefs to be spiritual, he replied:

Marcu: Yes, spirituality means that I also believe that we live forever, and we just take turns.

Josh: Like reincarnation?

Marcu: In a way.

We later asked Marcu about fate, paths and signs in life, and whether he believes in predestination to which he responded 'Yes, I believe those kinds of paths exist'. Thus, Marcu demonstrates a belief in something greater than individual knowledge, a connected global consciousness, spirituality, interconnected paths and fate – beliefs many religious believers share. Yet, he strongly self identifies as non-religious – perhaps because for him, religion means organised religion exemplified by the Orthodox Christianity he has left behind, which has been resurgent and active in the public life of post-Communist Romania.

This was not the first time that global consciousness or reincarnation had been discussed. In the very different context of the Netherlands – where almost three-quarters of 18–29-year olds say they have no religion (ESS 2016 74%/EVS 2014 72%) – we met Frank in Rotterdam, who described himself as an atheist with humanistic values. He spoke in a dualist way, distinguishing the physical from the spiritual, stating that our body turns in to 'worm food' after death, but that he believed in a form of reincarnation and that human souls had a measurable lifespan: 'not something physical or tangible, but in terms of consciousness'. Frank continued, 'I am convinced that people have their own network which they can or cannot choose to tap into', connected to a global consciousness. Frank had practised therapy linked to reincarnation where he was told remnants of a previous life were affecting him now that he had died early in a past life leaving behind a young family, trauma which translated into unruly behaviour as a teenager. In a manner typical of many interviewees, as we shall discuss further below, Frank was ambivalent about this PSMS – he was not entirely convinced of the 'past lives' explanation of his

teenage difficulties, but he found it to be a comparatively reasonable explanation, 'more reasonable than saying ... God did it'.

The idea of connection and linked/global consciousness also surfaced in Germany – in Leipzig Lena, a 33-year-old artist, identified as definitely non-religious and 'leaning towards humanism', told me that she was a 'little bit superstitious because I believe that everything around us is related or connected to each other'. She went on to describe this connection as a 'natural balance in the world', stating that there is 'a kind of inner order that is inherent in all things'. A similar idea also surfaced in Krakow, Poland, in discussion with Tomasz, who identified as a pantheist, and his nonreligious wife Ada. They both believed in a 'force' like that found in Star Wars. Tomasz went on to state 'the religion from Star Wars is something like pantheism' and while he did not believe 'in Jedi tricks like levitation', he did believe that 'every single being in the universe is connected somehow and we are divided in our consciousness'. Therefore, the idea of global consciousness was more widespread than any one country, found in rural and urban locations across Romania, the Netherlands, Poland and Germany.

Some interviewees expressed materialist beliefs about life after death which nonetheless expressed some sense of natural interconnection beyond a monadic individualism. For example, Dumitru, a 25-year-old man from Timisoara, was 'passionate' about combining funeral ashes with the seed of a tree to produce a so-called 'grave tree', replacing gravestones with a forest. He spoke of the beauty of watching the tree grow every year. This would be sacred for Dumitru as felling the tree would be a symbolically violent act of 'cutting someone' down'. A further example comes from Rafal a 36-year-old man from Warsaw who expressed how we are all 'star-dust', as popularised by theoretical physicist and cosmologist Lawrence Krauss and astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. Dumitru found thinking that the elements in our bodies were formed in stars billions of years ago and would go on after death 'comforting'; he described it as a type of 'reincarnation', and while his consciousness may or not become energy, for Dumitru this was a 'nonspiritual idea' in which he found solace.

### ***Fate, paths and free-will***

The idea of cosmic intervention in terms of being guided by signs, paths and having a predetermined fate was discussed with several participants. Thus Elena (Romanian living in London) stated in the context of a discussion about how much influence and control we have over our lives:

I like to say none, absolutely none ... I believe there is no free-will. That the entire universe is pre-determined ... I think it's the shittiest belief I have. I believe life is more like a movie than a game. You have the illusion you change what will happen to you, [but] literally you can't.



We found this analogy interesting and asked Elena if she felt like she is watching her life unfold like a film, rather than playing it and hence able to influence key events, to which she responded:

I think you feel like you're playing it, but you're not really playing it. It's all set into motion already, so that's why I think you don't have control. I think in a sense you can say everything is meant to be just because everything is predetermined. I'm fully aware that it's not something that is 100%. But in my opinion, that's, yeah, the thing I believe most.

Elena did not believe in a karmic or providential mechanism and in fact, no agent, including herself, is shaping her life – although she has a lingering sense that 'it feels like all this was meant to happen' – and she does not rule out living in a 'matrix-like simulation'. In this sense, Elena is making a philosophical distinction between fate which could be a mixture of spiritual, religious or astrological concepts and a more mechanistic form of pre-determination.

Among the 11% of participants who expressed PSMS beliefs relating to cosmic justice and karma, a common theme was that when 'things go wrong out of nowhere; you feel like the universe is playing a joke on you'. Luca a 24-year-old Romanian living in Constanța went on to say that while he does not believe in God or a religious being, or a divine entity of any sorts, but he does believe that there is 'some mysterious force in the universe that kind of directs things'. In these cases, the agent envisaged is not necessarily benign. Nonetheless, beliefs in cosmic interconnection or guiding forces to explain events in our lives may support some sense of human significance, even if the intending agents are not positively disposed towards us.

### ***Folklore, superstition and dissonance with rationalist-materialist outlooks***

Several Romanian participants spoke of folklore and superstition passed on through family members (in particular grandmothers or older female relatives) and reported that they experienced these shared familial beliefs (for example in foresight or superstitious beliefs) as in conflict with their more general, 'rational' outlook, yet also compelling. For example, Marcu told us: 'So, I don't believe in superstition ... but I believe black cats bring me bad luck. It's so confusing, it's really annoying me'. We asked Marcu if he saw a black cat, would he avoid it? He responded:

Yes, so if I see a black cat, I have bad luck. But that's the feeling I get. It's unconscious. It's just a feeling, but rationally I know it's not true. So, there's a conflict inside me and that's very, very stressful and very annoying.

Marcu does not readily accept these magical beliefs yet cannot avoid their force of habit in his daily life. Another example comes from Bogdi, a young Romanian man living in the Black Sea coast city of Constanța, who explained the process of 'de-hexing' performed by older female relatives. Bogdi was preparing for a holiday but his girlfriend was feeling unwell, so her grandmother insisted a de-hexing ritual was performed to bring good health. He explained:

The process involves lighting matches and saying a prayer, if you name each matchstick and it burns before you've finished your prayer you can tell if it's either a man or a woman who has hexed you depending on the name. And, if the matches sink you are hexed. To purify the hex, you take a drink from the glass with the matches, then you move your place. The hex remains in the seat, so you need to change. You take a bit of water and make a cross on your hair and then the recovery process begins.

Yet, did Bogdi and his girlfriend truly believe this would work? Not entirely. Bogdi described the process as a placebo and the superstitious ritual only completed because his grandmother insisted; they performed the ritual 'because it will make her shut up'. Yet, he believed that the ritual was effective, placebo or not – his girlfriend felt better. Here we see how PSMS beliefs are lived in tension both with internal processing (rationalisation) and group or familial pressures.

### **Discussion and conclusion: 'patch and make do' soft atheism and connective nonreligion**

When discussing where Elena (Romanian living in London) sourced her beliefs, she explained how her realisation and transition to atheism contributed to her depression, as she didn't have her 'safety net anymore'. She continued:

I like to keep believing that everything will be alright. Of course, there's no guarantee, but I think sometimes it's better not to think of certain things and try to overanalyse them, and be like, just, okay, everything will be alright. Maybe there's a god, maybe there isn't a god, but just don't think about it. I'm strategic about my beliefs. I'm trying to choose whatever will make my day to day life less neurotic or anxious.

While Elena identifies as being a sceptic, atheist, humanist and agnostic, her beliefs in meaningful coincidences, how her life resembles a movie she cannot control, and making potential choices dependent on her horoscope, allow her to deliberate and code-switch between analytic and intuitive modes of thinking dependent on the situation. She experiences tensions and dissonances between these PSMS beliefs and practices and her tendencies towards a rationalist-materialist form of atheism, but her priority is not

the intellectual resolution of these tensions, but rather what enables her to get on with life and to feel 'less ... anxious'.

This allows Elena to gain some sense of control, comfort and relief from anxiety. Elena's PSMS beliefs, and those of our other interviewees, are a bricolage drawn from a common stock of New Age and popular culture (e.g. Sci-Fi and transhumanism) images and concepts. Thus, our interviewees display an individualisation in the selection of their beliefs, and in that sense evidence a form of secularisation without (or with partial) disenchantment – secularisation as the decline in the authority of traditional religious institutions (Chaves 1994), but in enchanted thinking. This seems less well captured by the image of a 'pick 'n mix spirituality' – with connotations of a powerful freely-choosing subject – than by the 'patch and make do' improvisation of the bricoleur (Levi-Strauss 1962).

Above we introduced Irvine and Kyriakides (2018) use of the Weberian concept of societal rationalisation to explain their finding of magical thinking amongst nonreligious in Orkney and Shetland – with its combination of confidence in the knowability and transparency of the world, yet recognition of the limits of individual knowledge, it opens up 'a space of unknowing' in which 'magical thinking' can make a home (205).

We find this a cogent interpretation, but it does not match our observations. First, when our interviewees invoke PSMS beliefs it seems less a response to the elusiveness of comprehensive knowledge, more to negotiate a lack or loss of personal meaning and affirmation. Second, the Weberian sense of the knowability of the universe – and hence its disenchantment – is, we suggest, informed by Newtonian understanding of the natural world, untroubled by Einstein's theory of relativity or the inherent uncertainties of the quantum world. The latter theories were referred to by several respondents as ideas they discuss with their friends or relating to determination, suggesting that lay versions of these theories – however well or poorly understood – resonate with their own experiences of uncertainty, inform their ideas of interconnection, and are used to make sense of their experiences.

Furthermore, whereas Irvine and Kyriakides observed the relatively smooth emergence of magical thinking in the reported conversations of their fieldwork, in our observation utterances implying PSMS thinking were often accompanied by some discomfort or reflexive sense of dissonance. Magical thinking often co-exists with more rationalised forms of thought uncomfortably and mostly not without internal contention, sometimes embarrassment. Thus, the tension between a rationalist sensibility and PSMS beliefs is not resolved through the kind of nature mysticism Irvine and Kyriakides report, but may be experienced as annoying, or articulated with an awkwardness mitigated but not resolved by humour.

These differences could be an artefact of the method, because our questioning may have confronted interviewees with possible dissonances in their thinking more directly. But we suggest it is more than this; what troubled our interviewees

is not the detailed knowledge of specific scientific domains that Weber identifies but rather personal meaning, the kind of knowing which affirms the importance of the individual and his or her place in the universe, and moral meaning. Hence the cost of disenchantment is not the elusiveness of comprehensive knowledge but the pain of lack or loss of personal meaning and affirmation.

Here, we find Irvine and Kyriakides (2018, 203) use of Evans-Pritchard (1937) more salient. This articulates a gap between knowledge of the cause of an event and its meaning; science can explain how something happens, but not often in a way that is personally meaningful, which affirms the significance of the individual. Hence alongside an in principle acceptance of a disenchanted scientific worldview we frequently heard phrases from participants similar to Elena's 'the entire universe is trying to direct you when you're unstable and when you're unbalanced'.

Rather than PSMS and connective nonreligious beliefs filling a gap between scientific knowability and individual knowledge, it seems to us rather that the work done by these beliefs is one of affirming individual significance and some sense of control in a world that is perceived not as comprehensively knowable but as deeply opaque and uncertain, despite the rationalisation of fragments of it. Pew (2017) data shows that Millennials in Poland and Romania (with no significant difference between the religious and nonreligious) are more likely to consult horoscopes, tarot cards, or see a fortune teller (Pew 2017) than their parents and grandparents' generation. Science may explain why you are feeling unbalanced in life but cannot reassure us that the universe cares for us, and it seems to be this 'gap' that our interviewees' PSMS and connective nonreligious beliefs primarily address. Millennial nonreligious reach not only to each other for a sense of connection, but also to the mystical cosmologies of the New Age and Sci-Fi fantasy.

## Notes

1. Slovenia being the single exception, ESS (2016).
2. In Romania we interviewed more men, of the 14 interviews only 3 of whom were female.
3. Those who say religion is not at all important in their lives. We recognise this category is not exclusively synonymous with nonreligion, but it does suggest a clear rejection of institutional religion.

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