

POST-RELIGIOUS IDENTITY FORMATION AND WELL-BEING: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

Palash Mandal¹, Prioma Das²

¹Assistant Professor, Govt. General Degree College Gopiballavpur-II, Jhargram, West Bengal,

²Senior Clinician (PSW), Mental Health Action Trust, Kozhikode, Kerala

Correspondence: Palash Mandal, e-mail: palashsocio@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Religious disaffiliation is an increasingly common phenomenon in many parts of the world, with a growing number of individuals identifying as atheist, agnostic, or “spiritual but not religious.” This transition involves not only a change in belief but also a significant identity shift, often accompanied by challenges and opportunities for psychological well-being. This narrative review examines empirical evidence on the relationship between post-religious identity formation and well-being outcomes, including subjective well-being, mental health, and social belonging. Findings suggest that post-religious individuals experience enhanced autonomy, authenticity, and personal growth; however, they also face stigma, social isolation, and existential distress, particularly in highly religious societies. The review further reveals that factors such as cultural environment, prior religious involvement, and access to secular support networks moderate the relationship between post-religious identity and well-being.

Keywords: Religious disaffiliation, Post-religious identity, Psychological well-being

Submitted: 02.02.2026 **Revised:** 10.03.2026 **Accepted:** 10.06.2026 **Published:** 30.07.2026

How to cite this article: Mandal P & Das P. (2026). Post-Religious Identity Formation and Well-Being: A Narrative Review. *Indian Journal of Health Social Work*, 8(1), 31-35.

INTRODUCTION

Religious identity is deeply connected with personal meaning, social belonging, and cultural integration. For many individuals, leaving religion represents more than the loss of a belief system; it involves a fundamental reconstruction of self-identity and social networks. The process of leaving religious identity has been variously described as deconversion, disaffiliation, and religious exit. While existing research has extensively explored the mental health benefits of

religiosity, the psychological outcomes of leaving religion remain less systematically examined.

This review aims to consolidate empirical evidence on how post-religious identity formation affects well-being. Specifically, it examines (a) mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety; (b) subjective well-being indicators, including life satisfaction; and (c) moderating factors including cultural context, stigma, and community support. By

synthesizing findings across diverse populations and methodological approaches, this review seeks to provide a comprehensive account of the psychological landscape of religious disaffiliation and to identify directions for future research and clinical practice.

METHODOLOGY

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy employed a combination of subject headings and keywords related to religious disaffiliation and well-being outcomes. Search terms included: "religious disaffiliation," "deconversion," "religious exit," "post-religious identity," "atheist well-being," and "spiritual but not religious," combined with well-being-related terms such as "mental health," "life satisfaction," "depression," "anxiety," and "meaning-making."

The search was limited to peer-reviewed publications in English from January 2000 to December 2023. Reference lists of included studies were manually searched to identify additional relevant publications not captured by the database searches.

Theoretical Foundations

The process of religious exit can be understood through multiple theoretical lenses. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, religious identity is formed and maintained through social interactions and shared meaning-making processes (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980). As individuals leave religious communities, they must reconstruct their sense of self without the familiar symbolic frameworks that once guided them.

Attachment theory offers a complementary perspective, positing that religious beliefs often serve as a secure base for emotional

regulation and worldview formation. The loss of attachment to God, community, or a belief system can produce a profound psychological impact comparable to other forms of attachment disruption (Cherniak et al., 2020). Social identity theory provides perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of post-religious identity formation. According to this framework, religious affiliation serves multiple psychological functions: it fosters a sense of community, enhances self-esteem through in-group identification, and provides individuals with a coherent sense of their place in the world (Tongerlen & DeWall, 2021). The dissolution of these functions upon religious exit necessitates an active process of identity reconstruction.

RESULTS

Literature Review: An Overview of Disaffiliation Research

The landscape of religious disaffiliation research reveals a complex tapestry of psychological outcomes that defy simple categorization. This section critically analyzes existing scholarly works pertaining to religious disaffiliation, its various manifestations, and its documented impacts on individual well-being.

Empirical Findings on Well-Being Outcomes

The empirical literature presents nuanced findings regarding well-being outcomes following religious disaffiliation. Some studies indicate that leaving religious affiliation is associated with decreased health and life satisfaction. Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) demonstrated that religious disaffiliates experience poorer physical health, increased psychological distress, and reduced life satisfaction compared to consistently religious individuals. Their longitudinal analysis of nationally representative data revealed that these negative effects persisted even after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors.

However, other research points to potential pathways for improved psychological functioning through secular avenues. Studies examining atheist and agnostic populations have found that these groups often report higher levels of psychological well-being in certain domains, particularly those related to autonomy and personal growth (Baker et al., 2018). These individuals frequently describe their religious exit as a liberation from restrictive belief systems that constrained their authentic self-expression.

The Complexity of Context

The impact of religious disaffiliation appears to be heavily context-dependent. While personal religiosity generally correlates positively with life satisfaction globally, this association intensifies in nations with greater governmental regulation of individual liberties (Elliott & Hayward, 2009). Cultural religiosity also plays a crucial moderating role. In a highly religious societies, post-religious individuals may face significant social stigma, discrimination, and ostracism that substantially impact their well-being. Conversely, in more secular societies, religious disaffiliation may be regarded as a normative life transition with fewer negative social consequences.

The timing of religious exit also appears significant. Research indicates that young adults, particularly those who do not pursue higher education, exhibit significant decreases in religious participation (Uecker et al., 2007). This developmental timing may influence the ease of identity reconstruction, as young adults are already navigating multiple identity transitions and may possess greater psychological flexibility in adapting to change.

Special Populations and High-Control Religious Groups

Research on individuals leaving high-control

religious groups provides particularly illuminating insights into the challenges of post-religious identity formation. Studies of former Jehovah's Witnesses reveal the complex interplay between method of exit (voluntary versus forced), prior religious commitment, and subsequent well-being outcomes. Individuals who were disfellowshipped (i.e., subject to forced exit) often experienced distinct patterns of ostracism and identity reconstruction compared to those who chose to leave voluntarily (Ransom et al., 2021).

Similarly, research on former members of ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities, evangelical groups, and other high-demand religions consistently documents the challenges of transitioning to secular life, including difficulties with foundational life skills, social integration, and identity coherence (Berger, 2015; Fazzino, 2014).

MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES

Depression and Anxiety

The relationship between religious disaffiliation and mental health outcomes proved complex and multifaceted across the reviewed studies. Depression emerged as the most frequently examined outcome, with mixed findings across different populations and contexts. Most studies examining depression found elevated levels among post-religious individuals compared to consistently religious populations; however, this relationship was significantly moderated by several factors. Studies conducted in highly religious societies consistently reported stronger associations between religious exit and depressive symptoms, while research in more secular contexts yielded weaker or non-significant relationships.

Fenelon and Danielsen (2016) analyzed nationally representative data revealing that religious disaffiliates showed increased depressive symptoms over time, with effects

persisting for several years post-exit. However, other longitudinal studies suggested that elevations in psychological distress often diminished over time, particularly among individuals who successfully constructed alternative meaning-making frameworks.

Anxiety outcomes displayed patterns similar to those observed for depression, with elevations reported most acutely in the period immediately following religious exit. Several studies examined existential anxiety specifically, finding that post-religious individuals frequently struggled with questions of meaning, purpose, and mortality that had previously been addressed within their religious frameworks (Grupa & Zarzycka, 2025).

Life Satisfaction

The relationship between religious disaffiliation and life satisfaction proved similarly nuanced. While some studies reported decreased life satisfaction among post-religious individuals, others found no significant differences in certain domains. Hayward et al. (2016) revealed a significant contrast between different types of non-religious identification: committed atheists often reported life satisfaction levels comparable to those of religious individuals, whereas individuals with “no religious preference” showed the most concerning well-being profiles, suggesting that the quality of identity construction — rather than mere disaffiliation — is a decisive factor. Autonomy and Personal Growth

Multiple studies indicated that feelings of autonomy and personal growth were notably elevated among post-religious individuals who described their religious exit as a voluntary choice made in pursuit of authenticity. Participants frequently reported making decisions based on personal values rather than external religious authority, an experience consistently associated with an

enhanced sense of agency and life satisfaction (Haire, 2022).

SOCIAL OUTCOMES

Family Relationships

Family relationships were frequently affected following religious disaffiliation, with many post-religious individuals reporting strained ties with family members who remained religiously affiliated. Persons from high-control religious groups reported particularly severe social consequences, including complete shunning by family members, which was found to exacerbate psychological distress and complicate the process of identity reconstruction.

Community and Social Support

The loss of religious community represented a significant challenge for most post-religious individuals. Religious communities typically provide multiple forms of social support, including emotional support, practical assistance, and shared social activities. Studies consistently found that successful post-religious identity formation was associated with the development of alternative social support networks capable of fulfilling these functions.

MODERATING FACTORS

Cultural Context

Cultural religiosity emerged as one of the strongest moderators of the relationship between religious disaffiliation and well-being outcomes. Studies conducted in highly religious societies such as the American South or conservative Muslim-majority countries consistently reported more negative outcomes for post-religious individuals, including higher levels of discrimination, social isolation, and psychological distress. By contrast, research conducted in more secular societies, such as urban areas of Western Europe, found small and frequently non-significant differences in

well-being between religious and post-religious individuals. These findings collectively suggest that the social acceptance of non-religious worldviews plays a crucial role in determining post-exit outcomes.

Type and Intensity of Prior Religious Involvement

Prior religious commitment was found to exert a significant influence on post-exit outcomes across numerous studies. Individuals from fundamentalist religious backgrounds faced greater difficulties in reconstructing their identities and integrating into secular society. Paradoxically, some studies suggested that higher levels of prior religious commitment were associated with both greater initial distress and more successful long-term identity reconstruction. A “U-shaped” relationship reflecting the more substantial identity resources and skills developed by highly committed individuals.

DISCUSSION

The Double-Edged Nature of Religious Exit

The synthesis of empirical evidence reveals that post-religious identity formation represents a complex psychosocial process with profound implications for individual well-being. Longitudinal analyses of nationally representative data demonstrate that religious disaffiliation is associated with both significant psychological costs — including increased depressive symptoms and reduced life satisfaction — and potential gains in autonomy and personal growth (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016). Rather than producing uniformly positive or negative outcomes, disaffiliation appears to initiate a period of identity reconstruction that can lead to diverse endpoints depending on multiple individual and contextual factors (Baker et al., 2018).

One of the most consistent themes emerging from the literature is the paradoxical nature of the religious exit experience. While many individuals report enhanced autonomy,

authenticity, and personal growth following their departure from religious communities, they simultaneously face significant challenges including social isolation, existential uncertainty, and stigma (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980). This double-edged effect underscores the high-stakes nature of religious exit as an identity transition, one in which the reconstruction of meaning and community is as consequential as the departure itself.

The positive dimensions of religious exit frequently center on themes of liberation and authentic self-expression. Individuals who describe their disaffiliation as a voluntary, self-directed choice consistently report higher levels of autonomy and personal growth than those who exit under social or family pressure (Baker et al., 2018). However, these benefits often came at significant social and psychological costs, as the loss of religious community typically entailed the simultaneous loss of social support, meaning-making frameworks, and cultural identity (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016).

The Critical Role of Context

A consistent finding across the reviewed literature is that the social and cultural context of religious disaffiliation substantially shapes individual outcomes. Individuals in highly religious societies face markedly greater challenges than those in more secular environments. Research demonstrates that the positive association between personal religiosity and life satisfaction intensifies in nations with greater governmental restriction of individual liberties, suggesting that cultural religiosity compounds the social costs of disaffiliation (Elliott & Hayward, 2009). Findings derived from, for example, highly religious regions of the United States may therefore not be generalizable to post-religious individuals in secular European countries, underscoring the need for culturally

sensitive theoretical models and targeted interventions.

The timing of religious exit also appears critical. Research indicates that young adults who do not pursue higher education exhibit the most pronounced decreases in religious participation (Uecker et al., 2007), suggesting that educational pathways moderate both the likelihood and the experiential quality of disaffiliation. Transitions occurring during young adulthood may offer greater opportunities for successful identity reconstruction given the natural developmental fluidity of this period; however, young adults may simultaneously lack the social and economic resources necessary to navigate complex identity transitions successfully.

Identity Reconstruction Processes

The reviewed literature provides important insights into the mechanisms through which post-religious individuals reconstruct their identities. Successful identity reconstruction appears to require several interrelated components: the development of alternative meaning-making frameworks, the establishment of new social support networks, and the integration of post-religious identity with other aspects of self-concept. Studies on the role of meaning-making in well-being indicate that the ability to construct coherent personal narratives outside of religious frameworks is a significant predictor of positive adjustment (Maliňáková et al., 2020). The most effective meaning-making approaches were those that provided coherent answers to existential questions while aligning with individuals' broader value systems. Notably, committed atheists who have developed stable secular identities report life satisfaction levels comparable to those of their religious peers, whereas individuals without a clear post-religious identity framework show significantly more

compromised well-being profiles (Hayward et al., 2016). This underscores the centrality of active identity work rather than mere disaffiliation. Reconstructing social identity was equally challenging: individuals often had to disengage from their religious communities while simultaneously building new social connections — a process well documented among evangelical leavers and those exiting high-demand denominations (Fazzino, 2014).
CLINICAL AND THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS
The findings of this review carry important implications for mental health professionals working with post-religious individuals. Traditional therapeutic approaches may prove insufficient for addressing the unique challenges faced by this population, particularly the complex interplay between identity, meaning-making, and social belonging. A substantial body of evidence documents the mental health benefits that religious involvement provides through spiritual coping, social support, and coherent worldviews (Hussain, 2022; Moreira-Almeida et al., 2006); clinicians should therefore be equipped to address the loss of these resources when clients undergo disaffiliation, including existential distress, grief over lost community, and the renegotiation of moral frameworks.

The review also highlights the importance of cultural competence among mental health professionals. Therapists working with post-religious clients must be familiar with the specific challenges associated with different types of religious backgrounds, including an awareness of religious trauma. Evidence from studies of former Jehovah's Witnesses and ultra-Orthodox Jewish community leavers demonstrates that individuals from high-control religious environments frequently experience prolonged identity disruption, social ostracism, and difficulties reintegrating into secular life (Ransom et al., 2021; Berger, 2015). Awareness of these dynamics is

essential for providing effective, trauma-informed care to this population.

LIMITATIONS

Several important limitations emerged from the review of existing literature. The majority of studies employed cross-sectional designs, which limits causal inference and understanding of the temporal dynamics of post-religious identity formation. Notable exceptions, such as the longitudinal work by Fenelon and Danielsen (2016), demonstrate that negative well-being effects can persist for several years post-exit, but such studies remain scarce. Further longitudinal research is crucial for understanding how well-being outcomes evolve over time and for identifying the factors that promote resilience and recovery.

Another significant limitation is the geographic and cultural bias toward Western, educated populations. The majority of reviewed studies were conducted in North American or Western European contexts (e.g., Baker et al., 2018; Uecker et al., 2007), and the experiences of post-religious individuals in non-Western cultures, developing countries, and non-Christian religious contexts remain substantially understudied. Measurement issues also emerged as a concern: many studies relied on general measures of well-being and mental health that may not capture the unique aspects of post-religious experience. The development and validation of measures specifically designed for post-religious populations could significantly advance the field.

Sample selection bias represents an additional methodological concern. Many studies recruited participants through online communities or support groups specifically for post-religious individuals (e.g., Ransom et al., 2021), potentially over-representing those with more negative exit experiences or ongoing identity struggles. Community-based

sampling approaches and probability-based recruitment strategies would provide more representative samples of the broader disaffiliated population.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The review identifies several priority areas for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking individuals through the process of religious exit and identity reconstruction are urgently needed to illuminate the temporal dynamics of these transitions and identify critical inflection points. As demonstrated by existing longitudinal work (Fenelon & Danielsen, 2016), well-being trajectories following disaffiliation are not static; understanding the conditions under which recovery and flourishing occur — particularly in relation to meaning-making processes (Maliðáková et al., 2020) — could directly inform the development of targeted psychological interventions.

Cross-cultural research examining post-religious experiences in diverse cultural and religious contexts would significantly enhance understanding of the role of contextual factors in moderating outcomes. Comparative studies that extend beyond the Western, predominantly Christian contexts that dominate the current literature (Elliott & Hayward, 2009) are particularly needed. Theoretical development is equally important: although foundational frameworks such as symbolic interactionism offer valuable starting points (Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980), comprehensive integrative models that account for the full range of identity, meaning-making, and social processes involved in post-religious transitions are still lacking.

Research on resilience factors and protective processes represents another critical priority. Evidence that some post-religious individuals — particularly committed atheists with stable secular identities — achieve well-being levels comparable to religious individuals (Baker et

al., 2018; Hayward et al., 2016) suggests that positive outcomes are attainable and that the conditions supporting them can be identified and cultivated. Understanding these factors could assist in identifying individuals at risk for negative outcomes and in informing preventive interventions and community support programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Post-religious identity formation represents a complex and multifaceted process with significant implications for psychological well-being. While the transition away from religious belief and community can offer opportunities for enhanced autonomy, authenticity, and personal growth, it also presents substantial challenges, including social isolation, existential uncertainty, and identity disruption.

The relationship between religious disaffiliation and well-being outcomes is neither uniformly positive nor negative but depends heavily on contextual factors including cultural environment, method of exit, prior religious involvement, and access to support resources. This contextual dependency underscores the importance of individualized approaches to understanding and supporting post-religious individuals.

The evidence suggests that successful post-religious identity formation requires active identity reconstruction work, including the development of alternative meaning-making frameworks and the establishment of new social support networks. Mental health professionals, community organizations, and peer support networks play crucial roles in facilitating positive outcomes for individuals navigating these transitions.

Several important research gaps remain, including the need for longitudinal studies, cross-cultural research, and the development of post-religious-specific theoretical models and measures. As religious disaffiliation

continues to increase globally, understanding the psychological processes and outcomes associated with post-religious identity formation becomes increasingly important for mental health professionals, researchers, and society more broadly.

The complexity and diversity of post-religious experiences documented in this review underscore the importance of avoiding overgeneralization while recognizing common themes and challenges. Each individual's journey away from religious belief and community is unique, shaped by personal history, cultural context, and available resources. This review demonstrates that while religious disaffiliation can present significant challenges, individuals are capable of successfully reconstructing meaningful, fulfilling identities outside of religious frameworks. Understanding the factors that promote such positive outcomes represents both a scientific challenge and a moral imperative as societies become increasingly diverse in their religious and spiritual orientations.

REFERENCES

- Baker, J. O., Stroope, S., & Walker, M. H. (2018). Secularity, religiosity, and health: Physical and mental health differences between atheists, agnostics, and non-affiliated theists compared to religiously affiliated individuals. *Social Science Research*, 75, 44–57.
- Berger, R. (2015). Challenges and coping strategies in leaving an ultra-orthodox community. *Qualitative Social Work*, 14(5), 670–686.
- Brinkerhoff, M. B., & Burke, K. L. (1980). Disaffiliation: Some notes on "falling from the faith." *Sociological Analysis*, 41(1), 41–54.
- Cherniak, A. D., Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., & Granqvist, P. (2021). Attachment

- theory and religion. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 40, 126-130.
- Elliott, M., & Hayward, R. D. (2009). Religion and the search for meaning: Examining the moderating role of religious context. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 1(3), 135–144.
- Fazzino, L. L. (2014). Leaving the church behind: Applying a deconversion perspective to evangelical exit narratives. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53(4), 729–745.
- Fenelon, A., & Danielsen, S. (2016). Leaving my religion: Understanding the relationship between religious disaffiliation, health, and well-being. *Social Science Research*, 57, 49–62.
- Grupa, M., & Zarzycka, B. (2025). The Experience of Deconversion Among Polish Catholic Adolescents: A Mixed-Methods Investigation. *Journal of religion and health*, 64(6), 4348-4371.
- Haire, F. S. (2022). Born again: Narrating the mental health journeys of religious exiters. *Sociology Compass*, 16(9), e13030.
- Hayward, R. D., Krause, N., Ironson, G., Hill, P. C., & Emmons, R. (2016). Health and well-being among the non-religious: Atheists, agnostics, and no preference compared with religious group members. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 55(3), 1024–1037.
- Hussain, D. (2022). Religious coping and mental health: The role of spiritual practices in managing psychological distress. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 61(2), 1456–1472.
- Maliòáková, K., Tavel, P., Meier, Z., van Dijk, J. P., & Reijneveld, S. A. (2020). Religiosity and well-being among adolescents: The mediating role of meaning-making. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(16), 5959.
- Moreira-Almeida, A., Neto, F. L., & Koenig, H. G. (2006). Religiousness and mental health: A review. *Revista Brasileira de Psiquiatria*, 28(3), 242–250.
- Ransom, H. J., Monk, R. L., Qureshi, A., & Heim, D. (2021). Life after social death: Leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, identity transition and recovery. *Pastoral Psychology*, 70(1), 53–69.
- Tongeren, D. R. V., & DeWall, C. N. (2023). Disbelief, disengagement, discontinuance, and disaffiliation: An integrative framework for the study of religious deidentification. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 15(4), 515.
- Uecker, J. E., Regnerus, M. D., & Vaaler, M. L. (2007). Losing my religion: The social sources of religious decline in early adulthood. *Social Forces*, 85(4), 1667–1692.

Conflict of interest: None

Role of funding source: None