



# Atheism in the Shadows: Negotiating Identity in a Faith-Oriented Culture

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**Abstract** - This paper explores how Filipino atheists experience and interpret atheism within a predominantly religious society. Grounded in Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological approach, the study is based on comprehensive interviews with seven individuals who self-identify as atheists. Five key themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Atheism as a Path to Intellectual Freedom, (2) Atheism as a Process of Inner Conflict and Understanding, (3) Atheism as an Expression of Moral Independence, (4) Atheism and the Burden of Silence, and (5) Atheism as Social Tension and Subtle Defiance. These findings underscore that atheism in the Philippine context is more than the rejection of theism; it represents a multifaceted negotiation of thought, emotion, and social interaction. For participants, atheism offered both empowerment and constraint—enabling critical reflection and ethical self-governance while also requiring discretion in a culture where religious belief permeates family life, education, and national identity. By engaging with scholarly perspectives that view atheism as both a worldview and a social identity, this study contributes fresh insights from Southeast Asia. It underscores the importance of acknowledging secular identities within religious-majority societies and calls for more inclusive and critical engagement with non-religious perspectives in the Global South.

**Keywords:** atheism, phenomenology, religious diversity, secularism

## I. INTRODUCTION

In a country often lauded as the only Christian nation in Asia, atheism remains a marginal and misunderstood identity. The Philippines, with over 90% of its population identifying as religious—predominantly Roman Catholic—has long been shaped by centuries of religious influence, from pre-colonial animistic traditions to Spanish-imposed Catholicism and contemporary charismatic Christianity. In such a context, atheism is not just an intellectual stance; it is a deeply personal, often socially contested position that challenges dominant religious narratives and collective norms.

Atheism in the Philippines, while growing in visibility through online communities and occasional public engagement, remains largely understudied in academic discourse, particularly within the social sciences. In recent years, the global literature on atheism has expanded to include nuanced accounts of non-belief across sociocultural contexts. However, much of this scholarship remains dominated by Western perspectives, where

the social consequences of non-belief may differ significantly from those in a postcolonial, collectivist, and highly religious society such as the Philippines.

The significance of this study lies in its focus on the Filipino atheist not merely as an object of sociological curiosity but as a subject with agency, voice, and lived complexity. By employing Colaizzi's method of descriptive phenomenology, the study seeks to uncover the essences of atheism as experienced by Filipino individuals who self-identify as atheists. The study contributes to the sociology of religion, secularism studies, and Philippine social thought by presenting atheism not as a mere negation of belief, but as a phenomenon rich with existential, moral, and cultural meaning.

Atheism, at its simplest, is commonly understood as the absence of belief in a deity or deities. Yet, as literature in the philosophy of religion and sociology has shown, the term carries varied and contested meanings. Definitions range from the “strong” atheism—the positive assertion that no gods exist—to “weak” or “negative” atheism, which merely withholds belief without asserting the contrary (Martin, 2007; Flew, 1972). Michael Martin (2007), in his seminal work, delineates between positive atheism and negative atheism to accommodate different orientations within the non-belief spectrum. Others, such as Paul Cliteur (2010), argue that atheism should be understood not only as a metaphysical claim but as part of a broader worldview that includes rationalism, secular ethics, and skepticism toward religious authority.

Sociologically, atheism is often contextualized within broader frameworks of secularization and modernity. Phil Zuckerman (2007) and Stephen Bullivant (2013) point out that atheism must be examined within the sociocultural systems that enable or restrict non-religiosity. In regions such as Scandinavia, non-belief has become normalized, even mundane, whereas in religiously conservative nations, atheism can carry social penalties, including familial rejection, discrimination, and even threats to personal safety. The Philippine context reflects the latter situation, where religion is intertwined with national identity, community belonging, and moral legitimacy.

In the Southeast Asian context, atheism is further complicated by historical and colonial legacies (Duile and Aldama, 2024). They have emphasized how colonial religious institutions shaped the Philippine moral landscape. Christianity was not merely a set of doctrines but a civilizing project, tied to ideas of order, education, and proper citizenship. Consequently, non-belief is often equated with rebellion, amorality, or Westernization—labels that Filipino atheists must navigate in their personal and social lives.

Furthermore, a growing body of work seeks to differentiate atheism from related concepts such as agnosticism, secularism, and non-religiosity. While agnosticism posits that the existence of God is unknowable, and secularism promotes the separation of church and state, atheism centers specifically on the belief dimension. Yet even among atheists, there exists a spectrum of engagement—from the “apatheists”, who are indifferent to religious questions, to the “activist atheists”, who vocally challenge religious institutions (Lee, 2015).

In the Philippine setting, this diversity remains largely undocumented. The few existing studies, such as those by Aldama (2021) and Blechschmidt (2018), have noted the psychological struggles and social consequences faced by Filipino atheists, including internal conflicts, secrecy, and family tension. However, these studies often approach atheism from a sociological or anthropological perspective rather than from a phenomenological and lived-experience orientation.

This study adopts a descriptive phenomenological methodology as developed by Colaizzi (1978), which is particularly suited for uncovering the meanings embedded in lived human experiences. Phenomenology emphasizes *how* phenomena appear in consciousness rather than *why* they occur. In contrast

to quantitative surveys that measure belief or identity frequencies, phenomenology seeks to capture the *essences* of a phenomenon as it is experienced and articulated by individuals themselves.

Colaizzi's method, in particular, provides a rigorous and structured approach to descriptive phenomenology, involving steps such as extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, and validating findings with participants. This approach allows for a detailed and ethically grounded engagement with the experiences of Filipino atheists, offering insights that transcend mere statistical analysis.

Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, this study uncovers the psychological, social, and existential dimensions of atheism in the Philippines. What does it mean to reject belief in God in a society where such belief is taken for granted? How do atheists articulate their moral compass, their sense of purpose, or their experience of alienation and community? What existential insights do they offer about meaning, doubt, and freedom?

Guided by this philosophical and methodological orientation, the central research question of the study is: "What is the meaning of atheism based on the lived experiences of atheists?"

This question privileges the subjective realities of the participants, allowing them to define atheism in their own terms—whether as a liberation, a loss, a source of clarity, or a continuous struggle. Rather than imposing a predefined framework, the study listens to the voices of those who inhabit the margins of religious society.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHOD

This study utilized descriptive phenomenology, specifically Colaizzi's (1978) method, to explore the meaning of atheism as lived and articulated by Filipino atheists. Rooted in Edmund Husserl's philosophical tradition, descriptive phenomenology aims to describe phenomena as they appear to consciousness, without presuppositions or theoretical impositions. It is particularly suited for inquiries that seek to understand the subjective meanings of personal and often marginalized experiences, such as atheism in a deeply religious society like the Philippines.

The study employed a qualitative design grounded in Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method of descriptive phenomenological analysis. This method was chosen for its rigor and emphasis on remaining faithful to participants' original accounts while allowing for the identification of essential structures of meaning. Unlike interpretive approaches that draw on external frameworks, Colaizzi's method emphasizes a return "to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1970), privileging the voices of participants and their descriptions of lived experience.

A total of seven Filipino atheists participated in the study. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, with specific criteria: (1) self-identification as an atheist, (2) Filipino citizenship, (3) willingness and ability to articulate personal experiences related to atheism, and (4) fluency in either English or Filipino. While the sample size is small, it aligns with the phenomenological emphasis on depth rather than breadth, allowing for a rich and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

Participants varied in age, gender, and socioeconomic background, reflecting the diversity of the Filipino atheist population. Some participants were vocal about their atheism in public or online forums, while others remained closeted or disclosed their beliefs only to trusted individuals. This variation enriched the data and revealed the spectrum of experiences, from active engagement to social concealment.

The primary method of data collection was in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed individually in a private setting—either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, depending on availability and preference. The interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in either Filipino or English, depending on the participant's comfort.

The interview guide was designed to elicit detailed and reflective responses. It began with general questions such as, “Can you describe your journey toward becoming an atheist?” and “How does your atheism affect your day-to-day life?” It then moved toward more existential and social dimensions, such as “What does atheism mean to you personally?” and “How has being an atheist influenced your relationships, values, or worldview?”

Probing questions were used to deepen the inquiry, following the participants' own narratives and language. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identity of all participants and ensure confidentiality.

The study was conducted in adherence to standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with an informed consent form that outlined the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks, and their rights—including the right to withdraw at any time. Participants were also assured of strict confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation. Ethical clearance was secured from the affiliated institution's research ethics committee.

Given the potential sensitivity of the topic, care was taken to foster a non-judgmental, respectful, and empathetic interview environment. Some participants expressed concerns about being misunderstood or stigmatized, making the assurance of anonymity and trust-building crucial throughout the research process.

The data were analyzed following Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method of descriptive phenomenological analysis:

1. Familiarization – All transcribed interviews were read multiple times to immerse the researcher in the data and gain a general sense of participants' lived experiences.

2. Extraction of Significant Statements – Key phrases and sentences that directly related to the phenomenon of atheism were identified and extracted from the transcripts.

3. Formulation of Meanings – Each significant statement was analyzed to formulate meanings that reflected the essence of what the participant was expressing. Care was taken to bracket personal assumptions and interpretations.

4. Organization into Theme Clusters – The formulated meanings were grouped into clusters of themes that reflected shared elements of the participants' experiences. These thematic clusters served as the foundation for understanding the structure of the phenomenon.

5. Exhaustive Description – An exhaustive description of atheism, as experienced by the participants, was written by integrating all theme clusters into a rich narrative account.

6. Formulation of Fundamental Structure – From the exhaustive description, the fundamental structure (or essence) of the phenomenon was distilled, capturing the core meaning of atheism for Filipino non-believers.

7. Validation by Participants – To enhance credibility, the findings were returned to the participants for validation. They were invited to review the exhaustive description and confirm whether it accurately captured their experiences. Minor clarifications and affirmations were integrated into the final analysis.

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through strategies aligned with phenomenological research standards. Credibility was enhanced through member checking and prolonged engagement with the data. Dependability and confirmability were addressed through careful documentation of analytic decisions and by bracketing personal biases throughout the process. Transferability was considered through rich, thick descriptions that allow readers to assess the relevance of findings to other contexts.

### **III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section presents and interprets the emergent meanings of atheism as experienced and articulated by the seven Filipino atheists interviewed in this study. Through Colaizzi's method of descriptive phenomenological analysis, five major thematic clusters emerged that reflect how atheism is experienced, internalized, and lived in the Philippine context. These themes include: (1) Atheism as Intellectual Liberation, (2) Atheism as a Journey of Inner Struggle and Clarity, (3) Atheism as Ethical Autonomy, (4) Atheism and the Weight of Silence, and (5) Atheism as Social Dissonance and Quiet Resistance. Each theme is discussed with supporting quotations and analyzed in dialogue with existing literature.

#### **1. Atheism as a Path to Intellectual Freedom**

A dominant theme among participants was the notion of freedom from dogma and the embrace of rational inquiry. Participants often described their atheism as a product of questioning religious beliefs and institutions that no longer made sense to them.

*“I grew up praying every day. But one day, I just asked myself—what if I stopped? Nothing changed. The world didn’t fall apart. That was the beginning of my freedom,”* said Mark, a 26-year-old software developer.

Participants framed their atheism as a rational and deliberate decision rather than a reactive or emotional one. Their narratives resonate with Bullivant's (2008) description of “cognitive atheism,” where disbelief is rooted in philosophical skepticism, critical thinking, and empirical doubt rather than rebellion.

*“It was like peeling layers of an onion. Once I questioned one thing, the rest unraveled. I needed proof, and there was none. So I let go,”* shared Alex, 31.

This process mirrors the idea of deconversion as transformation, where former believers undergo a cognitive shift that leads to a complete reorganization of their worldview (Streib et al., 2009). For these Filipino atheists, embracing atheism was not a momentary decision but a slow intellectual emancipation.

#### **2. Atheism as a Process of Inner Conflict and Understanding**

Despite the liberation associated with atheism, most participants recounted deep personal struggles in arriving at their current belief system. For some, this entailed fear of divine punishment, guilt from abandoning faith, or conflict with religious upbringing.

*“I remember crying the night I said out loud, ‘I don’t believe in God anymore.’ It felt like betrayal. I thought I was going to hell,”* recalled Nina, 24.

These experiences reflect the internal tension often experienced by deconverts, especially in societies with strong religious norms. The emotional conflict is consistent with the work of Fazzino (2014), who noted that individuals transitioning out of religious belief often undergo a painful period of identity destabilization before re-establishing a coherent self.

Yet, after this internal dissonance, participants described a sense of clarity and psychological relief:

*“After years of pretending, it felt good to be honest with myself. I realized I didn’t have to live in fear anymore,”* said Luis, 34.

This transition from inner turmoil to self-acceptance supports the phenomenological insight that existential meaning is not fixed but constructed and reconstructed through personal reflection and choice (van Manen, 1990).

### **3. Atheism as an Expression of Moral Independence**

Several participants emphasized that morality and ethics were not tied to religion. Rather, their atheism was accompanied by a firm sense of personal responsibility and humanistic values.

*“People ask me, ‘If you don’t believe in God, what stops you from doing bad things?’ My answer is: compassion. You don’t need religion to know right from wrong,”* said Erika, 28.

This perspective aligns with secular moral philosophy, which asserts that ethical behavior can be grounded in reason, empathy, and social contracts rather than divine command (Flanagan, 2007; Blackford, 2012). The idea that morality is independent of theism counters the often-assumed association between religious belief and moral conduct in Philippine society.

Interestingly, participants also challenged the moral inconsistencies they saw within organized religion, such as hypocrisy, judgmental attitudes, or clerical abuses.

*“I was told that being gay is a sin, but then I see priests abusing children. That’s when I stopped believing that religion has a monopoly on morality,”* stated Ben, 30.

For many, atheism became a stance not only against belief in gods but also against structures of moral authority that they perceived as arbitrary or oppressive. This moral positioning echoes Phil Zuckerman’s (2014) work on secular morality, which notes that atheists often develop strong ethical identities based on fairness, justice, and human dignity.

### **4. Atheism and the Burden of Silence**

One of the most poignant themes was the sense of concealment and silence that many Filipino atheists carry. Despite their clarity of belief, most participants described the difficulty of “coming out” as atheists to family, friends, or colleagues.

*“I’ve never told my parents. They’re deeply Catholic. I just nod during prayers and pretend. It’s exhausting,”* confessed Nina.

This phenomenon resembles what Smith (2011) calls the “closeted nonbeliever”, where individuals keep their lack of belief hidden due to anticipated rejection, conflict, or stigma. In the Philippine context,

where over 80% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic (PSA, 2020), religious identity is deeply embedded in family life and cultural rituals.

Participants who disclosed their atheism described experiences ranging from marginalization to outright rejection:

*“When I told my friends, one of them said I needed to see a psychiatrist. They thought something was wrong with me,”* said Erika.

Silence, then, becomes both a coping strategy and a form of protective dissimulation—a way to maintain social harmony while preserving personal authenticity. This theme reveals the emotional and relational labor involved in maintaining atheist identity in a religious milieu.

## 5. Atheism as Social Tension and Subtle Defiance

Finally, participants framed their atheism as a form of resistance—not always confrontational, but quietly nonconforming. In a society where religiosity is the norm, atheism became a personal act of noncompliance and critical distance.

*“I don’t preach atheism, but just being myself is already a statement. I don’t follow the rituals. I don’t bow my head. I just stand there,”* said Luis.

For others, their silence and participation in religious rituals were seen as a form of social camouflage, not complicity. They chose which battles to fight and which to let pass.

*“I go to mass on holidays just to avoid drama. But in my mind, I’m thinking about science, not salvation,”* Mark quipped.

This subtle resistance illustrates what Lee (2015) describes as “everyday atheism”—the lived, often quiet practices of unbelief that resist dominant narratives without open confrontation. Filipino atheists in this study navigated a liminal space between belief and unbelief, visibility and invisibility, accommodation and defiance.

Some participants also reflected on their role in broader conversations about faith and freedom:

*“I hope people like me just existing will make others question things. That’s enough for me,”* said Ben.

This signals a growing consciousness of atheism not merely as a private belief but as part of an emerging secular presence that subtly reshapes cultural norms.

## Synthesis of Themes

The lived experience of atheism in the Philippines, as revealed in this study, is not reducible to disbelief in deities alone. Rather, it is a complex identity shaped by cognitive questioning, emotional transition, ethical reasoning, social constraint, and subtle resistance. Atheism is experienced not merely as an ontological position, but as an existential stance within a religiously saturated environment.

The findings challenge simplistic definitions of atheism as mere negation. While dictionary definitions often define atheism as "the lack of belief in gods" (Oxford, 2023), the experiences of these participants suggest a multidimensional reality—Involving liberation, loss, solitude, courage, and agency.

This resonates with Cimino and Smith's (2007) assertion that atheism is "a constructed identity"—actively negotiated and lived in everyday contexts. It also supports the phenomenological claim that meaning is not universal but situated—emerging through embodied experience and lifeworld encounters.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study set out to explore a central phenomenological question: *What is the meaning of atheism based on the lived experiences of Filipino atheists?* By employing Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method and engaging in in-depth interviews with seven Filipino atheists, this research illuminated the multifaceted and deeply personal nature of atheism in the Philippine context. The findings demonstrate that atheism among Filipinos is not merely the absence of belief in deities, but a richly textured existential stance shaped by cognitive reflection, emotional turmoil, social navigation, and ethical self-formation.

Five major thematic meanings emerged: (1) Atheism as Intellectual Liberation, (2) Atheism as a Journey of Inner Struggle and Clarity, (3) Atheism as Ethical Autonomy, (4) Atheism and the Weight of Silence, and (5) Atheism as Social Dissonance and Quiet Resistance. These themes reveal that atheism is experienced as both emancipatory and burdensome—offering freedom from doctrinal constraints while simultaneously exposing individuals to misunderstanding, alienation, and the pressure to conform.

Atheism, in the Filipino context, appears to be a process of meaning-making that involves breaking away from religious norms while reconstructing new forms of identity, morality, and belonging. Participants described their atheism as a form of intellectual honesty, a result of disillusionment with religious teachings, and a path toward ethical autonomy grounded in humanistic values. At the same time, their stories were tinged with caution, concealment, and calculated silence, often as a means of maintaining familial and social harmony.

These lived experiences align with existing literature that conceptualizes atheism not only as a belief position but as a social and existential condition (Zuckerman, 2014; Lee, 2015). In deeply religious societies like the Philippines, atheism functions both as an inner conviction and a socially managed identity, often practiced with discretion to avoid marginalization. The themes uncovered in this study also reinforce the idea that atheism can carry significant emotional labor, requiring individuals to navigate personal authenticity while managing social relationships.

Furthermore, the findings complicate the traditional dichotomy between religious and secular, showing that atheism is not a total detachment from religious culture but an ongoing engagement with it—sometimes through opposition, sometimes through negotiation, and often through reluctant participation in religious practices. Participants frequently inhabited a liminal space between belief and unbelief, public performance and private conviction, silence and subtle resistance.

Overall, this phenomenological study affirms that atheism in the Philippines is not a singular narrative, but a constellation of experiences that defy easy categorization. The lived realities of Filipino atheists are shaped by broader socio-cultural structures, particularly the pervasive influence of Catholicism and its role in shaping moral expectations, family dynamics, and public rituals. Against this backdrop, atheism emerges as a quietly radical way of being, rooted in introspection, autonomy, and resilience.

Based on the insights gained from this research, the following recommendations are proposed for scholars, educators, counsellors, and broader society:

1. Expand Qualitative Research on Non-religion in the Philippines. The study of non-religiosity, atheism, and secular identity in the Philippines remains underdeveloped. There is a need for more qualitative and ethnographic research that captures the diverse experiences of Filipinos who exist outside dominant religious frameworks. Future studies could examine intersections with gender, class, regional identity, or political affiliation to further nuance our understanding of Filipino secularities.
2. Develop Educational Materials that Include Non-religious Perspectives. Philippine education often privileges religious narratives, particularly those aligned with Christian doctrine. Incorporating non-religious worldviews in ethics, philosophy, and values education can foster critical thinking, inclusivity, and respect for pluralism. Curricula should reflect the reality that some Filipinos are atheists, agnostics, or spiritual independents, and that these identities are equally valid.
3. Encourage Safe Spaces for Identity Disclosure and Dialogue. Many participants in this study remain closeted due to fear of judgment, ridicule, or familial conflict. Institutions such as schools, workplaces, and community organizations should cultivate safe and respectful spaces where individuals can express their beliefs—or lack thereof—without fear of discrimination. This involves promoting freedom of belief and conscience as essential human rights.
4. Train Mental Health Professionals in Religious and Non-religious Identity Dynamics. Psychologists, counselors, and social workers should be sensitized to the unique struggles of individuals navigating deconversion, religious trauma, or existential questioning. Atheist clients may experience guilt, anxiety, or identity confusion, especially in cultures that equate religiosity with morality or normalcy. Training modules on religious and spiritual diversity should include atheism as a legitimate worldview.
5. Engage Religious Institutions in Conversations on Pluralism. While some religious leaders may view atheism as a threat, others may be open to interbelief dialogue. Facilitating conversations between atheists and the religious can promote mutual understanding, reduce prejudice, and foster a culture of coexistence. Religious institutions have a role to play in affirming that morality, compassion, and community are not exclusive to believers.
6. Highlight Secular Moral Frameworks in Public Discourse. The notion that morality must be grounded in religion continues to shape public debates in the Philippines, especially on issues like reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, and education. This study underscores that atheists also possess strong moral commitments, often grounded in humanistic ethics. Public discourse would benefit from recognizing the legitimacy of secular moral reasoning.
7. Promote Visibility Through Media and the Arts. Filipino atheists remain largely invisible in mainstream media. Encouraging documentaries, literature, theater, or digital content that represent non-religious perspectives can challenge stereotypes and amplify marginalized voices. These representations can provide validation for those silently struggling and encourage broader societal empathy.

This study affirms the richness of phenomenological inquiry in illuminating the inner lives of marginalized identities. By listening deeply to the experiences of Filipino atheists, we gain not only a clearer understanding of atheism, but also a broader appreciation for the complexity of human belief, the courage required for existential honesty, and the quiet strength of those who choose to walk a different path. As the Philippine society continues to modernize and diversify, it is crucial to ensure that all worldviews—religious and non-religious—are given space, voice, and respect.

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