



The inaugural conference of the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN):

Friday 11 December 2009 | Wolfson College, Oxford

Non-religion and Secularity: New Empirical Perspectives

Keynote titles

Is it risky to be an unbeliever? Gender, risk and religiosity: A critique

Colin Campbell (University of York)

On the receiving end: Discrimination toward the non-religious in the U.S.

Ryan Cragun (University of Tampa)

Who are the non-religious in Britain and where do they come from?

David Voas (University of Manchester)

Short paper abstracts

Supernatural agency detection in random visual noise

Kirsten Barnes, University of Cambridge (Psychology)

Within the cognitive science of religion it has been suggested that belief in supernatural agents is ubiquitous because of its capacity to fit the human cognitive system. Specifically, Barrett (2004) has suggested that a hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD), alongside other cognitive tools such as Theory of Mind, mediates this belief. Due to the hypersensitivity of the agency detection device, it is prone to find agents in the environment, even when none are present. Why some individuals do not believe in supernatural agency despite presumably still having a HADD has, however, previously gone untested. The task set was to detect (1) when the stimulus was a degraded image, and (2) what the image was (free response). Data from these tasks provide information on controlled and automatic dispositional factors at work during agency detection. Preliminary results suggest that there is a significant difference in the types of agency and non-agency detected within the random stimuli. This was across the participant groups, however, and there was no significant difference between the two belief-groups regarding the frequency with which agency was detected. Significant differences between the two participant groups were found, however, when analysing levels of psychoticism, boundaries and empathy, highlighting potential confounding variables that may interfere with the study of agency detection in religious and non-religious participants.

'Believing in belonging': Researching belief without asking religious questions

Abby Day, University of Sussex (Anthropology)

A unique research method was designed to answer the question: "What do people believe in nowadays and how do we find out?" This approach was the first in the sociology of

religion to research belief by asking non-religious questions of apparently non-religious people. My qualitative method, detailed here, produced data that led me to conclude that statements of religious affiliation are often expressions of 'believing in belonging', where people associate with religion to reinforce ethnic, familial, or other social identities.

Belief in science and in the “Da Vinci Code”: Measuring naturalistic beliefs and its cognitive correlates

Miguel Farias, University of Oxford (Psychology)

This paper describes the development of a scale of naturalistic beliefs by the author of the paper, in collaboration with philosophers Guy Kahane and Nick Shackel, and the historian of science John Hedley Brooke. Preliminary validation of the scale was carried out with a sample of religious and atheist students (N = 130), that also filled in a number of other measures, including belief in ideas put forward in the best-selling “Da Vinci Code” novel, knowledge of the Bible, and standardised cognitive and personality scales. I will present and discuss the newly developed scale on naturalistic beliefs as a way of tapping into contemporary atheists’ ideas and attitudes, particularly related to the value attributed to science in understanding the world. I will also discuss some apparently contradictory evidence suggesting that atheists have higher scores both on “need for cognition” and “Da Vinci Code beliefs” than religious people.

Dimensions and types of non-religiosity: Scale development in progress

Nicholas Gibson (presenting), University of Cambridge (Psychology)

Claire White, University of Oxford (Anthropology)

Kirsten Barnes, University of Cambridge (Psychology)

We are unaware of any scale or instrument that can be used to distinguish among types of non-religious individuals. Although various labels exist to describe non-religious and secular positions (such as atheist or agnostic), these are often misunderstood or misapplied by laypersons. Even where they are correctly used it is clear that—for example—atheists differ in their emotional responses to religion, their intellectual interest in religion, and their behavioural repertoire with regard to religious individuals and institutions. Rather than attempting to generate a typology from philosophical grounds we see merit in allowing a typology to emerge empirically, thus tapping non-religiosity as it is lived. This paper will present data from a 24-item scale intended to capture dimensions of non-religiosity within a sample of 131 British adult subjects self-describing as atheists or agnostics. Four potential dimensions of non-religiosity emerging from factor analysis will be examined together with an exploration of potential types of non-religiosity that emerge from cluster analysis of subjects.

Christo-secular ambivalence in British security policy, 2001-2009

Stacey Gutkowski, University of Cambridge (International Relations)

Although secularism has recently become a site of analysis for international politics, it has as yet received little theoretical elaboration in the area of security studies. A new research programme is needed to further this end, one that is not merely a secondary addendum to the existing one on religion and security. This paper suggests some directions for that research agenda, that turns to examine how trajectories of secularisation and non-religion

in Britain impacted on security policy towards radical Islam between 2001-2009. It seems that a kind of Christo-secular ambivalence has afflicted British security policy, both in the case of threat perception and the management of risk. The paper offers demonstrative examples from the Iraq War and counter-terrorism policy.

Theoretical and methodological resources for breaking open the secular and exploring the boundary between religion and non-religion

Kim Knott, University of Leeds (Sociology)

The secular condition, secularism and the associated non-religious ideological categories of agnosticism and atheism have particular significance in contemporary Europe. Given that these concepts and their associated fields of belief, practice and organization represent a counter-field of interest for scholars of religion, as well as an increasingly important arena in the politics of religion, we ignore them at our peril. I shall consider the conceptual and categorical relationship between the religious and the secular, the boundary which separates them, and the resources that are available in the study of religion for examining this relationship. In particular, I shall refer to three approaches: historical/conceptual, spatial/discursive, and cognitive/cultural. These are all tools for understanding more about how we see, imagine, define, classify and represent religion and its other (whether we call that non-religion or the secular), tools that, once employed, might challenge the categories we use and the anxieties they induce. Furthermore, I will examine what happens around the boundary between the religious and the secular and make a case for a reconstitution of the object of the discipline of religious studies to include non-religion as well as religion.

A secular mind

Jonathan Lanman, University of Oxford (Anthropology)

Cognitive anthropologists argue that we can better answer enduring anthropological questions by utilizing the growing insights of the cognitive and evolutionary sciences. This belief is not wholly unjustified, as cognitive anthropologists have had some success in addressing the long-standing question of why religious beliefs and practices are so widespread in human populations, mostly in reference to universal cognitive biases. This success, however, raises another enduring anthropological question, that of how to best account for “secularization.” If religious beliefs are so well supported by universal cognitive biases, whence secularization and atheism? In this presentation, I will argue that a cognitive approach can help answer one important element of the secularization debate, the question of whether or not particular socio-economic environments cause decreased levels of religious belief and commitment. I will present both qualitative and quantitative data from my fieldwork and survey research among non-theists in Western countries suggesting that particular socio-economic environments do indeed lower levels of religious belief and that this effect occurs through the impact of these environments on our cognitive mechanisms devoted to reasoning about social groups and about what representations to accept from others.

Members of Atheist/Freethought/Secularist organizations in Germany and the United States

Bjoern Mastiaux, Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf, Germany (Sociology)

I would like to contribute a paper documenting my current research on organized atheism in Germany and the United States. With my study, I set out to investigate the motives, experiences, and biographies of those who have become more or less active members of primarily politically oriented (rather than philosophical, academic, or congregational) atheist / freethought / secularist organizations. While focusing only on members of this particular type of organization, my aim has been to vary the members' characteristics with regard to their age, gender, duration of membership, degree of activism, and socio-religious background as much as possible. With respect to the latter aspect, I have conducted interviews with members of German *IBKA (International League of Non-Religious and Atheists)* and *BfG (Bavarian Freethought Association)* in generally atheistic Berlin, religiously mixed North Rhine Westphalia, and traditionally Catholic Bavaria, as well as with members of local chapters and affiliates of the U.S. organizations *American Atheists* and *Atheist Alliance International* in California, Minnesota, and Georgia. All in all, from the summer of 2007 until the summer of 2009, I have conducted more than sixty interviews. At Oxford, I would like to briefly present the sampling method employed (both with respect to sampling organizations as well as sampling interviewees), the interviewing technique used, as well as some preliminary findings on who the members of this type of organizations are.

Title TBC

John Nash, Oxford Brookes University (History)

The good atheistic Samaritan: Intrinsic, extrinsic and quest atheism and its relationship with prosocial behaviour

Sven Oelsner, University of Jena, Germany (Psychology)

Contemporary psychological research concerning the relationship between religiousness and prosocial behaviour shows an ambiguous picture. Some researchers found a correlation between religiousness and helping behaviour (Bernt, 1989; Hansen, Vandenberg, & Patterson, 1995; Sappington & Baker, 1995) where others did not (Darley & Batson, 1973; Smith, Wheeler, & Diener, 1975; Sundeen & Raskoff, 1995).

In studies documenting positive effects religiousness was frequently investigated with qualitative measures such as the *intrinsic*, *extrinsic* and *quest* religiosity scales proposed by Batson (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991). These scales are based on underlying constructs covering social activities, philosophical thinking, ritualistic behaviour and worldview scepticism practiced by atheists and theists alike. However, terms specifically associated with Christianity (e.g. church, prayer, bible) increase the item difficulty for atheists and generate variance in the theistic sample only. The study to be presented investigated the question whether religiosity scales measure theistic/ supernatural beliefs or rather social, cultural and philosophical activities. The results indicate that the supposed relationship between religiousness and prosocial behaviour is not based on theistic religiosity (i.e. belief in the existence of supernatural beings) but rather on sociocultural attitudes shared by theists and atheists.

A British secular-religious cleavage?

Stratos Patrikios, University of Strathclyde (Political Science)

The growing visibility of secular commentators and organisations in Britain is often regarded as evidence of a cultural conflict between 'the Secular' and 'the Religious'. Two key assumptions underlie this popular account: that there is growing disagreement between the two groups, and that each group is a homogenous actor that can be mobilised against the other. But are these assumptions supported in reality? For instance, can we meaningfully speak of a 'secular' camp on cultural issues? The paper answers these questions by examining whether the controversy we see in the media reflects a divide at the mass level. The analysis uses survey data to model distributional measures of public opinion over time (1983-2007). Two types of social attitudes are examined: positions on pre-marital sex and homosexual relations. Results identify a widening gap between the non religious and the religious (esp. Anglicans) regarding attitudes towards homosexual relations. This widening gap is a function of the differential rate of liberalisation that has affected both groups. However, if the gap is to be consequential for social and political developments, each competing group should be growing increasingly homogenous. Findings suggest that there is no such trend in the internal coherence of the two groups.

Atheism in post-socialist conditions: The examples of Slovenia and Croatia

Marjan Smrke, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (Sociology)

While the majority of countries in Western Europe have become more secular in recent times, most post-socialist countries have been undergoing a process of desecularization. The disintegration of the socialist regime in Yugoslavia, which functioned as a sort of secular civil religion, took place in a period of escalating intranational tensions, conflicts, and ethno-religious mythologies. Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia Herzegovina, the nations most involved in the military conflicts from 1991 to 1995, have undergone a marked desecularization on the societal, organizational, and individual levels. From some perspectives, it might appear that Slovenia is an exception to this trend, as its transition to independence did not trigger a desecularization factor or what Steve Bruce termed "cultural defence". But nevertheless we can speak in all of these cases of the essentially altered social position of atheism. If it was privileged before, it is now affected by strengthened and emboldened church ideologies. We observe in both Slovenia and Croatia the re-emergence of certain traditional attitudes toward atheism, which Colin Cambell, in his *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, called Victorian prejudices (Cambell, 1974). For this reason, I have undertaken in recent years the empirical testing of the following theses that have been publically promulgated by leading representatives of the Roman Catholic Church: 1. that atheists are unhappy; 2. that atheists are unreflective about life; 3. that atheists are immoral, and; 4. that atheists do not feel solidarity with social minorities. On the basis of data collected by ISSP, EVS, and WVS, it is possible to claim that these statements made by the Church about educated Slovenians and Croatians are unsubstantiated. Especially in Slovenia, both "convicted atheists" and "natural atheists" show (according to their own statements) above-average happiness, above-average reflection on life, above-average moral rigour and are less distanced from various social minorities. The reasons for such findings will be pursued in a comparative analysis of the ethos and value habitus of Catholicism on the one hand, and in the secular ideologies that have been present in Slovenia and Croatia on the other. The dialectic relationship between these two phenomena justifies (once again) the conclusion that the sociology of religion must incorporate the sociology of non-religiosity/irreligion.

The challenge of popular religion to atheism: a socio-cognitive approach

Steven Sutcliffe, University of Edinburgh (Religious Studies)

According to a recent British opinion poll, 64% (n=1000) believe that 'some people have powers that cannot be explained by science', 49% believe in ghosts, and 41% believe in communication with the dead. Earlier Gorer (1955), in a survey conducted in an English newspaper, found equally robust levels of belief in ghosts, reincarnation and horoscopes. The 'new age' or 'holistic' milieu is similarly fecund (Sutcliffe 2003, Heelas and Woodhead 2005). I argue that such qualitative evidence in the UK (for example) suggests that – despite apparent triumphs of secular modernity - religious belief and practice is alive and well in its popular, 'theologically incorrect' (Barrett 1999/Slone 2004) expressions. These expressions support more complex, synthetic and/or discursive forms of 'religion', making the articulation of 'religion' in ordinary, everyday life settings appear unremarkable and 'natural'. On this evidence, modernity and popular religion are not mutually exclusive, secularization has in-built limitations, and atheism – defined as predicating social identity on denial of god(s) - is likely to remain a pursuit of intellectual minorities. I argue that 'folk' narratives and models are a better guide to what 'religion' is like at the point of production than sophisticated and abstracted reflections produced by specially trained elites (whether religious or secular). They also point to the persistence and longevity of 'religion' insofar as cognitive representations generated below the level of conscious awareness instinctively reinforce socially constructed discourses. The elementary forms of 'religion' are thus co-produced by cognitive processes in human brains operating in synchronization with sociological forces of order and legitimation. Atheism is likely to find this popular double act hard to breach.

Methodological challenges in understanding different modes and locations of irreligiosity

Teemu Taira, University of Leeds (Religious Studies)

This paper demonstrates how to make use of existing survey data on religion when studying Atheism and irreligiosity. I shall suggest that it is useful to make a distinction between Atheism (as an identity tag) and general irreligiosity (for example indifference). This is especially so, because the current debate on New Atheism is dividing the irreligious: some identify themselves as atheists while others refuse to do so. Furthermore, it is helpful to study the phenomenon by not simply looking at beliefs but also identification, attitudes, participation, private practice and membership (including reflections on future membership). The importance of these distinctions lies in an attempt to construct a coherent picture of the varying modes and locations of Atheism and irreligiosity. It also may change the way the issue is dealt with more generally, because in public discourse these distinctions are often neglected. Although my research is focused on public discourse in Britain and Finland, in this example I will focus upon Finnish society. I shall suggest, however, that the methodological strategies can be applied to all societies where Western-style discourse on religion exists. Instead of simply attempting to explain the Finnish situation by referring to meaningful sociological variables such as education, gender, class, age and region, I shall combine the survey data – World Values Survey, Church Monitor and Gallup Ecclesiastica (1995–2005) – with systematically collected newspaper material to offer an interpretation of the Finnish situation. Two observations will be made: firstly, Finnish people are belonging (to religious organisations because of others) but not practising (themselves); secondly, they

are rather irreligious (indifferent, non-religious) but not self-identifying Atheists. The connection between these two observations will be discussed.

The 'return of religion' and the return of the criticism of religion: The 'New Atheism' in recent German and American culture

Thomas Zenk, Free University Berlin, Germany (Religious Studies)

Criticism of religion can be found throughout the ages, not only in Europe but in other parts of the world as well. It appears that history of religions itself can be interpreted as continued criticisms of one religion against another (e.g. Christianity as criticism of Judaism and Mediterranean pagan polytheism, Buddhism as criticism of Hinduism and so on) or within one religion (phenomena such as reform movements, fundamentalism etc.). Both, in intra-religious as well as inter-religious criticisms the frame of religion is not transcended. An explicit non-religious criticism of religion, however, is a relatively new phenomenon in the history. It can be traced back to the European Age of Enlightenment. Nowadays, atheistic or even anti-religious voices have returned and the books by the so-called "New atheists" (Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, Dennett) are all bestsellers and were widely and vividly discussed. Both, the theses and arguments of the "New atheists" as well as their public reception are examined in the course of a research project at the Free University of Berlin. Our project aims to analyze these two aspects in a historical comparison of the situation in Europe and the United States. By means of a discourse analysis, we hope to gain insights about the relations between what is called "the return of religion" (Riesebrodt) and the return of the criticism of religion. At the 2009 NSRN our first findings will be presented.