NSRN Events Report

NSRN ANNUAL LECTURE 2011: ATHEISM EXPLAINED, BY JONATHAN LANMAN

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EVENT DETAILS

NSRN Annual Lecture 2011:

"Atheism Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Atheistic Thought"

By Jonathan Lanman (Keble College, University of Oxford)

5 April 2011
St Mary's University College, Twickenham
Organised by NSRN co-directors, Stephen Bullivant (St Mary's University College) and Lois Lee (University of Cambridge)

REPORT

The First Annual Lecture of the NRSN marked a landmark in the history of the organisation; taking place, somewhat ironically, where the Pope had only recently delivered his own speech. Delivering the first of the NSRN annual lectures was Jonathan Lanman, who gave a concise and well-argued lecture, 'Atheism Explained'. Despite his caveat that the title was a slightly misleading riff off Pascal Boyer's book *Religion explained*, the lecture provided a persuasive, quantitative account of contemporary 'non-theism' (meaning a lack of belief in supernatural beings) and its more vocal counterpart,'strong theism' (meaning a moral opposition to religious beliefs and values). In his own work, he "fractionates" atheism,

Introductory Remarks

Lanman's lecture closely follows the ideas summarised in his article, 'Religion is Irrational, but so is Atheism', written for the *New Scientist* this year (2011). In both, Lanman takes an article written by Bullivant and Lee, also for the *New* Scientist, (2010) as a jumping off point. In their critique of the 'Enlightenment assumption' that non-religion is rational and acultural and their disproving of the correlation between higher levels of education and atheism, Bullivant and Lee called attention to a major gap in our understanding of the true causes of religion and, in turn, non-religion. Lanman reminded us of this by making a comparison between religiosity in the US and in Scandinavia: these areas have similarly high levels of education but differential levels of religiosity, demonstrating clearly that a simple relationship between 'rationality' and atheism is questionable.

Lanman argues that atheism – like religion in Boyer's account – is not an evolutionary by-product. Instead, its distribution can be explained by 'human-nature' (aspects of our evolved psychological make-up) in interaction with the socio-cultural contexts in which we live. Lanman guides us through this hypothesis. There is, he said, a large body of evidence against the idea that humans come to our understandings solely through a process of rational reflection. Instead, we see patterns in random occurrences; we often fall prey to our own confirmation bias, tending to look for evidence to confirm our views and rarely looking for evidence to disprove it. Rather, 'rationality' is usually used to describe a normative vision of how we *should* think a view prevalent in contemporary Atheist and Humanist discourse. Yet rationalism fails as a general explanation for nonreligious normative stances, instead we need to look to socio-cultural. Lanman's ultimate view is that neither belief or non-belief are natural; we need to start from a view that our behaviour is mostly unconscious and our brains are wired to numerous specialisms which can be affected without damaging the overall intelligence or other specialist functions.

The Puzzle

Lanman's work contributes to a puzzle threatening to undermined current achievements of cognitive approaches to religion. If the cultural epidemiological approach of Cognitive Science of Religion [CSR] leads to the conclusion that we possess a psychological disposition to thinking religion is "catchy" and that supernatural beliefs are so widespread as to seems almost universal, why are there such a large number of people who do not believe in the existence of supernatural beings? The question of how to account for clear variations between numbers of non-theism between countries is likewise an open one. Citing a wealth anthropological findings of world views which deify harsh and spiteful gods and New age religious practice in more affluent societies, Lanman quickly disregards "comfort" theory of religion (Inglehart and Norris; Gill and Lundsgaarde), an observed correlation between existential security and theism is not the same as a correlation between comfort and theism. Lanman posits instead a theory of 'threat and action', in which threats lead to religious actions, or embodiment of religion and in turn embodied actions work on cognition, making religiosity more credible. Lanman expands on findings in the fields of psychology and anthropology, theorising that 'threat' increases in-group commitment, be these religious or non-religious groups, then leading to increased practices, such as prayer. Action helps maintain the in-group commitment, through 'walking the walk' and not just 'talking the talk' and establishes the practice. Conversely, it can be argued, where existential threats and normative threats (such as ethnic and religious diversity) decline religious commitment also recedes.

Action = CREDs

Lanman's major contribution concerns the idea of Credibility Enhancing Displays [CREDs] as a method for understanding religion and nonreligion. Using the example of pre-language learning, arguing that humans associate credibility with action since action does not have the deceptive potential of language (Bloch, 2008). Thus we engage in CREDs where repeated action reinforces, increasing our likelihood of repeating said practice. Lanman compared the examples of how we come to view the existence of germs versus the 'tooth fairy', both phenomena which we do verify ourselves: we sustain a belief in the existence of the former, he says, because, as children, we repeatedly see germs referred to in *action*, e.g. hand washing. We observe no such credibility enhancing displays that show that the tooth fairy might actually exist: the tooth fairy does not appear to be shaping behaviours at all.

The implication of this is that frequency and level of exposure to religious CREDs proportionally impact on the level of religiosity and commitment generationally. A small but growing body of evidence supports this; sociologist, Roger Dudley (1999), has completed a longitudinal study of *Seventh Day Adventist*, finding that young members are more likely to become apostates in adulthood if their parents did not practice their beliefs during childhood and adolescence (also see Hunsburger and Altemeyer, 997 and 2006). Lanman cites his own reasearh with atheists and Christian theists, in which a short survey found a stark difference between the two groups in terms of exposure to relevant CREDs: theists had experienced significantly higher exposure.

"I don't hide from facts!": Strong Atheism vs. Non-theism

Lanman's distinction between 'strong atheism' and 'non-theism' was compelling. 'Strong atheism' is distinct from non-theism, because it includes a moral judgement of how the world should be. 'Strong atheism' makes two normative judgements: firstly, religion is seen as oppressive (Dawkins 2006) and secondly, religious followers are judged as having weak characters. Non-theism, on the other hand, is virtuous, based on cognitive understanding and empirical knowledge; the proper way of establishing one's beliefs. Lanman historically situated this notion of 'virtuous' rationalism; drawing on the development from stoicism to the 'muscular' Christianity of the Victorian Era, which blended into agnosticism and atheism in the work of Sir Leslie Stephen. Through this, the view emerges that you should not give into the emotionality of religion and to be religious becomes a sign of weakness. As an example, 'Strong atheism' was contrasted with Scandinavian 'non-theism', which is relatively benign (Zuckerman 2008), where people even reject the label 'atheism' because of the connotations of 'anti-religion or strong polemics.

Lanman makes another kind of comparative analysis: atheism, he notices, can not only be compared across time, but also across space. Considering the distribution of atheism across the world, he notices that strong atheist cultures – manifest in sentiment, literature and organisational participation – seem to increase when religion (appears to be) gaining social or political strength, i.e. when religion is threatening a normative, secular view. This pattern is only noted where people can express atheist sensibilities. This pattern of high atheist membership can also be seen historically, in Britain, during the governmental imposition of blasphemy laws (Campbell 1972), with a decline in membership after these laws were relaxed. So, strong atheism is seen to be not so much an attack upon someone else's ideology as it is a defence of one: modern secularism. Signs of 'strong atheism' in contemporary culture can be explained by threats caused by religion, particularly after 9/11, leading to interest in authors such as Richard Dawkins. Even Scandinavia is not immune to this stimulus: interest in organised atheism increased around the time of the religious 'intervention' into the secular norm in response to the 'Danish Cartoon Affair'. Whilst we are used to thinking of religions in terms of identity, this work suggestions that the same sort of social attachments are exhibited by atheists. Atheism too, can be an identity, a vision or normative framework of how the world should be and can therefore be expressed in 'us/them' language.

In summary then, we have seen a shift in our moral values and a shift in our identities. As such, atheists can experience a threat to their normative position. It is from this that authoritarian versions of non-theism – Lanman's 'strong atheism' – emerge. Lanman argues that where existential and normative threats are low, so will strong atheism, such as Scandinavia. Where existential threats are low, but normative threats remain high, such as in the US and to a lesser extent the UK, strong atheism is high or increasing. The internet however, is breaking down these national distributions. Where the normative threats begin to transcend national boundaries, through selected stories shared online, a possibly inflated and non-localised picture of religious group strength is created, upping secular in-group commitments. The conclusion seems to be, we cannot attend only to cognitive explanations of religion and, to the extent that cognitivists

have taken note, of atheism. Rather, atheism, like religion, are complicated moral systems, made yet more complex by the socio-cultural systems in which they are embedded.

Closing remarks

Despite the purposefully misleading title, Jonathan Lanman's lecture "Atheism Explained" did manage to outline a persuasive account of contemporary non-religion. It proved apposite as an inaugural lecture for the NSRN as a research organisation, however, in demonstrating how many open questions we still have in this field. Some of these were implicit. Lanman's pragmatic terminology, for example, was not convincing. Despite his comments that the classificatory system is not as important as the empirical phenomenon at stake, this issue deserves further consideration. In particular, his use of the term 'theism' rather than 'religion' as a generalising concept is problematic, particularly given that his discussion extended beyond the issue of God-belief. A second issue was the reliance on quantitative analysis, something which certainly leaves space for qualitative approaches which might, work with the complexities of generational atheist/nonreligious value transmission. I would argue that more research is needed to flesh out particular causal claims concerning nonreligious practice. If religious practice is generational and informed by CREDs, do such a thing as nonreligious CREDs exist or is simply the absence of action which is important? And what of those who convert or de-convert? Does a strong non-theist parent demonstrate similar CRED behaviour and how does this impact the level of non-theism of their offspring? Lanman's work, however, enables us to ask such questions and, as such, advances our understanding significantly. Lanman is to be commended, too, on making his findings relevant and comprehensive for researchers of religion and nonreligion regardless of their methodological preferences.

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