NSRN Events Report

NSRN QUALITATIVE METHODS WORKSHOP
By Christopher R. Cotter, University of Edinburgh

EVENT DETAILS

NSRN Qualitative Methods Workshop
Methods for Nonreligion and Secularity Studies Series
Tuesday 14 December 2010
PPSIS, University of Cambridge
Co-convened by Lois Lee and Stacey Gutkowski, NSRN co-directors

PARTICIPANTS

Katie Aston Goldsmiths, University of London | **Steph Berns** Birbeck College, University of London | **Suzanne Brink** University of Cambridge | **Dr Rebecca Catto and Dr Janet Eccles** Lancaster University | **Chris Cotter** University of Edinburgh | **Dr Ryan Cragun** Tampa University, Florida | **Dr Abby Day** Sussex University | **Dr Matthew Engelke** London School of Economics | **Katharina Goetze** University of Oxford | **Dr Stacey Gutkowski** University of Sussex and NSRN | **Lois Lee** University of Cambridge and NSRN | **Björn Mastiaux** Heinrich-Heine Universität | **Patrick McKearney** University of Cambridge | **Dr Sarah-Jane Page** University of Nottingham | **Dr Johannes Quack** University of Heidelberg | **Lydia Reid** University of Manchester | **Leo Schlöndorff** University of Vienna | **Matt Sheard** Birbeck College, University of London | **Ruth Sheldon** Birbeck College, University of London

See below for abstracts of delegates research

REPORT

The call for papers for the first in the Methods for Nonreligion and Secularity Studies Series, organised by the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), introduced the intentions of the day with a recent summary of the field:

> It can reasonably be said that what is most glaringly absent from current studies of those who are not traditionally religious is a qualitative understanding of the ways in which different types of "nones" construct their moral frameworks and meaning systems. … Creativity and determination [...are] needed in order to study non-traditionally religious people in a more qualitative manner. (O'Brian Baker and Smith 2009, 730)

To this end, the workshop, held at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Politics, Psychology, Sociology and International Studies, brought together researchers from a wide variety of disciplines – Sociology, Psychology, Religious Studies, Theology, Middle Eastern Studies, History, Anthropology, International Relations and Literary Studies – who have all engaged, or are engaging, in projects related to the qualitative study of nonreligion, secularity and related areas (NS hereafter). The intention was to provide an informal environment where researchers could present projects past, present and future, and participate in a knowledge exchange with colleagues. Following brief introductions, it was clear that we were in for an exciting and stimulating (if exhausting) day. Projects focused on such varied topics as expressions of nonreligion in diverse national contexts; institutional/organised and diffuse/grassroots expressions of nonreligion; the nonreligion of elites, authority figures, students, labourers, stand-up comedians, the military and others; and the public negotiation of nonreligion in a variety of contexts – museums, political movements, apocalyptic literature, social surveys and Christmas celebrations, to name but a few.

Some general problems

Despite this clear diversity of approaches, all participants were united by their enthusiasm for the growing area of nonreligion and secularity studies – a unity which also found expression in the three core problems which such researchers, it emerged, are all facing. The first of these is the lack of an established tradition to provide a theoretical backbone for NS research projects. This is not to imply that the field has not moved on from the 'neglect' illustrated by Colin Campbell in the 70's (1971, 11). In fact, since Campbell's seminal work there has been a (sporadic) stream of publications in this area, which has seen an explosion in recent years (see the NSRN's [bibliography](#)). However, whilst this growing 'tradition' may provide some grounding for the general demarcation of NS, each researcher present at this workshop is taking this field into uncharted territory.

Secondly, whilst the traditionally 'religious' can be located by researchers via their various forms of participation and self-identification, this is not the case for the 'nonreligious' or 'secular'. One way in is by focusing interest on the few forms of organised nonreligion and secularity, although researchers mentioned difficulties with recruiting participants even via these organisations. The problem is much more acute and complicated, however, for those concerned with the majority of non-organisational nonreligious positions within the NS field. As Matt Sheard has asked when conducting historical research into British working-class atheism, how does one determine how important or relevant a nonreligious identity is to an individual if such details are absent or discarded from questionnaire, interview, biographical and other sources of data? If an individual nominally identifies with a religious label yet does not score remotely highly on scales of 'religiosity', how are they to be separated from the rest of the pack? And do we have a right to do so? Even when an established pool of nonreligious research participants has been established, problems still arise around gaining access to unbiased and unprovoked expressions of nonreligiosity, and motivating the nonreligious to participate in research focusing on something which they may not have given much thought to. We know the material is there ... but 'getting inside people's heads and hearts is not a straightforward exercise' (Fergusson 2009, 27) and this is arguably more true of NS research than it is of others.

The final major problem encountered across the board concerned issues of insider versus outsider discourses. The group discussed conflicts between academic categories and self-chosen labels, a problem exacerbated by the infancy of such academic work, which has yet had time to develop in dialectic with actual nonreligious stances.

There is also the sense that people may adopt different positions at different times, and understand nonreligious terms in vastly different ways to any tentative academic definitions. Some work is suggesting that terms such as 'Bright' and 'freethinker' are used much more readily within non-Anglophone contexts, with other terms such as 'atheist' may be under-utilised in some non-Western contexts. In Goetze's experience of the field, she has found that 'secularists' is a much more important term in the Egyptian context she has worked with. Whilst many of these definitional and terminological issues may disappear as the field expands, the more individualistic and non-organisational nature of this field tends to resist neat categorisation.

Some innovative methods

Several participants described their use of non-mainstream methodologies. For some, the innovation is in terms of the research object. Examples included Steph Berns' exploration of, as she put it, 'the significance of the museum as a site of embodied religious and secular engagements with religious objects'; Leo Schlöndorff's study of 'secularised apocalypses'; and Patrick McKearney's focus on British stand-up comedians and particularly on their constructions of religion.

Other innovations involved bringing more traditional methods to bare on a novel research object. Matt Sheard, for example, is conducting a historical study, making use of personal testimonies, oral histories and autobiographical data to delve into the lives of working class 'atheist apostates' from 1900-1980. Sheard is building up an intriguing collection of sources which are already yielding some fascinating results. Matthew Engelke's planned research involves extensive ethnographic fieldwork at the headquarters of the British Humanist Association (BHA) and includes training for the office of humanist celebrant. Matthew hopes that this unprecedented research will shed light on issues of 'ritual' and 'belief' amongst organised humanists, as well as 'how the dynamic between individuals and institutions plays out within a movement that is driven by traditions of free thinking'.

By contrast, Lydia Reid and Sarah-Jane Page's projects are cases in which new methods are being employed to understand the NS field. Between them, they are making use of photo-elicitation techniques, video diaries and video elicitation interviews. Through their projects, the significance of the visual in the relationship between religion and the secular will be explored, along with contributions to nonreligious and religious identity formation, and an examination of how the nonreligious experience the Christian festivals that many regularly participate in. Amongst other things, this will provide a window into the (non)religiosity of what Voas (2009) has termed the 'fuzzy middle', examining the relationship between religion and consumerism, particularly for those on the fringes of religious belief.

These innovative methods demonstrate that established methodologies can be applied in new and exciting ways to this under-researched field, and that cutting edge research techniques can be applied with repercussions which far surpass our own area of focus.

A portrait of the discussion

The discussion flowed through five distinct though overlapping themes.

1. Narrative and biography

Both the nonreligious and the religious often have difficulty articulating their standpoint, although this may be more pronounced for the nonreligious. A colourful illustration of this came from one of Ryan Cragun's interviewees who told him, 'I have too much shit going on in my life to deal with religion'. Gaining access to non-narrativised positions such as these is one of the most intriguing and problematic areas of this research, involving teasing out 'life histories' from informants, building upon the tradition of 'narrative interviews'. Matt Sheard's research indicates that, over the generations, those who were born 'nones' often have had very little to say about

their non-belief, whilst apostates generally attempt to construct their identity in anti-religious terms. In addition, those in the problematic 'none' category may simply not have the time or inclination to form a fully articulated 'opinion' on religious matters.

2. Nonreligious and secular institutions and authority figures

Many of the researchers present at this workshop were investigating specifically nonreligious and secular organisations, and the engagements with these groups. A number of research questions were raised. How similar, if at all, is the experience of 'conversion' to an NS organisation/institution to that of a 'religious' conversion? How do 'official' expressions of NS relate to expressions at a more grassroots, non-organisational level? How do local NS organisations relate to their national headquarters? Patrick McKearney's research was an interesting addition here: NS, especially in its more robustly articulated sense, remains a minority position, however, many UK-based stand-up comedians who reach a mainstream audience, incorporate nonreligious and sometimes positively anti-religious rhetoric and ridicule into their routines. The hypothesis that emerges from this is that many stand-up comedians are the unofficial but effective spokespeople for NS in British and possibly other settings. Here, as elsewhere, the workshop looked forward to further research.

3. Social networks

The influence of social networks upon individual views and commitments is quite a relatively new area of research, as much for the study of religion as for nonreligion. Lois Lee's engagement with this phenomenon prompted a lot of discussion. Whilst it would be assumed that the religiosity of one's associates has a major impact upon one's own views, there are some within the NS field, particularly 'nones', who are not familiar with their friends' religious stance. What might levels of awareness of the (non)religious orientation in friendship circles tell us about the importance of such matters? In other contexts, 'social network' takes on different connotations: in Egypt, for example, the internet – particularly blogging and social networking sites – is integral to the NS phenomenon (Katharina Goetze). Here and in similar contexts, nonreligiosity is not something which is readily communicated to friends or family, and the internet has provided a forum where the nonreligious can engage with and form a community.

4. Material nonreligion

The study of material religion is a relatively new field (with the journal *Material Religion* established in 2005). Unsurprisingly, therefore, Steph Berns' study of the British Museum, and Sarah-Jane Page's focus on secular consumption of religious festivals, provoked a great deal of discussion. Whilst museums may understandably wish to create 'authentic' or 'holistic' experiences for consumption, what happens when a supposedly secular institution attempts to do the same thing with 'religious' artefacts? Is there such a thing as an 'authentic' or 'holistic' nonreligious experience? And to what extent are NS organisations involved in provision of material nonreligion through rites of passage, literature etc? How do ideas of material nonreligion map on to the 'profitable and vociferous' (Eller 2010, 14) atheist publication industry, as exemplified particularly by the work of the 'Four Horsemen'?

5. The Religion/Nonreligion Overlap

The boundaries between the nonreligious, secular and religious fields are porous and socially constructed. Just as it is possible for us to refer to 'nominal Christians' or 'secular Christians', so we can speak of 'nominal atheists' or 'religious atheists'. When we speak of 'dimensions of religiosity' (Abby Day), it is also possible to categorise related 'dimensions of irreligiosity', or to speak of 'modes of unbelief' (Johannes Quack). And just as there are those who may 'believe without belonging' (Davie 1994), there could be considerable mileage in applying this same model to un-believing with or without belonging.

This overlap carries over into other debates within both religion and nonreligion. On the legal front, what should legally be considered religious, and what nonreligious? Should there be a distinction at all? Do the nonreligious have any legal rights relating to their nonreligious views and practices? On the topic of 'labelling', we find a similar modern unease with institutions and labels playing out amongst the religious and the nonreligious, with 'conventional' labels such as 'Christian', 'atheist' or 'agnostic', being shunned due to discomfort/disagreement with popular interpretations of those terms. Suzanne Brink's research into irreligious prejudice against the religious raises many issues concerning the positioning of the religious and nonreligious. Are the nonreligious to be considered as another 'religious' group with which others interact? Do we construct the 'nonreligious' as a dichotomous opposing force against the united 'religious'? If so, what justification can there be for uniting such disparate groups? Is it even appropriate to speak of the 'nonreligious' as a group at all?

Closing remarks

The methods workshop raised many more questions than it answered. However, this was precisely the point. As researchers in a rapidly growing field with no established methodological or theoretical orthodoxy, we need to work together to produce a coherent body of scholarship which can be easily navigated and understood by those within or without the NS field, which is unafraid to push boundaries and explore exciting new avenues which may in fact be closed to more established subject areas. For all of our (beneficial) diversity, the delegates at this stimulating, timely and invaluable workshop show an unprecedented unity in enthusiasm, adaptability, intellectual rigour and willingness to work together to take this emergent discipline forward.

Bibliography

Bainbridge, William Sims. 2005. Atheism. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 1: 1-24.
Campbell, Colin. 1971. *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. London: Macmillan.
Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Eller, Jack David. 2010. What Is Atheism? In *Atheism and Secularity - Volume 1: Issues, Concepts and Definitions*, ed. Phil Zuckerman, 1-18. Santa Barbara: Praeger.
Fergusson, David. 2009. *Faith and its Critics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Brian Baker, Joseph, and Buster Smith. 2009. None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religious Nonbelief and Nonbelonging in the United States. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 4 (December): 719-733.

Voas, David. 2009. The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe. *European Sociological Review* 25, no. 2: 155-168.

ABSTRACTS

Katie Aston | Goldsmiths, University of London |

Scholarly understandings of the growth of secularism in the 20th century assumed the retreat of religion into the private sphere, yet an upsurge in public expressions of religious practice have been observed in recent years in which material culture and new technologies play a vital role (Morgan 2008, Keane 2008). Such developments compound the need for greater critical comprehension of lived experiences of secularism, as highlighted by leading scholars including Professor Linda Woodhead, at the AHRC Innovative Methods in the Study of Religion conference (2010; also Asad 2009, Cannell 2010). Accordingly I shall conduct the first ethnographic study of explicit public enactments and experiences of secularism and non-religious values in the UK, interrogating contemporary notions of secularism and its entanglement with religious practice. I will focus on individuals and groups in Britain mobilising publicly around values of non-religion and secularism, exploring their ritual symbolism, verbal and visual language; I will document the range of emergent material forms, rituals and networks using visual ethnographic methods (Banks 1999, Pink 2001). Preliminary research into the 2008 "Atheist Bus Campaign", initiated in direct response to religious advertising campaigns, highlighted the significance of visual and verbal non-religious performance, including advertising and networking locally and internationally through new media. I anticipate that many contemporary public expressions of non-religion area response to public religious expressions in a multi-religious context and draw on historically embedded Christian ideology (Cannell 2005).

Steph Berns | Birkbeck College, University of London

'Seeing the sacred in the museum: exploring visitor engagement with sacred objects in the British Museum.' This project will bring together existing concepts, debates and methods within the field of material religion and museum visitor studies in order to examine ways in which people engage with sacred objects in a public museum. Whilst museum visitor research has become a well-established field of study, comparatively little work has been done on religious dimensions of visitor interactions with objects, and in particular, the ways in which these interactions may be informed by ways of sensing, seeing and feeling associated with different kinds of religious and secular subjectivities. This project will therefore explore the significance of the museum as a site of embodied religious and secular engagements with religious objects, as well as the complexities and challenges of identifying the museum site as a post-secular public cultural space.

Dr Stephen Bullivant | St Mary's University College & NSRN

My own research has, so far, focused on two main areas - the resonances or overtones which certain terms, such as 'atheist', might have for people (especially survey participants), and the phenomenon of 'irreligious experiences' (roughly speaking, the converse of classic, Jamesian 'religious' experiences). My primary interest at present, however, is on the role of the internet - especially social media and networks - in generating and sustaining the (in many ways surprising) rise of the New Atheism, especially in the USA. I'm particularly interested in exploring this theoretically in light of Berger and Luckmann's theory of 'plausibility structures'.

Dr Rebecca Catto | Lancaster University
Dr Janet Eccles | Lancaster University

The Young Atheists: investigating secularism today amongst young Britons | Swiss charitable foundation the Jacobs Foundation is funding this one year small scale and qualtiative project employing the methods of semi-structured interviewing and participant observation in order to investigate British young people's participation with secularist organisations such as the National Secular Society and the British Humanist Association, which run activities specifically for young people. It aims to address the area of young people and secularism, providing original data on young people's experiences and perceptions of non-religion (secularism, atheism, humanism etc) and religion and how they think their secularist participation relates to their wider lives. The project has developed out of the Foundation's 2010 conference "The role of values and religion in youth development. A culture-informed perspective", at which the absence of such data was bemoaned by scholars including José Casanova and Grace Davie. Ideas and advice on how to proceed is sought, especially as this is a relatively new area of research for both the project's PI (Rebecca Catto) and RA (Janet Eccles

Chris Cotter | University of Edinburgh

I am engaged in a year-long research project amongst selected undergraduate students at the University of Edinburgh. This research will be based on a combination of questionnaires, complemented by in-depth follow-up interviews with selected participants. Students are in a period of transition on numerous levels: familial, social, financial and intellectual, to name but a few. I intend to analyse the impact of these transitions on the process of becoming nonreligious/maintaining an irreligious stance. In addition, I address the impact of education on religiosity, and of academic subject area upon the irreligious turn, and intend to delve into the nuanced "varieties of nonreligion" expressed within the university, the conflicting understandings of key definitional terms, and the perceptions and preconceptions of, and about, the irreligious. I hope to demonstrate a dynamic relationship between religiosity and nonreligiosity, to confirm or challenge extant theories on the effects of education, subject area, financial situation and social situation on the nonreligious turn, and address underlying problems

of definition, perception and expression of the varieties of nonreligion.

Dr Ryan Cragun | Tampa University, Florida

My current research focuses on individuals who report no identification with organized religion, but also do not associate with a pro-secular or pro-atheist group. This work will form the basis of a chapter in a book on secularism that is part of the "Future of Religion in America" book series that will be published over the next few years by Columbia University Press. The basic goal of the chapter is to get a sense of what the ordinary, everyday lives of Nones are: what do they do instead of go to church, what are their hobbies, how do they derive their ethics and morals, how do they think about religious people, and how do they manager their non-religious identity in a predominantly religious society like the U.S. There have been a number of studies that have focused on Nones and seculars who are affiliated with pro-secular or pro-atheist groups, but nothing, to date, that focuses on nones without this connection, and particularly on their everyday lives. We are hoping to interview between 20 and 50 diverse people for this project and have a small grant from my university to pay participants and transcribe the interviews. As part of this project I am including a sub-component that gets at my bigger interest in the role of social networks in religious disidentification. We developed a section of the interview to allow us to explore the religiosity of members of participants' social networks over their lifetime to explore idea.

Dr Abby Day | Sussex University

Comparing Belief Cross-Culturally: An Organic, Holistic Model | Research about religion and belief often imposes definitions that limit out understanding and sometimes skew findings to represent supposedly religious orientations. We need an interpretive method to allow us to analyse cross-culturally and compare what belief means to different people in different places at different times. Analysing belief holistically and organically helped me to resolve the 'census question' puzzle: why would so many non-religious people choose to claim a Christian identity on the UK census? Applying that analytical framework helped me identify two prominent belief orientations: anthropocentric and theocentric. I will summarise briefly here what I mean by those 'orientations'.

Dr Matthew Engelke | London School of Economics

My training in the anthropology of religion has resulted in two major projects to date, both on Christianity: the first in Zimbabwe; the second in England. In the latter, which ran from 2006-2009, and focused on an ecumenical, evangelical charity devoted to promoting the Bible and its image, I became increasingly interested in what many evangelicals see as their public-sphere foils: secular humanists. Indeed, in much of the work for this project, secular humanists, "atheist fundamentalists," and other such figures--real and discursive--played a significant role. It struck

me that an ethnography of humanism in the UK would be a good follow-on project, and that's exactly what I plan to do starting this January, when I begin ESRC-funded fieldwork on the British Humanist Association. Although I have yet to do sustained research on humanism, I am interested, at the methodological level, in several issues, such as how categories like "belief" figure differently (or not) than in research on Christians, and how the dynamic between individuals and institutions plays out within a movement that is driven by traditions of "free thinking."

Katharina Goetze | University of Oxford

Non-religion, dissent and the internet in Egypt | My research addresses the ways in which non-religious positions are constructed and contested in Egypt at this point in time. Religiosity (whether Muslim or Christian) marks a common ground in the Muslim-majority country. De-conversion from Islam and declaring oneself non-religious is both legally and socially highly problematic. My fieldwork in Cairo has been conducted among individuals that overwhelmingly know each other through the internet, and have formed discussion groups with like-minded individuals both on- and offline. These groups and meetings provide a space to speak freely about ideas that are normally off-limits among family, friends or colleagues. The research has focused both on the role the internet plays in forging a space for such exchanges, as well as the issues that are bound up with declaring oneself non-religious (opposition to rise of Islamism and religious pressures, concerns with modernity).My project has at its heart a normalisation of the common view of religion's role in the region, demonstrating that while religion is a powerful force in the Arab Middle East, its role is never uncontested.

Dr Stacey Gutkowski | University of Sussex & NSRN

The political implications of non-religion and secularity in the Global North. As part of my research on the influences of secularity on the practice of warfare I am interested in how to trace the influence of political secularism and non-religiosity through the policy process. Though there are data on non-religiosity among the wider population, non-religiosity among policymakers has not yet been explored. My interviews with senior UK politicians, army officers and policymakers on radical Islamism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has featured some discussion of the personal religiosity and non-religiosity of these figures. I am interested in refining this further aspect of the interview process further.

Lois Lee | University of Cambridge & NSRN

My doctoral research (2006-) has sought to investigate the substance and variety of nonreligious perspectives and practices. I have used two main methods: (i) situated ethnography, in North London and with some auto-ethnographic aspects, and (ii) interviews and participant observation with participants selected via a maximum variation sampling strategy – that is, I have

looked for cases of potential nonreligiosity that are as different as possible from one another, in order to try to consider the parameters of any field we might want to call 'nonreligion'. Attention has been focused on the possible range of nonreligious outlooks, symbolic representations and political expressions. My theoretical framework has been shaped by an interest in modernisation and individualisation theories and, as a result, I have also been interested in the personal-social aspects of lived nonreligion – for which I have used, amongst other things, a qualitative social network exercise for the interviewing process.

Bjoern Mastiaux | Heinrich-Heine-Universitaet

I've actually done research on members of a specific kind of atheist, secularist, or freethought organizations in Germany and the United States (local incorporated activist atheist groups, which offer their members a chance both to socialize as well as to get active politically). Other than some similar studies that have appeared in the meantime, my aim has been not to investigate these members' worldviews, ethics, and demographics per se, but to focus on the fact of their membership. The overall research question is: What are the reasons and circumstances for (these relatively few) atheists (living in quite different socioreligious settings in the Western world) to get organized around nonreligiosity? I have set up my research design back in 2007 and have conducted my interviews in the years of 2007, 2008, and 2009. Therefore, at the workshop, I would like to present my sampling and interviewing techniques. Currently I am struggling with the (computer assisted) analysis of the huge amounts of data generated that way (which I may talk about, too, of course), and I would love to compare notes and talk about experiences with others going through this stage of qualitative research.

Patrick McKearney | University of Cambridge

Stand-up is a popular part of mainstream British and Irish culture. Yet it is rarely noted that non-religious viewpoints are frequently expressed in the regular ridicule of religion (atheism and secularism receive comparatively little attention). But this study found that religion is ridiculed in significantly different ways. My research looks at six comedianS: Eddy Izzard, Dara O'Briain, Dylan Moran, Ricky Gervais, Stewart Lee and Marcus Brigstocke. The former three ridicule flaws in religious people. But crucially they also ridicule these traits in non-religious people. The ultimate target of their ridicule is distinction between the religious and non-religious. They laugh *with* those they ridicule. The latter three, by contrast, ridicule traits from a position of superiority. Their target is an outsider group that they distance themselves from. They do not sympathise with religious people but laugh *at* them. The evidence of this diversity adds empirical substance to postsecularist critiques and so undermines a common discourse that conceives of ridicule as a homogeneous form. The differences between these forms are essential to understanding the sociological implications of the ridicule of religion, particularly in poorly understood political events such as the Danish Cartoons.

Dr Sarah-Jane Page | University of Nottingham

I am currently developing a proposal to investigate the meanings and values around Christian festivals such as Christmas and Easter for those at the fringes of Christian belief (i.e. those willing to celebrate major Christian festivals but who would not participate in formal religion) and why these festivals carry such popular salience. One method I hope to utilise is video diary and video elicitation interviews. Basically, this will be a project seeking to identify the benefits people accrue through celebrating Christian festivals in a secular context, including a consideration of familial ties, nostalgia, consumerism and gendered work (such festivals involve a huge amount of planning and organisation, where traditional gendered divisions of labour may be reinscribed, despite increased egalitarianism in other spheres). It is thus focusing on religion and secularism at a cultural crossroads, where the religious and the secular are at an intersection or boundary, embedded in each other, but where politics of meaning are fraught and contested (Knott 2005). This is borne out by the Christian distaste of Christmas consumerism, often portrayed in outlets such as the "Church Times", or by the incongruence in popularity of Christmas carol services, where cathedrals and churches are filled to the brim with participants who may never set foot into a church at any other time of year. Although studies addressing the popular salience of Christian festivals in a secular context have been addressed in the United States (E.g. Pleck 2000), to my knowledge there is very little work being carried out in the UK.

Dr Johannes Quack | University of Heidelberg

My interests are:
1) How to describe non-religion positive, i.e. not against the respective religious default positions (not "parasitic" on religion)?
2) How to compare non-religion / "modes of unbelief" in a trans-cultural framework?
3) How to research religious indifference (eg. how to access them, specify a sample, ...)?
My research activities are:
1) Fieldwork (PhD) on rationalist / atheist / humanist organizations in India
2) History of the criticism of religion(s) in Europe
3) Naturalism in the social sciences

Lydia Reid | University of Manchester

Having completed my Masters' project I am about to embark upon my ESRC funded PhD thesis, exploring the relationship between religion and modernity. I hope to carry out the stimulus-driven interviews in a comparative study of numerous university religious societies: Muslim, Christian and Jewish. The interviews will consist of presenting religious believers with (i) extracts from New Atheist literature (Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, Harris), (ii) typically "modern" moral dilemmas (such as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, environmental issues), (iii) photo-elicitation techniques (religious believers will be asked to take photos of anything which represents their identity and to then discuss these pictures with myself during the interview. The aim will be to observe whether or not religious believers identify themselves first

and foremost in religious terms, or whether other aspects such as ethnicity, culture and occupation also feature in the interviewees' identity formation).

Leo Schlöndorff | University of Vienna

My dissertation is part of an interdisciplinary collaboration of two historians, one media scientist and two literary scholars. The project covers the reception of apocalypse in various contexts from the early middle age until contemporary times. I am concerned with the apocalypse of the 20th and 21st century. As a literary scholar I meanly analyze fiction and to some extent film, but I also catch try to catch a glimpse of apocalyptic prophecy in science. In a postmodern context the concept of the end has changed fundamentally. There seem to be not just one end, but a plurality of possible ends: The End of history, the end of class struggle, the end of philosophy, the death of God, the end of religions, the end of Christianity and morals […], the end of the subject, the end of man, the end of the West, the end of Oedipus, the end of the earth, Apocalypse now […]". (Derrida 1983). Some key questions concerning the "secularized apocalypse" are: In a secularized age thinking the end is not any more a practice restricted to religion. Scientific models dominate our picture of the end of the world. Wars, ecological disasters, and cosmic catastrophes have the power to destroy the world as we know it. In this context apocalypse becomes an umbrella term for many phenomena which all have in common a complete or near complete destruction of the world. In a biblical sense from this point a renewal of the world would happen. But is this the case in a secularized apocalypse? What happens after the Day X if there is no hope for an intervention from god? Is there still space for a vision of a new and better world or is it just the survival of some unlucky people in an unpleasant place which once had been our world?

Matt Sheard | Birkbeck College, University of London

My current study is looking at the influence of non-elite atheists on the social history of twentieth century Britain and in particular on their impact on the progress of secularisation in the period 1900 – 1980. I'm using oral histories and autobiographies to reveal how people described their own loss of faith and the age at which this occurs. In the last ten years the social history of religion in Britain has been dominated by the idea that the 'religious crisis' of the 1960s marked a watershed in the dechristianisation of Britain. Historians have suggested a variety of causal explanations for this, however, atheist apostasy is not amongst them. My work shows that apostates dechristianised from the beginning of the century and unbelief spread in the non-elite population until it was able to find expression in public discourse during the social revolution of the 1960s. In the preceding decades there were atheistic sub-cultures such as radical politics or university education which allowed some to realise their unbelief, yet others rejected religion with little apparent external influence. Apostasy tended to occur during adolescence, so we must look to the influences on children that shape beliefs, such as parenting, peer attitudes, education and entertainment, to explain how atheist apostates came to reject religious socialisation.

Ruth Sheldon | Birkbeck College, London University

My PhD project is looking at student engagement with Israel-Palestine within UK university campuses. My work relates to the study of non-religion in the sense that the project will look interactions between student groups who self-define in terms of religion, culture and political commitments and this may include "non-religious" groups such as student Atheist societies if they are involved with the issue on campuses. I hope that through focusing on an issue which is variously portrayed as a "religious" "ethnic" and "political" conflict, and which engages students in moral discourse, the project will provide an opportunity to explore the moral and symbolic frameworks and values constructed and contested among students who identify as religious or non-religious.