



NSRN Events Report

Reflections on ‘Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts’

Report by Steven Tomlins, the University of Ottawa

Event Details

Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts

November 22-24, 2012

University of Ottawa

**Sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of
Canada, The University of Ottawa, and The Religion and Diversity
Project**

Participants:

Keynote: Dr. William A. Stahl, Emeritus, University of Regina
The Church on the Margins: Religion and Atheism in a Secular Age

Dr. Amarnath Amarasingam, York University
The Cultural, the Nominal and the Secular: The Social Reality of Religious Identity among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada

Dr. Lori G. Beaman, University of Ottawa
Freedom of and freedom from Religion: Atheist Involvement in Legal Cases

Dr. Peter Beyer, University of Ottawa
From Atheist to Spiritual to Religious: Straddling Boundaries among the Second Generation of Post-1970 Immigrants in Canada

Spencer Bullivant, University of Ottawa
Believing to Belong: Nonreligious Belief as a Path to Inclusion

Dr. Richard Cimino, New York Theological Seminary
Secular Rituals and Atheist Solidarity (co-authored by Christopher Smith)

Chris Cotter, Lancaster University
Without gods yet not without nuance: engaging qualitatively with atheists and other nonreligious individuals

Dr. Ryan Cragun, University of Tampa
Predictors of 'Atheist' Self-Identification: Who are the 'New Atheists'?

Stephen LeDrew, York University
Atheism vs. Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics in the Atheist Movement

Lorna Mumford, University College London
Living Nonreligious Identity in London

Steven Tomlins, University of Ottawa
Collectively Negating Religious Belief: Why Some Atheists Join Atheist Communities

Report

On November 22-24, 2012, a three-day workshop was held at the University of Ottawa in Ontario, Canada, funded by the [Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada](#) and made possible by the financial assistance of the [University of Ottawa](#) and [The Religion and Diversity Project](#). It was co-organized by Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins and explored 'Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts'. The workshop was truly multidisciplinary, drawing on research into atheism conducted in multiple social scientific contexts: Law, Religious Studies, Sociology, Philosophy and Anthropology. The workshop's objective was to critically analyze current discourse on atheism and 'religious nones' in Western societies, as well as to explore where the academic study of atheism is situated and the different angles from which it is being addressed in the participants' academic contexts of Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The keynote lecture by William A. Stahl, 'The Church on the Margins: Religion and Atheism in a Secular Age,' was open to the public and formed part of the Religion and Diversity Project's [Critical Thinkers in Religion, Law, and Social Theory](#) speaker's series. His paper argued that the declining membership of previously hegemonic Canadian churches (Catholic, Anglican, United) has placed them on the margins of society and is symptomatic of the end of Christendom. He highlighted three narratives that have been used to theorize this decline: the secularization thesis; a narrative of renewal (religions fluctuating between decline and renewal); and Charles Taylor's work on the changes in the nature of social solidarity in the contemporary world. Stahl's presentation offered insights into the theoretical contextualization of the relationship and roles of contemporary religion and atheism.

The second session, 'The Socialization Processes of 'Religious Nones',' consisted of papers by Amarnath Amarasingam, Lorna Mumford, and Christopher Cotter. Using his work on Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada as a case study, Amarasingam explained how religious identity shifts according to different political, social, and cultural criteria and concerns. His paper, 'The Cultural, the Nominal and the Secular: The Social Reality of Religious Identity among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada,' analyzed the impact of variables such as social movements, nationalism, and ethnic allegiance(s) on religious identity. One of Amarasingam's findings was that higher levels of commitment to nationalist policies correlates with religion being less important as a self-identifier; some interviewees said that they would still acknowledge their familial religious affiliations on forms etc, but they also believed religion to be divisive, particularly in nationalistic matters, and would downplay religious identities when discussing religion in this context. Amarasingam's paper pointed to how religious identities shift according to a variety of factors and contexts.

Lorna Mumford, who has been engaged with atheist or nonreligious meet-up groups in London, presented her paper, 'Living Nonreligious Identity in London.' She argued that:

British political policies endorse the view that religious belief is considered socially beneficial, thus codifying religious identity as normative and resulting in a perception of atheists as different, even socially inferior. Consequently

nonreligious individuals often compromise or conceal their atheist identity and opinions in order to avoid causing offence or provoking negative reactions from other members of society.

Mumford addressed how some atheists conceal the atheist elements of their identities, explaining that some do so out of concern for how their atheism will be interpreted: 60% of her survey respondents answered 'yes' when asked if they had ever experienced a negative reaction from someone who had discovered that they were an atheist or a humanist.

One of the questions raised early on in the workshop was whether or not a typology of atheism could be developed. Cotter's paper, 'Without gods yet not without nuance: engaging qualitatively with atheists and other nonreligious individuals,' proposed an analytic typology for the study of atheism, based on questionnaire and interview data from Scottish subjects. Not limited to one definition or type of nonreligion, Cotter's typology allows for a more nuanced understanding of nonreligion than does the definition of an atheist as a person who is simply not a theist. He was also concerned with demonstrating 'variety in the category 'nonreligious', whilst demonstrating the inadequacy of attempts to do this in terms of dimensions of 'religiosity'.' In other words, his work explores the use of positive self-identifying descriptors that are not limited to a simple negation of religion. The implication of this is that scholars need to avoid considering religiosity to be the normative state and nonreligiosity to be cast, by definition, as oppositional. Cotter's research shows how nonreligiosity is varied, contains many self-positive descriptors, and is not always simply a matter of opposing religious viewpoints.

The third session, 'Living Atheism,' involved presentations by Richard Cimino and Steven Tomlins. Cimino's paper, 'Secular Rituals and Atheist Solidarity,' (co-authored by Christopher Smith), explored the American situation, particularly with regard to atheist group solidarity and the challenges and strategies associated with the positive promotion of atheism in American society. Cimino argued that organized atheism in America often expresses itself in 'rituals' such as sarcastically ridiculing and protesting against religion in order to foster a positive atheist group identity. This phenomenon – the ritualization of atheism – is both a response and a reaction to the perceived normative relation that religion has to identity in the US, and it has led to both solidarity and divisions within atheist movements. As an example, Cimino points to 'Darwin Day' as a day created for celebration – and, by extension, group unification and – which serves as an atheist commemoration of science.

Tomlins' presentation, 'Collectively Negating Religious Belief: Why Some Atheists Join Atheist Communities,' was based on interviews with members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa, and explored the reasons for which people join the group. According to the research, the dominant reason given related to the desire of members to converse with like-minded people. Other reasons included a desire to converse in a safe place where the probability of causing offense was minimalized. This research did not find evidence of members joining due to an interest in propagating atheism, as some scholars would anticipate. Juxtaposed with Cimino's analysis of the American atheist communities and Mumford's outline of British atheism, this presentation prompted a discussion of cross-national variety in atheism, and the extent to which this variety mimics the diversity in religious cultures.

The fourth session, 'Atheism and Youth,' included presentations by Peter Beyer and Spencer Bullivant. While the previous session dealt directly with atheist group identification, Beyer's paper, 'From Atheist to Spiritual to Religious: Straddling Boundaries among the Second Generation of Post-1970 Immigrants in Canada,' discussed individuals who identify with a religion but whose affiliation to that religion becomes more complicated in an interview setting. Beyer's research involved 300 interviews with second- and '1.5'-generation Canadian immigrants and found that people identifying themselves or their family with a religious tradition expressed a more fluid relationship with these religious identities in open interview discussion. Some explained that they were atheists, others critical of religion but unsure of how to replace it, and some felt as if they were not religious yet were somehow still connected to their religion in a complicated or confused way. Beyer suggested a 'punctuated continuum' of religious self-description as a model for understanding the diversity of people's identification with religion. Religious identity, Beyer argues, is a matter of degree of commitment and exclusivity, and by punctuated continuum he means that an individual's religiosity can be seen to fit on a continuous scale from complete atheism that rejects religion to complete, specific, and exclusive identification with a specific religion, with various punctuated degrees of identification in between, always keeping in mind that degrees of an individual's religiosity may shift according to time and circumstance.

Bullivant's paper, 'Believing to Belong: Nonreligious Belief as a Path to Inclusion,' outlined parents' motivation for sending their children to American nonreligious summer camps, such as CampQuest. Bullivant demonstrated that some parents express the view that there 'is a public misconception that people who do not 'hold a' religious belief are thought to have a hole in their lives where religious belief should exist,' others felt that getting together with other nonbelievers allows for a sense of inclusion. His paper pointed to the difficulties of being an atheist in a society where being religious is the norm, and where atheists are one of the least trusted minority groups in the country. It also shed light on how nonreligious individuals are able to create space for nonreligious expression through group-building and the creation of secular activities such as summer camps. Such activities appropriate resources often used by religious organizations for their own, nonreligious purposes.

The fifth session, 'Atheist Identities,' featured papers by Lori G. Beaman, Stephen LeDrew, and Ryan Cragun. Beaman, who holds the Canada Research Chair in the Contextualization of Religion in a Diverse Canada, presented her reflections on various claims made by atheists in the legal arena. Examples include 'the objection to prayers in municipal council meetings, and the placement of religious symbols in public spaces.' Her paper was entitled 'Freedom of and freedom from Religion: Atheist Involvement in Legal Cases.' Her work has often explored the exercise of religious freedom in court, but as she began paying more attention to cases involving atheists she noticed the negative caricaturing of this group in both the media and the courtroom. Christian religious symbols, she found, were often classified as cultural rather than religious, effectively painting atheist complainants as anti-cultural.

LeDrew's paper, 'Atheism vs. Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics in the Atheist Movement,' used a comparative approach to highlight the different ways in which atheist group identity is expressed. LeDrew began with a

historiography of two branches of atheism: Scientific Atheism and Humanistic Atheism. He described Scientific Atheism as originating in Enlightenment-era rationalism and natural science, explaining that Scientific Atheists see religion in terms of its explanative function. Humanistic Atheism, on the other hand, derives from the social sciences, and Humanistic Atheists understand religion as a social phenomenon. LeDrew explained how these two ways of understanding the nature of religion have given rise to tensions between and within groups of atheists and humanists.

Cragun presented on the topic ‘Predictors of ‘Atheist’ Self-Identification: Who are the ‘New Atheists?’’ By ‘New Atheists’ Cragun referred not only to authors commonly identified as such, such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins; rather, he expanded the definition to include those who exhibit New Atheist traits. To measure these, he chose three questions from a 2007 Pew US Religious Landscape Survey. These questions relate to a belief in an afterlife (with New Atheists saying ‘no’ since they reject the supernatural), their view of evolution (with New Atheism agreeing with evolution since they have a positive view of, and reliance on, science), and the responders’ view of the origin of the Bible (with New Atheists considering it a product of the human mind since they are critical of religion). He used a two-step cluster analysis to explore how many of the atheists that the Pew survey identified exhibited these three traits. Cragun found that New Atheists in America tend to be older than other atheists and less racially diverse; 90% of New Atheists are white compared to 77% of other atheists. New Atheists are also more likely than other atheists to be male, liberal, well-educated, and quite wealthy.

As well as advancing participants’ knowledge of the field, this international workshop raised particular questions about cross-national variation between atheist cultures. The differences between atheisms are just as important to understand as their similarities. By focusing on both the differences and the similarities, this workshop advanced understandings of the ways in which atheisms are culturally contingent and express specific narratives arising out of their particular context.