

# NSRN Terminology



## CONFERENCE OVERVIEW

Title: 'NSRN Terminology'

Dates: Wednesday 27 April – Wednesday 18 May 2011

Location: Online

Convenor: Lois Lee, LL317@CAM.AC.UK

## CONFERENCE AIMS

A few early contributions apart, the study of ‘nonreligion’ and/or ‘secularity’ and/or ‘secularism’ as a collective research programme is still in relatively early days. As a result, terminological frameworks used to make and discuss research projects are highly dynamic – something which is desirable and productive. Moreover, the development of theoretically robust conceptual tools for study in this broad area cannot be forced, but must instead be the product of sustained and systematic theoretical and especially empirical work. On the other hand, however, some aspects of the research process stand to benefit from collective reflection on the concepts that are already being used as working terminologies – the terms that have proved necessary in order to be able to conduct any research in the first place.

Of these aspects, the issue of successfully communicating our research to various users is significant. Given the polemics that provide a backdrop to much of our social scientific work in nonreligion studies, the terms we use to describe our work can, indeed, be as much of a hindrance as a help in communicating our research and research agendas. It is therefore essential that we, as a research community, are at least clear about how we are using the terms and put efforts into making these working terminologies clear to those with other interests. In addition, it may already be possible to identify or update some terminological conventions that will help us in these various communications.

The NSRN website is geared to supporting and facilitating communication between researchers, but it is also expressly designed as a point of access for non-researchers who want to engage with the social scientific study of nonreligion. The jumping off point for this conference is the possibility of providing an online glossary for both audiences. In the first place, a glossary would simply help navigate the terms that are used by the website editors on the website; a note on terminology is provided at [www.nsrn.co.uk/About.html](http://www.nsrn.co.uk/About.html) and this glossary would update that. I would also like to consider, however, how useful this glossary might be in less site-specific terms. The conference therefore takes this moment as an opportunity to reflect on where our research terminologies have got to. It will also provide an opportunity to share some of the terminological work that I know several of you are conducting and/or have recently published and may want to introduce and discuss with other researchers.

## Questions/streams

The conference will be broken down into the following core areas for discussion. These are listed here with some ideas and questions for jumping off points. The draft glossary attached is also provided as a sort of position paper or way in to some of these issues.

Streams:

### **1) 'Nonreligion' (and 'irreligion')**

This is the area that I want to contribute, having developed a definition of nonreligion in the course of my empirical research and work with the NSRN. I want to put that definition forward (see glossary) and invite comment on how successful or not that concept is as, as I have used it, a core term for this area of study. Are there those whose view is, 'nonreligion', no thanks? What kind of problems have you experienced or foresee the term? E.g. is the relative and negative prefix a problem? Should we, against my suggestion, continue to use 'nonreligion' and 'irreligion' as synonyms?

### **2) Secular\* ('secular', 'secularity', 'secularism', 'postsecular')**

Is it possible to deal with the nonreligious independently of the secular in our conceptual terminology, as suggested in the glossary? The idea is that conflating unbelief and other forms of nonreligion with societal differentiation may be more hassle than it's worth – but is this idea transposable into your research settings? Are there cultural or other local reasons that work against this approach?

The glossary does not refer to the postsecular, an increasingly popular concept. Is there a coherent definition of the 'postsecular' that we can provide? Does that notion add anything once you consider that the secular (in terms of differentiation) can come in multiple forms and exist in a variety of relationships with religion and, indeed, nonreligion?

### **3) God-related terms (atheism, non-theism, Godlessness)**

There are obvious cultural and historical reasons that the concept of 'atheism' has been so important in Western nonreligions. It follows that 'atheism' is an essential term for the phenomenological study of nonreligion. But how should the term be used as an analytic term? Are there any conceptual reasons to maintain more general uses of the term, in which 'atheism' is used as a proxy for being without *religion* in more general terms and/or for the rejection of supernatural belief in general? Or do such uses impair our ability to reflect on the cultural traditions in which we are working?

Can God-related concepts be meaningfully distinguished from one another: atheism from non-theism from Godlessness? And what does the term 'unbelief' imply? 'Unbelief' means unbelief in what? Is this a useful term?

### **4) Unpacking 'apostasy'**

Historic accounts of nonreligion have focused on how people deviate from orthodox religion. Are we now in a position to unpack this quite simple model and move towards more complex and precise notions of relationship with religion? What terms could we

helpfully add to the draft glossary as it stands? Do our concepts need to reflect more dynamic and less linear changes in relationships with religion?

### 5) What's in a name?

Counter-intuitively, perhaps, the conference will close with a discussion of the value of this whole enterprise – the project of considering if a working terminology of some wide utility might be developed. There are, of course, various schools of thought when it comes to the ontology and value of concepts and of common terminologies. By providing an opportunity to consider these positions at the close of the conference, I hope that, instead of rehearsing these theories in the abstract, these approaches will provide a framework for understanding the successes and dead-ends that the conference discussion has demonstrated.

### 6) AOB?

Are there any other issues that delegates want to raise in the context of this discussion?

## Schedule

		TIME	
DAY	DATE	Noon GMT	6pm GMT
Wed	27-Apr	-	-
Thu	28-Apr	<b>Introduction &amp; glossary draft</b>	
Fri	29-Apr	-	-
Mon	02-May	-	-
Tue	03-May	-	-
Wed	04-May	-	-
Thu	05-May	<b>1) Nonreligion papers</b>	-
Fri	06-May	Q and A (1)	Q and A (2)
Mon	09-May	<b>2) Secular* papers</b>	-
Tue	10-May	Q and A (1)	Q and A (2)
Wed	11-May	<b>3) God papers</b>	-
Thu	12-May	Q and A (1)	Q and A (2)
Fri	13-May	<b>4) Apostasy papers</b>	-
Mon	16-May	Q and A (1)	Q and A (2)
Tue	17-May	<b>5) Names? papers</b>	<b>6) AOB? papers</b>
Wed	18-May	Q and A (1)	Q and A (2)

## How to participate

The benefit of a virtual conference is the involvement of delegates from around the world at very little cost, and we are pleased to have participants from several time zones. As such, however, we will not be incorporating any 'real-time' discussion; rather the conference is structured to replicate a formal conference but with submissions being made via email. Please note, like a face-to-face conference, this will only work if your participation follows the format – i.e. no shouting out in the middle of someone's talk, as it were.

There are therefore two ways to participate in this conference:

- 1 By providing a **'short paper'** for one (or more) of the above streams. Short papers will be circulated by email according to the conference schedule, and can be a short comment of a couple of hundred words up to a word limit of 1000 words (equivalent to a 10 minute presentation).

Like any other conference paper, these short papers can be as informal as you wish but will be a citable resource for other delegates; papers should be cited as conference papers, in the normal way. These papers should be clearly distinguished from other contributions by a header, stating 'short paper', as well as the title and author(s).

N.B. Given the short notice of this conference, delegates may not wish or have time to contribute new and sustained arguments; short papers should, however, provide an opportunity for you to (further) distribute and promote work already completed in this area, and to consider how these concepts might work or not (!) work with your particular field of study, empirical setting, disciplinary approach etc.

If you want to contribute a short paper, please email me your interest and the stream(s) you wish to participate in.

- 2 By providing **comments and questions**.

Comments and questions should be sent to me **ONLY**, at my email address: [LL317@CAM.AC.UK](mailto:LL317@CAM.AC.UK). They can be sent at any time, but please state clearly which stream(s)/'speakers' your comments or questions are addressed to. These will then be circulated in one email **AFTER** each stream has been completed (i.e. all short papers distributed). In order for 'speakers' and other delegates to be able to respond to questions and comments, a second round of comments and

questions will be collated in the same way (i.e. via me) and distributed in the same way.

THESE CONTRIBUTIONS SHOULD NOT BE CITED, unless permission is privately sought and granted, in which case it should be cited as a personal communication. This is to ensure delegates feel comfortable throwing out new and half-baked ideas etc that we can all consider and workshop, without necessarily being associated with or having to defend those ideas after the close of the conference.

Conference participation should be strictly limited to these forms please. Like any conference, this format is limited and will leave issues and comments outstanding, but hopefully it will work to 'table' issues, share and forge new ideas and working relationships which will hopefully continue outside of this forum.

## Conference outputs

**Short papers** can be cited in the normal way.

**NSRN Glossary** might be published online (by the NSRN on the NSRN website), but this is a question of the conference: is that useful to do and in what format should it be provided. Of course, all contributions to this glossary will be fully referenced – and, as contributions will be pared down to definitions and short concepts, these contributions are unlikely to compromise any other publication plans you have in this area.

The glossary would be concerned with analytic (or etic) categories. It is not intended to provide any index to the various understandings of terms that exist in the 'real world'. The ways in which terms like 'atheist' or 'nonreligion' are appropriated or attributed in practice are historically and culturally contingent – fascinating subject matter, but well beyond the scope of this discussion. That said, emic categories will be relevant to the assessment of this analytic terminology, especially in terms of its anticipated usefulness outside of research.

The glossary might include more than one understanding of a term where there are substantial reasons for maintaining these.

### **Others?**

E.g. It may be that this conference results in an integrated critique of a centralised terminology, in which case the output may be a published note to that effect.

## Delegates

Robin W. Allen	Boise State University	<a href="mailto:RALLEN@BOISESTATE.EDU">RALLEN@BOISESTATE.EDU</a>
Katie Aston	Goldsmiths, University of London	<a href="mailto:ASTONKATIE@HOTMAIL.COM">ASTONKATIE@HOTMAIL.COM</a>
Marian Burchardt	University of Leipzig	<a href="mailto:MARIAN.BURCHARDT@UNI-LEIPZIG.DE">MARIAN.BURCHARDT@UNI-LEIPZIG.DE</a>
Stephen Bullivant	St Mary's University College NSRN	<a href="mailto:BULLIVANTS@SMUC.AC.UK">BULLIVANTS@SMUC.AC.UK</a>
Chris Cotter	University of Edinburgh	<a href="mailto:CHRIS.R.COTTER@GMAIL.COM">CHRIS.R.COTTER@GMAIL.COM</a>
Ryan Cragun	University of Tampa	<a href="mailto:RYANTCRAGUN@GMAIL.COM">RYANTCRAGUN@GMAIL.COM</a>
Abby Day	University of Sussex	<a href="mailto:AFDAY@BTINTERNET.COM">AFDAY@BTINTERNET.COM</a>
Malcolm Dean	UCLA	<a href="mailto:MALCOLMDEAN@GMAIL.COM">MALCOLMDEAN@GMAIL.COM</a>
Nick Gibson	University of Cambridge	<a href="mailto:NJSJG2@CAM.AC.UK">NJSJG2@CAM.AC.UK</a>
Josie Goodrow	University of New Orleans	<a href="mailto:JOSIENNE@MAC.COM">JOSIENNE@MAC.COM</a>
Stacey Gutkowski	University of Sussex	<a href="mailto:S.GUTKOWSKI@SUSSEX.AC.UK">S.GUTKOWSKI@SUSSEX.AC.UK</a>
Kennet Hansen	Independent scholar	<a href="mailto:KNET.HANSEN@GMAIL.COM">KNET.HANSEN@GMAIL.COM</a>
Joseph H. Hammer	Iowa State University	<a href="mailto:HAMMER@IASTATE.EDU">HAMMER@IASTATE.EDU</a>
Thomas Josephsohn	Loyola University Chicago	<a href="mailto:TJJ9Q3@GMAIL.COM">TJJ9Q3@GMAIL.COM</a>
Birgitte Johansen	University of Copenhagen	<a href="mailto:BJOHANSEN@HUM.KU.DK">BJOHANSEN@HUM.KU.DK</a>
Lois Lee (convenor)	University of Cambridge NSRN	<a href="mailto:LL317@CAM.AC.UK">LL317@CAM.AC.UK</a>
Tariq Modood	University of Bristol	<a href="mailto:T.MODOOD@BRISTOL.AC.UK">T.MODOOD@BRISTOL.AC.UK</a>
Alan G Nixon	University of Western Sydney	<a href="mailto:A.NIXON@UWS.EDU.AU">A.NIXON@UWS.EDU.AU</a>
Johannes Quack	University of Heidelberg	<a href="mailto:MELOBATRACHOS@GMX.DE">MELOBATRACHOS@GMX.DE</a>
Brian Pearce	The Inter Faith Network (UK)	<a href="mailto:BRIAN124PEARCE@BTINTERNET.COM">BRIAN124PEARCE@BTINTERNET.COM</a>
Frank L. Pasquale	Independent scholar	<a href="mailto:FLPASQUALE@COMCAST.NET">FLPASQUALE@COMCAST.NET</a>
David Pollock	European Humanist Federation	<a href="mailto:DAVID.POLLOCK@VIRGIN.NET">DAVID.POLLOCK@VIRGIN.NET</a>
Matt Sheard	Birkbeck, University of London	<a href="mailto:MATTSHEARD@MADASAFISH.COM">MATTSHEARD@MADASAFISH.COM</a>
John Simons	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine	<a href="mailto:JOHN.SIMONS1000@GMAIL.COM">JOHN.SIMONS1000@GMAIL.COM</a>
David Voas	University of Manchester	<a href="mailto:DVOAS@HOTMAIL.COM">DVOAS@HOTMAIL.COM</a>
Phil Zuckerman	Pitzer College	<a href="mailto:PHIL_ZUCKERMAN@PITZER.EDU">PHIL_ZUCKERMAN@PITZER.EDU</a>