

NSRN Events Report

NSRN

**ATHEISM AND ANTHROPOLOGY: RESEARCHING ATHEISM AND
SELF-SEARCHING BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE WORKSHOP**
By Lorna Mumford, University College London

EVENT DETAILS

“Atheism and Anthropology: Researching Atheism and Self-searching Belief and Experience” Workshop

21 September 2011

University College London

Sponsored by the European Association of Social Anthropologists and EASA Anthropology of Religion Network

PARTICIPANTS

Dr Sindre Bangstad, Oslo University | **Dr Rebecca Catto** Lancaster University | **Dr Janet Eccles** Lancaster University | **Dr Matthew Engelke** London School of Economics | **Dr Tim Jenkins** Cambridge University | **Dr Sonja Luehrmann** Simon Fraser University, Canada | **Lorna Mumford** University College London | **Dr Vlad Naumescu** Central European University, Budapest | **Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic** University College London | **Dr Charles Stewart (Chair/Discussant)** University College London

REPORT

Held at the Department of Anthropology, University College London, the Atheism and Anthropology Workshop was convened by Ruy Llera Blanes and Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic.

This NSRN Events report is divided into two sections; the first half incorporates a brief summary of each of the papers presented, while the second discusses some of the key themes and issues raised during the workshop.

KEYNOTE LECTURE:

“The Anthropology of *After Religion*” by Dr. Matthew Engelke

Engelke’s keynote paper introduced his current research with the British Humanist Association, and among local Humanist groups and Humanist celebrants. He began by commending Llera Blanes and Oustinova-Stjepanovic for convening a workshop that pushed beyond the secular frame to consider the ideas and issues of *atheism* as its own specific topic of research. He discussed the current groundswell of interest in nonreligion as a research topic, mentioning both the NSRN and the upcoming journal, *Secularism and Nonreligion*; commenting on how the coming of a journal devoted singularly to the topic of nonreligion signals the significance of that topic. Engelke’s presentation highlighted three important issues for studies within the field of nonreligion: ‘negation’, ‘transformation’ and ‘realisation’.

Engelke stated that while studies of kinship have been replaced by studies of relatedness (not non-kinship), studies of religion and nonreligion remain contextualised through oppositional categories bequeathed by structural-functionalism. He discussed the problem of defining the field through negation, and the difficulties of developing an alternative terminology, already a topic of much debate among researchers. Additionally, Engelke highlighted how humanists themselves often express frustration at being defined in relation to that which they are not; he quoted one interviewee who had told him ‘we do not describe religion as non-humanism’.

Arguing that secularisation has not brought about a fundamental transformation in the ways we think, organise and act, Engelke proposed greater recognition of the genealogical relationship between religious and nonreligious systems of belief, and a consideration of the extent to which religion and nonreligion share the same temporality. Referring to the title of his paper, Engelke

discussed a Secular Humanist rejection of the idea that atheism comes *after* religion, often characterized by the proffering of evidence for the existence of Humanist values throughout history. Humanism, contend its proponents, is just a contemporary label for something that has always existed.

The narrative theme of ‘realisation’ is common within Humanist discourses. Engelke’s paper incorporated a number of quotes from informants describing their discovery of the British Humanist Association and consequent realisation of themselves as Humanists. ‘A Humanist’ is not something a person becomes; there is no process of transformation. Rather, it is the recognition of a label for the philosophical worldview that he or she already holds. During the presentation, Engelke played a video clip of the British Humanist Association Choir singing their version of The Flaming Lips’ song *Do You Realize*, which encapsulates a number of other significant narrative themes shared by Humanists, including beauty, love, science, the cosmos and death.

SESSION ONE: RESEARCHING ATHEISM

“Discourses of Atheist and Humanist Identity in Britain” by Lorna Mumford

Until recently, academic approaches to the study of atheism conceived it to be purely an intellectual stance based on Enlightenment values of science, rationality and reason. However, emotional responses are that which shape our judgements, identity, actions and behaviour (Riis & Woodhead 2010), and Mumford’s presentation explored the emotional dimensions of nonreligious experience.

Drawing on ethnographic data collected through fieldwork with atheist and Humanist groups in London, Mumford demonstrated how motivation to assert an actively nonreligious identity may stem from emotional responses to specific experiences within an individual’s life, rather than existing purely as the product of intellectual deliberation.

Additionally, Mumford argued that political policies in Britain codify religious identity as normative (Shore & Wright 1997), and promote religion as a positive social value. This supports a perception of atheism as deviant and can lead nonreligious individuals to feel like second-class citizens. Mumford’s argument was supported by her informants’ experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in relation to the expression of their nonreligious identity. Consequently, many nonreligious individuals engage in the complex negotiation of self-defining labels, and may compromise or conceal their nonreligious opinions and identity in order to evade negative reactions.

“A Sociological Investigation of Young People in Britain’s Active Non-Religious Identities” by Dr. Rebecca Catto & Dr. Janet Eccles

Catto and Eccles presented data collected for The Young Atheists Project they are currently conducting at Lancaster University¹. The project, supported by the Jacobs Foundation, comprises a qualitative study of the opinions and feelings of young people engaged with atheist, humanist and secularist organisations and activities in the UK.

¹ <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fass/gradschool/activities/964/>

Many participants in the study appeared to become engaged with atheism in reaction to religious attitudes within their immediate social environs. Yet they avoided discussing their beliefs with religious family members or friends for fear of disrupting harmonious relations. Participation in the project offered them an opportunity to express and explore their opinions more openly. Referring to Kim Knott's (2010) idea of 'the secular sacred,' Eccles and Catto wondered whether this overriding respect for social harmony indicates that relationships are what matter most to people.

Catto and Eccles also found that the internet operates as a significant medium of communication and information for young atheists. Many of their participants regularly engaged with internet sites and forums devoted to atheist issues. Interestingly, a number of them demonstrated concern over the teaching of creationism in British schools (although there is no evidence that this is actually happening in the U.K.), which Eccles and Catto consider to result from engagement with American atheist websites. Such a finding supports the suggestion that in the global network society (Castells 2004), the perceived threat to secularism posed by religious ideology (Lanman 2011) transcends national boundaries via the internet (Aston 2011).

SESSION TWO: ATHEISM AND SECULARISM

“Which Road to Enlightenment? On the Impasses of Secularist Absolutism in Relation to Anthropology in Contemporary Norway” by Dr. Sindre Bangstad

Bangstad is currently conducting research exploring vernacular concepts of the secular among young Norwegians of Islamic background. The work of academics such as Charles Taylor (2007) demonstrates how the view of the Enlightenment as a passage from darkness to light, error to truth, revelation to reason, is a flawed interpretation. Nevertheless, it is a view still held by many secularists, and the categories of the secular and the religious continue to be construed in opposition within contemporary public discourse and the media.

Bangstad's paper described how two high profile media and public debates in Norway, the so-called 'morality police debate' (*moralpolitidebatten*) and the 2010 documentary *Frihet, likhet og det muslimske brorskap* (Freedom, Equality and the Muslim Brotherhood) by Walid al-Kabaisi, led to fears over stealth Islamisation, also provoking anti-Muslim discourse.

As a result of these debates, secularists exhibited passion, anger and vitriol towards Muslims, contends Bangstad, and the violence of these emotions contradicts with the Norwegian social imaginary, which tends to cast religion as the domain of passion and nonreligion as that of rationality. Bangstad argues that the media's representation of these debates, conflating atheism with secularism, resulted in unreasonable, impassioned secularist attitudes towards immigrant Muslims, perceiving them as the religious 'other'. Within the debate, both the religious and the secular appealed to notions of purity and existential danger in order to portray the other as a threat to the moral and social order.

“Secular Missionaries or Phonies? Old Believers' Moral Dilemmas in (Post)Socialist Romania” by Dr. Vlad Naumescu

In his work as an anthropologist of religion, Naumescu is currently researching issues of religious transmission. He thought that the workshop might be a good place to think through and explore a particular ethnographic problem he has been facing.

Naumescu conducts his research among a community of Old Believers in Romania. In the 17th century, the Old Believers split from the Russian Orthodox Church in disagreement over reforms. While the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe placed belief and practice in hierarchical relation, the Old Believers made no distinction between outer behaviour and inner sentiment. For this group, religious belief continues today to involve the total merging of ritual practice and everyday life. Verbatim re-production of old texts and rituals is necessary to maintain the link between the material and immaterial worlds, and participation in the rites directly affects an individual's relationship both to the divine and to personal salvation.

Under the socialist regime, 'generational specialisation' emerged as a solution to the difficulty of preserving the old rites in the face of the political ideology of secularisation. Adherence to ritual became the preserve of the older generation, while the young engaged with socialist ideology in order to work. Naumescu terms this suspension of religious practice 'temporary secularisation'.

This is the heart of Naumescu's ethnographic problem. Did these members of the Old Believer's community really put their faith aside; is it possible to bracket off one's own religious beliefs? Referring to the issue of temporality raised in Engelke's paper, Naumescu asked, 'can people be at once both religious and nonreligious?' In the modern West, the crisis of secularism often entails the categorization of people as either religious or non-religious. Questioning the dualistic nature of this thinking Naumescu asks why one must be categorized in either one group or the other.

SESSION THREE: ANTHROPOLOGICAL ATHEISM

"Antagonistic Insights: Evolving Soviet Atheist Critiques of Religion and Why They Might Matter for Anthropology" by Dr. Sonja Luehrmann

Luehrmann presented material from her new book (Luehrmann 2011) which combines archival research with ethnographic fieldwork in an exploration of how Soviet atheist propaganda reshaped religious practice and inter-religious relations. During the socialist period, the concept of scientific atheism became the banner under which researchers were able to study religious beliefs and practices. Much of this research was undertaken ostensibly to solve the puzzle as to why religious beliefs were not disappearing as they should have according to Marxist theory. The increased rate of baptisms during the 1950s and 1960s dispelled the notion that only the old, ignorant and disloyal would cling to religious beliefs.

Conferences were held and books were published on how to solve the problem of religious survivals. Questionnaires were commissioned seeking to discover why people continued to engage in religious practices; leading to the creation of secular activities designed to meet those needs fulfilled by religion. The atheist propaganda section of the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, renamed the Knowledge Society in 1963, trained its members to create and distribute atheist propaganda, and to conduct lectures on atheist topics.

Luehrmann's presentation demonstrated how research initially conducted from a hostile perspective, in this case with the aim of eradicating religious beliefs and practices, can generate as many useful insights as data acquired through a sympathetic approach.

“The ‘Language Ideologies’ of a Positivist Sociological Study and Evangelical Christianity Compared” by Dr. Tim Jenkins

Jenkins’ paper reflected on similarities between positivist language used by Evangelical Christians and the language used by Festinger (1956) in his ethnography of a flying saucer cult. The cult believed that an alien race, “the Guardians,” was coming to save it from a prophesised impending environmental catastrophe. Media reports about the prophecy prompted a group of ethnographic researchers to infiltrate the cult.

Jenkins argues that the events described in Festinger’s ethnography were constructed through the interactions of the cult, the social scientists and the media; there never was an uncontaminated phenomenon for either the social scientists to study or the media to report upon. Empirical scientific research is based on the assumption that scientific language is capable of describing the world as it really is; that it is purely representative and not affective. But as a language construct, scientific speech does not conclude a neutral, value-free space.

Jenkins contends that scientific speech about the world creates propositions about what is true in the same manner that Evangelical speech does. The process of becoming a scientist involves the internalisation of scientific language and attitudes. In similar manner, it is through conversion that a person becomes an Evangelical Christian. Jenkins proposes adopting a rhetorical approach to social scientific research, one which places the mind outside the head and recognises the performative aspects of scientific language.

“Confessional Anthropology” by Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic

Oustinova-Stjepanovic recently conducted research among Muslim gypsies in Macedonia who wish to become Sufi mystics, and her presentation incorporated both a compelling ethnographic description of the daily routine of a Sufi mystic, as well as her own personal experience of an exorcism ritual.

Prior to commencing fieldwork, and in order to engage in religious practices as part of her methodology, Oustinova-Stjepanovic recognised the need to suspend her own disbelief as an atheist researcher of religion. However, the expectation of difficulties arising from cognitive engagement with religious belief did not prepare her for the performative participation in religious ritual that she was about to experience.

Oustinova-Stjepanovic experienced bodily discomfort in response to the physical contact required as part of the exorcism ritual, and felt uneasy at the mystic’s subsequent demands to demonstrate how to ‘dance disco’. She believes that this discomfort was not the result of her cognitive assessment of the situation, but an affective embodied response, a visceral reaction, which stemmed from her atheist habitus.

Oustinova-Stjepanovic’s paper presented us with new insight into atheism, understanding it not as an intellectual, propositional stance, but as a particular ontological and phenomenological disposition, through which encounters with religion are experienced as an unsettling, and possibly even frightening, embodied reaction.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES AND ISSUES

The workshop raised a number of key themes and issues pertinent to the study of nonreligion, either through common elements within the different presentations or during the question and answer sessions. The second half of this report explores these themes and issues, and the questions they raise in respect to studies of nonreligion.

There was a general recognition among workshop participants that studies of atheism have previously tended to view it as a purely intellectual stance, thus overlooking the embodied and emotional dimensions of nonreligious experience. The need to look beyond propositional belief and to explore the embodied and material aspects of atheism was an issue raised repeatedly throughout the day.

The workshop commenced with a display of images thought to represent atheism's materiality; among them a photo of an old church overshadowed by a modern corporate building, and a picture of Conway Hall in London, which has hosted conferences and events promoting the principles of humanism and freethought since its establishment in 1929. These images were undoubtedly secular in form and content, thus a difficulty arose in the determination of them as specifically atheist. Participants were asked to consider whether atheism has a material culture, or if words and language are its principal forms of expression.

A number of the presentations did involve considerations of the emotional and embodied aspects of nonreligious lived experience. In his discussion on the narrative theme of 'realisation,' for example, Engelke spoke of one woman who referred to the moment when she realised she could live a life without God as 'like having an orgasm'. Mumford's presentation included an interviewee's account of experiencing physical discomfort at the prospect of swearing the oath on the Bible in court, and his consequent request to take the affirmation instead even though he believed this could cast doubt on his integrity as a police officer. Oustinova-Stjepanovic's description of her bodily discomfort during the exorcism ritual demonstrates how an atheist disposition can manifest itself through physical responses.

In contrast, Jenkins' account of the performative aspect of scientific language shows how words operate to influence and construct our understanding of the world. Rather than completely rejecting the analysis of discursive practices, scholars might find it useful to combine both approaches and consider how nonreligious discourses work to influence and construct the atheist embodied experience of being in the world.

Workshop participants often referred to the work of academics such as Charles Taylor (1998) and Talal Asad (2003); multiple secularisms, the failure of the secularisation narrative, and the legacy of Enlightenment values were all common themes within many of the presentations and ensuing discussions. Engelke's paper in particular spoke of the need for a greater recognition of the genealogical relationship between religion (specifically Christianity) and Western secularism. However, as Bangstad argued, while there may be academic recognition that the view of the Enlightenment as a passage from error to truth and revelation to reason is a flawed interpretation, nevertheless it is a view that is still held by many nonreligious people. It may therefore be worth a consideration of the ways in which our own academic conceptions of secularism and the Enlightenment legacy influence our approaches to the study of nonreligion.

Discussion raised the question as to whether the dichotomy of religious versus nonreligious is too sharp, and whether this division results in a failure to consider those individuals who may fall

in between. Naumescu's presentation specifically questioned this either/or distinction. His discussion of how Old Believers in Romania engaged in 'temporary secularisation' suggested it may be possible for an individual to conceive of him or herself as both religious and nonreligious at the same time. This may stem from the pre-Reformation religious ideology held by this community, which makes no distinction between outer behaviour and inner sentiment. Luehrmann argued that academic research has primarily focused on the interaction of the religious and secular space, particularly in Western Europe and America. This focus results in anthropological 'blind spots' regarding the differing processes of secularisation that have occurred in former Socialist states and nations, such as China, Turkey and India.

Eccles and Catto called for a critique of definitions of religion that have been shaped by Western Protestantism. Definitions of religion and nonreligion, which are based on Western Protestant notions of propositional belief, may not be pertinent outside of the context within which it arose. However, their work demonstrates how within the Protestant tradition, the categories of religion and nonreligion, and belief and nonbelief, are mutually constitutive. To young atheists in Britain, the comparison of their own beliefs to those of religious people makes sense, and Catto and Eccles emphasised the importance of taking seriously nonreligious people's own frameworks of conceptual understanding. Bangstad's presentation also stressed the need to consider the vernacular concepts of the people we study. By over-focusing on the need to break the dichotomy, we may overlook the way that this dichotomy frames many nonreligious people's own understanding. The dichotomy and the need to break it are both products of this Protestant tradition; what may be more useful is to consider where and why this dichotomy exists.

Catto and Eccles also spoke of how many of the young atheists they work with demonstrated a reluctance to engage in discussions about religion when there was a risk that it could damage a relationship. In one particular case, a young woman found it easier to tell her religious parents that she was gay than to inform them that she did not believe in God. Eccles and Catto regard such cases as representative of how relationships may be the most sacred thing to nonreligious people.

Other presentations supported this suggestion. Mumford described how nonreligious people sometimes conceal their atheist opinions from family members so as to avoid upsetting or offending them. Others continue to participate in religious practices for the sake of familial harmony. Naumescu's Old Believers maintained their community through generational specialisation; the spiritual salvation of the younger members of the community was preserved through their relationships with the elders. And Luehrmann explained that one of the biggest obstacles to the eradication of religion in the Soviet Union was the sense of community and bonds of friendship that it fostered.

Oustinova-Stjepanovic's presentation demonstrated how our own beliefs, or lack thereof, inform our bodily dispositions, raising the issue that belief may be significant in its impact upon our research. Can an atheist researcher fully understand the embodied experience of religious practice? Does the propositional stance of an atheist researcher of nonreligion affect the validity of his or her data? Can we ever truly suspend belief or disbelief as Oustinova-Stjepanovic hoped to do? Do we even need to? While Jenkins' paper showed how the propositional stance and prior assumptions of researchers can influence the outcome of a study, Luehrmann's presentation demonstrated that data acquired through an oppositional framework can be just as fruitful as that gathered through a sympathetic approach.

On a final note, the topic of mimicry was raised by some audience members, especially in response to Engelke's discussion of humanist weddings and funerals. However, there was a

general feeling among presenters that mimicry implied some element of falseness to people's behaviour, and that such an approach failed to take seriously nonreligious people's own explanations of why they engage in these forms of ritual. Engelke's response was that humanists generally consider the marking of rites of passage to be characteristic of human nature, as opposed to solely of religion.

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