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# **Explaining the rise of ‘Nonreligion Studies’: Subfield formation and institutionalization within the sociology of religion**

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## **ABSTRACT**

As recently as 2008, a major reference work in the sociology of religion could (correctly) describe the study of atheism, secularity, and nonreligion as ‘meager, fragmentary, and unappreciated’. Only a decade later, this situation has been radically transformed. Not only is there a substantial, ever-growing, and constantly diversifying (methodologically, theoretically, geographically) research literature, but ‘nonreligion studies’ now possesses a full ‘academic architecture’ of conferences, journals, monograph series, professional communities, and grant successes. Over this period, the study of nonreligion has become increasingly institutionalized as an established subfield of the sociology of religion. This has not simply come about by magic. On the contrary, there are very good sociological reasons **i)** why, for over a century, nonreligion failed to take off (outside of certain, telling milieux) as an area of sustained sociological interest; and **ii)** why and how this has – seemingly so rapidly – changed.

## **KEYWORDS**

**Nonreligion; subfield; institutionalization; atheism; secularity**

## INTRODUCTION: TOWARD A SOCIOLOGY OF THE SOCIOLOGY OF NONRELIGION

‘No tradition for the sociological study of irreligion as yet exists and this book has been written in the hope that it will help to stimulate the development of just such a tradition’ (1971: vii). So begins Colin Campbell’s landmark *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. That his hope was not immediately granted is evident from the opening of the entry on ‘Atheism’ in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, published 37 years later: ‘While the research literature in the social science of religion is vast, the study of irreligion remains meager, fragmentary, and unappreciated’ (Bainbridge, 2008: 319).

A mere five years later, however, Campbell’s book had become ‘canonised as a foundational text [...], called upon to foreground and legitimise the new-wave sociology of irreligion’ (Lee, 2013: loc. 180). As Campbell himself observed in the preface to a reissued edition:

Quite how long the wait would be before my hopes would be realised is rather starkly illustrated by the citation data for the book. [...] *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* was cited a mere five times between its publication [...] and 2006; in other words about once every seven years. However, by 2011 it had been cited some 86 times [...] evidence that my hope that the work might spark an interest in the study of irreligion was perhaps being realised after all. (2013: loc. 102)<sup>1</sup>

From the vantage point of 2019, we may speak far less tentatively: the social-scientific study of irreligion, albeit now rebranded as the ‘more or less synonymous’ (Lee, 2012: 137 n. 1) *nonreligion*, is now firmly established. ‘Nonreligion’, a relatively recent academic coinage, is a deliberately broad term – ‘a general definition that qualifies it as the master or defining concept for the field’ (ibid.: 130) – that principally refers to ‘Phenomena primarily identified in contrast to religion, including but not limited to those rejecting religion’ (Bullivant and Lee, 2016). It thus includes a wide range of social and cultural manifestations of atheism,

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<sup>1</sup> Using GoogleScholar’s citation data, the book was cited a further 133 times between 2012 and June 2019.

agnosticism, indifference, nonreligiosity (e.g., religious non-practice and non-affiliation), secularity, and other ‘religion-adjacent’ topics. Despite first appearances, therefore, nonreligion is a proper object of enquiry for students of *religion*. To draw an analogy here: such varied phenomena as declining voter turnout or party membership, political indifference or apathy, or the growth of so-called ‘anti-political’ ideas or social movements – all things that one might, if so inclined, meaningfully group together under the broad label of *non-politics* – are of obvious and legitimate interest to political scientists. Likewise, in the realms of medical research and practice, it would be a strange (and moreover unemployable) fertility specialist who claimed that issues relating to infertility are, *ipso facto*, outside of his or her sphere of interest.

The article explores the history of nonreligion within the social-scientific study of religion. (Although sociology will be my main focus here, this story cannot easily be separated from the parallel and often-intertwined stories that could equally be told from the perspectives of psychology, social and cognitive anthropology, history, and political science.) My aims are threefold: i) to explain nonreligious topics’ general lack of direct attention throughout most of the twentieth century – albeit with notable, and telling, exceptions – within the wider field(s); ii) given this long-established tradition, then to make sense of the sudden invigoration of interest and serious engagement the beginning of the twenty-first; and iii) to narrate the successful establishment of ‘nonreligion studies’ as a recognized subfield over the previous decade or so, through adapting some of Talcott Parsons’ insights on ‘institutionalization’, Robert K. Merton’s theories of academic discipline/field formation, and drawing some instructive parallels to the earlier emergence and establishment of New Religious Movement (NRM) studies. Taken together, these three sections constitute an exercise in ‘the sociology of sociology’ (cf. Curtis and Petras, 1972).

## PREHISTORY

As is well-known, the discipline's defining figures of the nineteenth-century were themselves notably nonreligious. Yet they were not so – a point often missed – in any one-dimensional or uniform way. Max Weber's comment that 'We, religiously 'unmusical' people find it difficult to imagine, or even simply to *believe*, the powerful role played by these religious elements in [early-modern Europe]' ([1906] 2002: 214) is, naturally enough, often quoted in this connection. Nevertheless, to his personal avowal of being 'absolutely unmusical religiously and hav[ing] no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me' he added the significant qualification: 'But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious *nor irreligious*' (quoted in Swatos and Kivisto, 1991: 347; emphasis in Weber's original). Note too the sweeping societal, political, and economic significance that Weber accords to subtle changes in theological thinking in *The Protestant Ethic* ([1905] 1906). Such affirmation of the 'independent causal significance of religious ideas' (Parsons, 1944: 187) is a far cry from many of his heirs' tendency to regard religious thought and practice as essentially passive in the face of wider socio-cultural currents (Stark, 2000).

It is a far cry too from the position of Karl Marx, for whom religious beliefs and ideas are primarily the epiphenomenal by-products of concrete political and economic realities. Like Weber, Marx's own relationship with religion, personally and professionally, was rather more nuanced than is often supposed. Most notably, his famous 'opium of the people' paragraphs were written at a time when opiates were known chiefly for their analgesic and supposed curative properties (McKinnon, 2005). For the hypochondriac Marx, himself an enthusiastic laudanum self-medicator, religion might help one cope with the painful symptoms of society's ills: 'the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions' ([1843] 1970: 131). Though in doing so, admittedly, it could inure one from seeking

proper treatment of the chronic underlying condition. But for Marx himself, religion itself was not the root problem: ‘The call to abandon illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions. Thus, the critique of religion is the critique in embryo of the vale of tears of which religion is the halo’ (ibid.).

Among sociology’s other canonical founders, Émile Durkheim and, earlier, Auguste Comte were perhaps most straightforwardly secularists and positive atheists. Even here, though, things are not quite so simple. If imitation is indeed the best form of flattery, then Comte’s own wildly ambitious plans for a universal ‘Religion of Humanity’ rather complicates the common and automatic conflation of anti-theism and anti-religion (Comte, [1852] 2009; Wernick, 2001). While there is a long tradition of regarding Durkheim as ‘a militant atheist, not just an unbeliever but a propagandist for unbelief’ (Evans-Pritchard [1973] 1981: 253), even here markedly different evaluations are available (notably Pickering, 1984: 3-28). He could also show levels of sympathy and nuance not normally associated with the *stereotype* of ‘a propagandist for unbelief’:

[H]e who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it! He is like a blind man trying to talk about colour. [...] There cannot be a rational interpretation of religion which is fundamentally irreligious; an irreligious interpretation of religion would be an interpretation which denied the phenomenon it was trying to explain. [...] Nothing could be more contrary to the scientific method. ([1919] 1975: 184-5)

The diversity and nuance of their nonreligiosities notwithstanding, it is true that sociology’s founding generation(s) jointly bequeathed to the discipline two notable characteristics: a high incidence of personal nonreligiosity among its leading practitioners (Gross and Simmons, 2009; Smith, 2003: 111-14), and a programmatic tradition of regarding *religion* – at least in modern, western, ‘developed’ societies – as an aberrant ‘social fact’ demanding special interrogation and explanation. Conversely, being an atheist or otherwise nonreligious ‘was assumed to be self-explanatory; as the natural state of mature civilised men (and of not a few early sociologists) it hardly required any discussion, let alone explanation’

(Campbell, 1971: 9). Also relevant, perhaps, is a general proclivity within the field to investigate things perceived as strange or problematic (i.e., not one's *own* beliefs). As Rodney Stark, for example, has complained: 'the space a religious group receives in journals is almost directly inverse to its size and conventionality' (1999a: 57). These observations have received strong support in a group statement of 'twenty-three theses on the status of religion within American sociology' jointly published by leading figures:

In most of social science, the received presupposition is that the secular or secularity is a kind of space created with the disappearance or exclusion of religion. For most who operate under categories inherited from the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century social-evolutionism, the 'secular' suggests a kind of natural resting place – that is, a neutral territory or condition achieved when the superstitions and irrationalities of religion are dispelled, or perhaps a final destiny for ever-evolving humanity. In this sense, secularity itself is naturalized, made neutral or objective, and de-problematized as a particular historical and social formation needing explanation itself. (Smith et al., 2013: 921)

Compare also the comments of British sociologist Margaret Archer and colleagues, versus the 'unexamined legacy of the enlightenment that we privilege atheism as the intellectual baseline and make religious belief alone something which is to be explained or defended' (2004: 5):

Refraining from any beliefs about transcendent reality, atheism has appeared to be the position of value-neutrality in this arena, the rational default category against which all other beliefs are measured. [... But atheism] reflects its own experience, the experience of the transcendent absent. It cannot then be held, as it so often has been, especially in anthropology and sociology, that religion alone is something to be explained and not atheism as well. (ibid.: 12)

In this connection, it is important to note a number of twentieth-century exceptions to this general trend. These typically arose from milieux in which manifestations of unbelief and nonreligiosity were regarded, not as the largely unnoticed 'normal', but rather as deviant and requiring explanation. That is to say, 'for the believer it is the very absence of belief which is the great social sickness' (Durkheim [1895] 1982: 91).

Most obviously, such was broadly true for those in the Catholic-dominated *sociologie religieuse* tradition of Gabriel Le Bras and his disciples in France, the Low Countries, Italy, and elsewhere (Dobbelaere, 2000). From the 1930s onwards, important studies, focusing

directly on unbelief, indifference, and lapsation as growing religious and social problems, began to emerge. This was not only ‘sociology [...] at the service of the Catholic Church’ (ibid.: 434), but it was explicitly and proudly so. Given the peculiarity of this orientation within the wider sociology-of-religion world, however, its proponents could also not fail to be notably self-aware. As Theodore Steeman, a Louvain-trained sociologist, Franciscan friar, and later theology professor at Boston College, notes early into his *The Study of Atheism: Sociological Approach*:

Evidently, the problem of Atheism is not a problem in its own right, but only in the context of some notion of normalcy linked to the believing attitude. [...] The study of atheism, therefore, presupposes that we treat the absence of God in the life of the atheist as a ‘conspicuous absence.’ (1965: 1)

This explicit construction of atheism as a ‘conspicuous absence’, in contrast to a ‘notion of normalcy linked to the believing attitude’, was most strikingly manifest in the conference on ‘The Culture of Unbelief’ hosted by the Vatican in 1969 (Martin, 1970). This was a remarkable event for several reasons. The sheer fact that ‘the first time that an international group of social scientists gathered to discuss this particular subject’ (Berger, 1971: vii) should be planned and hosted in the heart of the Catholic Church – in collaboration with the Sociology Department at UC Berkeley! – was, understandably enough, a source of surprise and intrigue to the world’s media. But it makes perfect sense from the perspective adopted here. Note, further, the sheer calibre of the speakers. Peter Berger was entrusted with inviting the social scientists and historians, who thus included: Thomas Luckmann, Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah, Bryan Wilson, David Martin, Charles Glock, and Martin Marty. Among their theological interlocutors, invited by the Vatican, were the future cardinals Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, and (to Berger’s surprise) the American Protestant ‘radical’ Harvey Cox. Pope Paul VI himself addressed the conference and, during a private audience, ‘was kind enough to assure Talcott Parsons he was acquainted with his work’ (Martin, 2013: 188).



Despite this pomp and circumstance, it cannot be said that ‘The Culture of Unbelief’ precipitated any serious or long-lasting focus on its subject matter within the sociology of religion. The likes of Parsons and Luckmann were naturally happy enough to write an ‘occasional piece’ in exchange for five days in Rome among friends and colleagues. But this was not the catalyst for any significant new focus on the topic beyond the conference. In fact, several of the speakers used the opportunity to express scepticism at the value and/or viability of ‘Unbelief as an Object of Research’ (Wilson, 1971). Berger’s own summation puts it rather neatly: ‘I don’t think that any profound insights came out of this conference [...] But it was a fascinating event’ (Berger, 2011: chap. 4; see also Cox and Dawson, 2019).

The above paragraphs advance a brief and necessarily speculative explanation for the fact that, until relatively recently, irreligion/nonreligion was an infrequent and, even then, normally fleeting topic for serious sociological investigation. The basic point here is simply that sociologists are not themselves spared from the ‘labyrinths of conflicting relations of interest, power, control, resource flows, habitus, and so on that ought to make us question the world as given to us’ (Smith, 2014: 26; see Bourdieu, [1987] 1992), and which they are so skilled at identifying in others. Of course, this cuts both ways. Below, I shall advance an explanation for why, seemingly suddenly, the sociology of religion’s decades-long collective uninterest in nonreligious matters changed. Before doing so, it is worth emphasizing a number of outright practical matters which also affected the popularity of the topic. The first of these is simply that, until *relatively* recently, ‘religious nones’ only made up a small proportion of the population in many countries. This was particularly true in the USA. Nones accounted for only 5-10% of the general population up until the mid-1990s: large enough to be noticed (e.g., Vernon, 1968), but too small, diffuse, and inchoate to merit or repay sustained sociological attention. Avowed atheists, agnostics, or humanists were – and still are – an even smaller constituency. While a small number of worthwhile studies were published on the memberships

of dedicated secularist and humanist groups, these too suffered from i) only attracting a small and atypical subset of the already-tiny numbers of avowed atheists and humanists; ii) generally showing few signs of growth or wider impact. In fact, some of the earliest such studies almost read as warnings to other scholars not to squander their time on such marginal phenomena. Thus Vetter and Green's 1932 article on members of the now-defunct American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, tellingly published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, frames 'Atheists' alongside 'Single Taxers, Fundamentalists, [and] Communists' as adherents of 'extremes of social, political and religious outlook' (1932: 179). To the best of my knowledge, it would take thirty-four years for an American social sciences journal to publish another article on atheism. The opening gambit of Demerath and Thiessen's 1966 paper in *American Journal of Sociology*, however, is hardly a clarion call to get in early on a new and exciting subfield: 'This paper offers a belated diagnosis of an organization that is currently in its death trance.' (1966: 674)

## **HOW THE GANG (FINALLY) GOT TOGETHER**

Fast-forwarding to the present, it is clear that nonreligion's sociological state of neglect no longer applies. At the most basic and easily quantifiable level, the past decade or so has seen a rising tide of publications on, or closely related to, nonreligion. This trend began a little over a decade ago. The website of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) used to keep a running bibliography of such items. While not necessarily an exhaustive record, it gives a fair impression of the subfield's changing output. For each year from 2000 to 2005, fewer than 20 such pieces are recorded. The following four years, 2006 to 2009 inclusive, fluctuate from lows of 35 to a high of 56. 2010 and 2011, meanwhile, have 87 and 126 entries, followed by over 200 in both 2012 and 2013. By the time the bibliography was last updated in January 2015, 2014 already had 150 nonreligion-related publications to its name (Cotter, 2015).

With the pace of publishing ever increasing, and (concomitantly) the need for new scholars entering the field to require help in seeking out relevant literature ever decreasing, the online bibliography was discontinued.

So what has changed? How are we to explain the sudden surge in sociological – and indeed psychological, anthropological, historical, etc. – interest over the past ten-or-so years? Furthermore, a key feature of nonreligion studies over this period has been its rapid ‘institutionalization’ (cf. Parsons, [1951] 2005: 220-58). One can now speak, not merely of a ‘*tradition* for the sociological study of [non]religion’ (Campbell, 1971: vii; emphasis added), but of a distinct subfield. How, and why, has all this come about?

First of all, two (interrelated) sets of things happened in the late-1990s and very early 2000s which, taken together, boosted the relative attractiveness of studying nonreligion, especially among British and American social scientists. This in turn produced a still-small number of often-junior scholars who were, to the best of their knowledge, ‘lone wolves’. However, once their researches began to bear fruit in articles and conference papers, and they realized they were not absolutely alone, then a rapid period of networking ensued – such that everyone working in the area was soon in touch with everyone else. This dense-clustering, acting in concert with the ‘relative attractiveness’ factors to be explained below, created a kind of virtuous circle: fueling more studies, more scholars noticing and joining in, and – ultimately – the founding of a bona-fide subfield. This latter, ‘institutionalization’ half of the story will be discussed in due course. Here, I shall spell out my ‘attractiveness’ theory in more detail.

On the face of it, the fact that social scientists suddenly started becoming interested in nonreligion in the middle-years of the first decade of the twenty-first century does not require much special explanation. For this was a period in which the media and book-buying public demonstrably also did – and in a big way. Most obviously, these years were the epicentre of the New Atheism, for which the best-selling books by Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel

Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens are the defining, though far from exhaustive, reference-points. Whatever else the New Atheism may have been, its emergence and reception were social facts of genuine significance or surprise – and ones therefore crying out for sociological interrogation (see Bullivant, 2010; 2017).

New Atheism was undeniably *one* of the catalysts of the emerging social-scientific interest in the area: here was something that was clearly too obvious, and too ‘loud’, not to be written about. But it was by no means the only one. For a start, the New Atheism did not arise *ex nihilo*. It cannot really be understood apart from a much broader and more diffuse ‘flourishing’ of atheism and nonreligiosity, probably beginning in the nineties and rapidly accelerating in the noughties, not least after 9/11. Recent scholarship points to a growing, loose-knit movement – much of it centered online – of which New Atheism is but a single, and not necessarily representative, expression (Kettell, 2013; LeDrew, 2016: 95-123). Add to this the growing prominence of ‘no religion’ in social surveys. The ‘rise of the nones’ was already becoming a staple in the US media’s religion coverage in this period of ferment, with a regular stream of major national surveys generating headlines on the growth of this demographic. In fact, significant media interest in nonreligion more generally also played a role in incentivizing academic interest in the topic. Having one’s work featured or cited in the news, or being asked to write an op-ed on a newspaper’s blog, is undoubtedly attractive to academics, for reasons both personal (a ‘Gilderoy Lockhart’ effect) and professional (e.g., national research ‘impact’ audits, institutional PR). It is also comparatively rare: the arcana of much academic work, no matter how obviously exciting to fellow experts, does not always translate easily or predictably into sellable copy. Albeit with some striking exceptions (as with NRM scholarship in the aftermath of ‘cult tragedies’, etc.), this is also true within the sociology of religion. Nonreligion studies has, over the past decade or so, proven a notable exception. For all that academics might complain about the superficiality and selectiveness of (some) journalistic coverage of their

particular topic, there is no doubt that media interest has brought exposure and other benefits both to the subfield itself, and to many individuals working in it.

In short, atheism, secularity, and related topics were becoming harder for social scientists to ignore. They were also becoming much easier to study. As previously noted, quite apart from any more ulterior reasons, would-be researchers have long been hampered by the difficulties of ‘finding’ the nonreligious, especially in the USA. Obviously, the more nones and/or outright atheists or agnostics there are, the easier they are to identify and interview, and the more likely they are to turn up in largescale surveys in usable (sub)sample sizes. The internet too – long a vibrant space for atheist discourse and community-building (Cimino and Smith, 2011; Addington, 2017) – has opened up all kinds of fieldsite possibilities for social research, only some of which have yet been exploited (see, e.g., Lundmark and LeDrew, 2019). Furthermore the ‘new visibility of atheism’ in the early-2000s both spawned, and attracted new attention towards, a diverse ecology of events, groups, and other initiatives. These naturally have proven attractive to researchers as opening up possibilities of well-defined sites for ethnographic work: the perfect case-study for a PhD project or a small grant application, for example. The Atheist Bus Campaign, for instance, has generated a significant secondary literature of its very own (e.g., Tomlins and Bullivant, 2016, with chapter case-studies from fifteen different countries). The Sunday Assembly, a ‘secular congregation’ launched in London in 2013, has already been the basis for PhD projects in England (Bullock, 2017), Scotland (Cross, 2017), and America (Frost, 2017).

In addition to such demonstrable ‘supply-side’ changes – i.e., nonreligion becoming more obvious, interesting, and accessible to potential researchers – I contend that a much subtler, and admittedly more speculative, shift was afoot. As much recent scholarship has highlighted, identity politics have become a signal feature of recent atheist discourse,

organizing, and campaigning. Once again, this applies especially in the US context. As Kettell notes:

New atheism has self-consciously adopted a discourse rooted in a language of group rights and demands for equal treatment. This has been fuelled, to a large degree, by a desire to establish a sense of explicitly ‘atheist’ identity, and [...] to develop a greater notion of group membership, community and belonging. (2013: 66; see also Taira, 2012)

One important facet of all this was a growing self-consciousness among atheists and nonreligious of being a marginalized and/or persecuted minority in some societies. In America, this idea gained critical support in *American Sociological Review* in April 2006 (i.e., just as the sociology of nonreligion was about to take off). Penny Edgell et al.’s ‘Atheist as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Belonging in American Society’ used national survey data to show that ‘atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups’ (2006: 211). According to the authors:

We believe that in answering our questions about atheists, our survey respondents were not, on the whole, referring to actual atheists they had encountered, but were responding to ‘the atheist’ as a boundary-marking cultural category. (ibid.: 230)

That is to say, ‘atheists’ seem to function in American society as a ‘symbolic other’, demarcating a perceived boundary between the American and un-American, and – by extension – the moral and immoral.

In retrospect, the growing self-awareness of the nonreligious as i) constituting a coherent social minority group, with accompanying collective concerns and causes, and who are ii) demonstrably the objects of widespread stigmatization, marginalization, and (potentially) discrimination, looks like a combination of factors specifically designed to provide sociologists with both personal and professional reasons to study nonreligion. The high levels of nonreligiosity among sociologists and other social scientists are well-evidenced (Gross and Simmons, 2009) and, as noted above, have long roots. Since social scientists are people too, then one would expect the growing identitarian awareness among the-nonreligious-

in-general would also affect at least some nonreligious sociologists. Furthermore, the discipline of sociology is one that is particularly primed to investigate social problems, both due its particular purview and methods, and to the avowedly activist commitments, mentalities, and motivations of many of its exponents (Collins 1998). In light of the Edgell paper – which, as of June 2019, has been cited over 800 times – it come as no surprise that the topic of ‘anti-atheist prejudice’ has rapidly generated a substantial sociological literature (e.g., Cragun et al., 2012). After all, if the nonreligious *are* a misunderstood and misrepresented minority in American society, then who better to help set the record straight than nonreligious sociologists themselves? Of course, it is not the case that all sociologists of nonreligion are themselves personally nonreligious, or personally committed to ‘the nonreligious cause’ – though many are. A good number could, moreover, be seen as proponents of a kind of *sociologie non-religieuse* (e.g., Zuckerman, 2014; Cragun, 2015).

## **NONRELIGION AND SUBFIELD CREATION**

An influx of individual scholars, even producing (by 2012) some two hundred-odd publications a year, do not in themselves a subfield make. Volume aside, arguably the most interesting feature of nonreligion studies over the past decade has been its rapid ‘institutionalization’. I use this term here in a double sense. Firstly, it refers to the *internal* process of building-up an architecture of ‘professional structures’ among scholars of nonreligion: dedicated networks, workshops, conferences, curricula, journals. This process involves a ‘differentiation’ (Merton, [1961] 1973: 50-1) of the subject from other areas of the sociology of religion, as being not only one of particular interest (i.e., enough to warrant and sustain this special attention and effort), but as needing to be addressed in a more rigorous and sustained way than has previously been the case. This, implicitly or (often) explicitly, includes criticism of the way in which the subject has hitherto been treated within the wider discipline.

Hence, in the subfield's early days, the profusion of quasi-moral descriptors such as 'neglected', 'overlooked', 'unappreciated', 'marginalization', and 'dereliction of duty' by writers decrying the situation *up until now* (e.g., Bainbridge, 2008; Bullivant, 2008; Pasquale, 2007). It typically also involves such things as the refining and clarifying of key terms, the retooling of existing theoretical frameworks and/or the forging of new ones (cf. Parsons, 1944), and the identification of particularly influential and pioneering texts or figures, both past and present. In general terms, this kind of differentiation is a standard phase in the establishment of academic subfields and/or subdisciplines (Hambrick and Chen 2008), as for example with the sociologies of sport or indeed religion itself (Malcolm, 2014; Dobbelaere, 1999). Perhaps the most instructive parallel here, however, is the formation of New Religious Movement (NRM) studies from the 1970s within the sociology of religion, and which has itself now spawned several thriving sub-subfields (see Arweck, 2006: 45-57; Ashcraft, 2018).

Secondly, I also take institutionalization to involve the *external* process by which an embryonic subfield, and those working within it, gain the necessary recognition and 'legitimation' (Merton, [1961] 1973: 51-2) from the wider discipline: in this case, the sociology of religion. Strictly speaking, there is nothing actually *stopping* scholars interested in a given topic from working on it, congregating together whether in person or online, or even publishing their own journals – and to go on doing so indefinitely even if their specific focus receives either little recognition, or perhaps even specific disdain, from outsiders within their own academic circles. However, if this activity is not valued by others wielding 'academic capital' (Bourdieu, [1984] 1988: 84-110) within their wider disciplines, there are very strong disincentives to expending one's resources in this way. No matter how excellent and interesting *other* 'X Studies' compatriots may find one's work, if major academic presses, high-quality journals, prestigious conferences, funding bodies, REF panels, or tenure committees (and the peer-reviewers engaged by them) do not agree, then one's career will inevitably suffer. Indeed,



if 'X Studies' does not carry sufficient credibility, then it will be much harder even to have a career in the first place. Not only will there be no 'perfect' posts ('Research Fellow in X Studies') to apply for, but in applying for generic posts (Lecturer in Religious Studies) one will need to play down one's primary research area in favor of secondary or tertiary interests. Furthermore, one will be up against a large pool of other applicants whose own primary work is in more accepted specialisms (and for which there may already be existing courses to teach, and/or potential future colleagues with whom one has mutual interests or connections). Accordingly, there is no shortage of examples of failed (sub)fields (see, e.g., Edmonds 2005 on 'memetics').

In practice, of course, the internal and external aspects of institutionalization are not neatly separable, either causally or chronologically. One does not set up a full-blown subfield from scratch, with a full complement of conferences, journals, and other professional paraphernalia, and then make a formal application for recognition from the 'institutionalized status-judges of the intellect' (Merton, [1961] 1973: 51). In point of fact, the initial impetus and encouragement towards the new area often comes from sympathetic *outsiders*, such as a potential doctoral supervisor encouraging the exploration of a new, interesting-looking topic. Insiders and outsiders (or in these cases, perhaps better 'fellow travelers') can work together to produce a kind of virtuous circle, whereby the value of a nascent subfield is recognized early on, and its development is actively supported by those not directly involved; those (often comparatively junior) researchers in the subfield start to justify this initial faith by producing research of wider interest (and, critically, citability), which in turn attracts further encouragement, support, and engagement. If successful, people, data, ideas, and methodologies nurtured in 'X Studies' may start to make an appreciable contribution to the wider host field or discipline, for example through being taken up by those not intensely involved in the subfield: several examples of this from the sociology of (non)religion are given below. In time,

moreover, they may come to be more-or-less fully institutionalized, that is, regarded as a permanent and integral component of the wider field. NRM studies is, again, a clear example of a subfield that has gone on to have such ‘a transformative impact’ (Robbins, 1988) on the sociology of religion.

The rapid growth of the sociology of nonreligion owes much to this dual process of institutionalization. One obvious ‘internal’ landmark was the foundation of the *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network* in late 2008 by Lois Lee (a Cambridge PhD student in Sociology). As noted earlier, a steady stream of nonreligion-related publications was already beginning to appear by this time. As would soon become clear, a slowly growing supply of other scholars (mostly postgraduate students or junior faculty) were starting to become interested in the topic. The purpose of the NSRN, which in its early days consisted of a simple website with a directory of members and a semi-regularly updated bibliography, and two email lists (‘Announcements’ and ‘Discussion’), was to be a means of helping scholars to find and connect with other scholars. This led to the hosting of a one-day conference in Oxford the following year (December 2009) on a shoestring budget: ‘Non-religion and Secularity: New Empirical Perspectives’. This is widely regarded as the first social sciences conference to be held on this topic since the Vatican’s 1969 ‘Culture of Unbelief’ event. Forty-seven people attended, including all organizers and keynotes.

In the ten years since then, nonreligion’s ‘professional architecture’ has grown fairly rapidly. The NSRN has continued to expand. Its website is, for example, a much grander affair, overseen by an ‘Online Team’ of almost twenty people. International conferences, now consisting of several days of papers, occur at least every two years. A peer-reviewed journal, *Secularism & Nonreligion*, launched in partnership with the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at the University of Hartford, CT, is now in its eighth year. An NSRN book series, ‘Religion and Its Others: Studies in Religion, Nonreligion, and

Secularity’, was launched by De Gruyter in 2015, with eight volumes now published or forthcoming.

Nor is the NSRN the only ‘institutional carrier’ (cf. Scott, 2003) of multidisciplinary nonreligion studies. Brill launched another journal, *Secular Studies*, in 2019. Several other academic presses have their own nonreligion – or *explicitly* nonreligion-inclusive – book series, such as New York University Press’s ‘Secular Studies’ (unrelated to Brill’s journal), and Palgrave Macmillan’s ‘Histories of the Sacred and Secular: 1700-2000’. Given the weight that ‘grant capture’ carries as an item of academic capital, both directly in terms of funding posts and indirectly as a measure of status and prestige, the willingness of funding bodies to allocate scarce and severely competed-over resources to nonreligion projects is of critical significance. The past few years have seen several six- or seven-figure grants, including from the Leverhulme Trust, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and the John Templeton Foundation.

Perhaps the single most telling indicator of nonreligion studies’ nascent institutionalization is the extent to which its particular topics and terminology have been incorporated into mainstream sociology of religion. For example, Estonian religious historian Atko Remmel and colleagues argue for there having been a recent ‘non-religious turn’ (*forthcoming*) within the wider study of religion. While this is both difficult to quantify, and indeed easy to overstate, the programmes and themes of leading ‘generic’ sociology of religion conferences are one indicator. The 2016 joint ISORECEA and ESA Sociology of Religion convention, for example, focused squarely on ‘Religion and Non-Religion in Contemporary Societies’. The 2018 annual meeting of SSSR/RRA, furthermore, included five sessions explicitly dedicated to aspects of nonreligion, plus a number of nonreligion-specific papers in other sessions. It is also now fairly routine for Calls for Papers to include explicit mention of nonreligion or nonreligion-related areas. Another telling indicator is the number of leading scholars who have, in the past few years, starting writing *directly* on atheism, secularity, and

nonreligiosity (e.g., Brown 2012; Smith 2019; Stolz et al. 2016; Woodhead 2016). This is often, to a certain extent, simply a shift of emphasis and focus. However, the change of analytic focus from ‘religious decline’ (a long-time staple of the sociology of religion) to ‘nonreligious increase’ is not purely semantic; the one is not merely the other’s mirror image of the other. In short, as Christian Smith has rightly observed:

Secularity and secularism are areas in which sociologists of religion have increasingly focused in recent years, ‘the secular’ becoming more properly understood as not a neutral, default human position or category, but instead a contingently situated, particular stance and type, the exigencies of which are worth empirical investigation. (2014: x n. 4)

## CONCLUSION

There was nothing terribly *new* about New Religious Movements in the 1960s and 1970s. In America alone, the nineteenth century had seen the founding of the Millerites, Latter-Day Saints (plus multiple offshoots), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christadelphians, Christian Science, and the Theosophical Society – to name only a few of the more famous. And yet, due to a combination of factors, ‘NRMs’ – as they were not yet called – received a surge of scholarly interest in this period. Trendy topics come and go in all disciplines and fields, and a spate of publications does not, in and of itself, constitute the founding of a bona-fide subfield. But in the case of NRM Studies, that is precisely what happened. The history of how and why this was so has been ably recounted elsewhere (Arweck, 2006: 45-57; Ashcraft, 2018). We may, however, be grateful that it did. The study of NRMs soon reaped (re)invigorating theoretical rewards for the sociology of religion as a whole (Robbins, 1988). Indeed, much of what now counts as ‘textbook orthodoxy’ within the wider field – e.g., on conversion, religious socialization, identity construction and maintenance, charismatic leadership and authority, religious marketplaces – was originally incubated and ‘beta tested’ by students of NRMs.

It would be wildly premature, not to mention recklessly Fate-tempting, to make the same prophecy for nonreligion studies. But the drawing of much more modest parallels does indeed seem justified. After all, there was nothing remotely *new* about the various phenomena included in the term ‘nonreligion’ in the early 2000s. And yet, for the concatenation of factors I have outlined above, atheism, agnosticism, indifference, secularity, and nonreligiosity became suddenly – and, at least in hindsight, sociologically explicable – attractive as research topics. And just like the erstwhile ‘cult’ scholars of the sixties and seventies, these new pioneers quickly found themselves dissatisfied with the technical vocabulary they had inherited: hence the refinement and clarification of existing concepts, and the coining of several new ones – including ‘nonreligion’ itself (e.g., Lee, 2012; Bullivant and Lee, 2016). Moreover, having followed the well-trodden paths of ‘differentiation’ and ‘legitimation’, one can now speak of nonreligion studies as having attained a sufficient level of ‘institutionalization’ as to be a fully incorporated member of the sociology of religion’s pantheon of subfields.

What directions it takes from here, and what ways in which it might enrich the field as a whole (though note Archer and Smith’s remarks above concerning ‘the secular’ no longer being viewed as a neutral, default, non-problematic social space), remain to be seen. But whatever future editions of *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* might have to report, it certainly won’t be that ‘the study of [non]religion remains meager, fragmentary, and unappreciated’ (Bainbridge, 2008: 319).

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