

What of nonreligion in the public sphere?

*Could replacing existing notions of 'religion' with more inclusive categories be a better fit for increasingly 'nonreligious' societies? A recent UCL roundtable discussion on unbelief raised questions about several areas of social and public life where it might be necessary to take better account of the nonreligious. **Lois Lee** argues that a positive role for religion in the public sphere will rely on finding egalitarian models that incorporate the nonreligious alongside the religious.*



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In recent years there has been a growing awareness of the central role that religion plays in personal, public and political life – even in so-called secular societies.

One example of this trend is a new dedicated **Faith Research Centre**, launched just last month as a major new arm within **ComRes**, one of the UK's leading polling companies. Meanwhile, in academia, the social sciences have been discovering – or rediscovering – their interest in religion, with big name academics – **Ulrich Beck**, **Bruno Latour** and others – publishing books on religion, sometimes for the first time in decades, sometimes for the first time ever. And, of course, **the Religion and the Public Sphere project** and **this blog series** also illustrate that questions about religion in the public sphere have returned to centre-stage in university life.

To say that these initiatives are important is a gross understatement. For reasons set out in numerous contributions to this forum (such as **here**, **here**, and **here**), such interventions should be welcomed and encouraged.

But it is important also to recognise that these initiatives often reproduce religion-centred conceptual frameworks that may limit their effectiveness in the longer term. They focus, that is, on the category of 'religion', or 'faith'. They do so for historical reasons and by necessity, since alternative conceptual frameworks are very much in the making. Ultimately, though, a positive role for religion in the public sphere will rely on the development of egalitarian models capable of including the nonreligious on even terms.



Egalitarian approaches to religion

What **Cécile Laborde** describes (in relation to her area of study) as ‘egalitarian’ approaches to ‘religion’ that find ways of including nonreligious analogues are of increasing interest to many theorists and practitioners concerned about religion and the public sphere. In public discourse, too, phrases like ‘people of all faiths *and none*’ have replaced more exclusive ways of describing ‘religious’ plurality in Britain and elsewhere. But the category of ‘religion’ itself (and ‘faith’, for that matter) remains a stumbling block.

As I have argued elsewhere, ‘religion’ is in fact highly unusual compared to the other social categories that we rely upon in public life, in that it is exclusive of whole (and increasingly large) sections of the population. Most other social categories used in public life are inclusive. When we think about age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, even political orientation, we think about populations as a whole. We anticipate that – however contested such classifications might be – it will be possible to describe everyone in terms of their age, their gender identity or their ethnic one. We consider that most people have a nationality and a political orientation – and if they don’t, we see this as in some sense anomalous: we are *concerned* about these conditions of statelessness, political apathy, and so on.

Religion is different. When we think about religion, we find it quite reasonable that some people are religious, whilst others are not and, today at least, we do not tend to see an absence of religion as a problem to fix.

Maybe the reason for this is that religion really is unique, and that the rules that apply to other social classifications simply don’t apply here. In recent years, however, many people – academics and non-academics, alike – have moved in another direction. Instead of seeing religion as something only some people have, they are more and more focused on replacing existing notions of ‘religion’ with inclusive categories that are more fit for purpose in increasingly ‘nonreligious’ societies.

The language is developmental still. Some explorations remodel existing categories – using, for example, concepts grounded in Protestant European traditions, such as ‘worldview’ or ‘lifeworld’, or expanded notions of ‘religion’ itself, as in **Ronald Dworkin’s** *Religion Without God* or **Alain de Botton’s** *Religion for Atheists*.

Others – myself included – see potential in developing new categories on the basis of theoretical reflection and, crucially, empirical research with nonreligious as well as religious populations. Scholars taking this approach turn to concepts such as ‘meaning systems’ or to the ‘existential’ (my own and some others’ preferred term, alongside concomitant studies of ‘existential belief’, and ‘existential culture’).

There are pros and cons to each approach. The former categories are more familiar – and therefore less jarring – to the ear. But they carry baggage, too, for example generalising Protestant notions of what it means to be religious and nonreligious to broader populations – something which may do more harm than good in the longer run. On the other hand, embracing fresh approaches takes better account of the latest research into religion and nonreligion, but involves much more effort to absorb into existing discourses.

Whichever approach, though, these explorations are bringing about a radical transformation in how we think about religion. They are bringing our thinking much more into line with the social contexts we are actually experiencing, and are making us much more able to respond to them.

Nonreligion and the public sphere

Finding egalitarian approaches is not merely a theoretical question, or a point of principle – though it might be both of those things, too. These approaches are important because nonreligious

people and existential cultures are part of public life in the same way that religious people and existential cultures are. What, then, is at stake when we think about *nonreligion* in the public sphere?

A general egalitarian principle implies that that schoolteachers, immigration officers, lawyers and anyone else who sometimes give consideration to people's religiosity may need to consider the nonreligious, too.

But we can also speak in much more concrete terms about nonreligion in the public sphere. At two recent roundtable discussions on the theme, '**Who cares about unbelief?**'^[i], held at UCL and the ASR conference in Seattle, contributors pointed to a number of areas where the nonreligious should be of interest, not on the basis of parity so much as on the basis of their experience as 'nonreligious' people and/or as religious 'unbelievers'.^[ii] These sessions raised the following questions:

- How effective are legal and policy frameworks that centre on 'religion' or even 'religion and belief' at dealing equitably and consistently with religious and nonreligious actors?
- How are local communities impacted by the growth of nonreligious groups, individual identities, and/or unbelief? Are the structures that support religious participation in local services and public life capable of including nonreligious and unbelieving actors? Attention was drawn to migration experiences as one example: we know that religious organizations provide support and crucial resources (including '**social capital**') to people trying to find their way in a new place, but what then of nonreligious migrants? What resources are we providing them?
- What challenges do public institutions face in their attempts to include and provide for nonreligious people? As **Judith Everington** showed in her work with RE teachers, providers of different kinds of goods often have the will but not the means to improve provision for the nonreligious in their classrooms or elsewhere.
- Does the presence of nonreligious people and/or unbelievers give rise to social tensions or pose other challenges for civil society? How do nonreligious existential convictions impact upon people's ability to get along with others in the workplace, for example, or in their local communities?
- What is the impact of this increasingly large and influential constituency on the political landscape? **In the US, the nonreligious are politically aligned with the Democrat Party (though they are also less likely than other groups to actually vote)**, whilst in the UK there are signs that the past link between nonreligious populations and public sector occupations and leftist politics is eroding, following a shift towards the private sector and towards the political right in recent years. How will these political profiles shape the politics of tomorrow?
- What is the standard of public understanding of nonreligion and unbelief and how does this impact upon community relations, law-making, social policy development, and so on? As well as issues around 'religious literacy', how should we tackle issues of '*nonreligious literacy*' in the context of a cultural landscape in which what it means to be nonreligious is consistently reduced to the outlooks of a tiny handful of elite spokespeople, **or rather spokesmen** such as Richard Dawkins, Brian Cox, A.C. Grayling, Stephen Hawking – men whose nonreligious outlooks vary somewhat but are nevertheless examples of a particular form of rationalist, post-Enlightenment humanism that is not shared by the nonreligious population as a whole.
- What is the role of the media in this? **We heard that the media lack knowledge about who the nonreligious are, and therefore about how they can best cater to this audience.** Yet we also heard it proposed that media consumption might be one of the main conduits by which the nonreligious explore their own existential beliefs and cultures, and come into contact with the existential beliefs and cultures of others, both religious and nonreligious. Is this something that media organisations and funders could be more reflective about, and responsive to?

Asking good questions



These are only some of the questions posed in these sessions, and even these are dauntingly broad in scope. We are, moreover, very far from having answers to many of them, or even sometimes the language for asking them in the most effective way.

But asking the questions is crucial, not only because this large and growing constituency does and should play an active role in public life, but because recognising this will actually help protect the role of religion in public life too. In countries where the **nonreligious are or are fast becoming majorities** – ‘**nonreligionising**’ contexts, if not **secularising ones** – the religious are at real risk of being marginalised or ignored entirely in the longer term. What will preserve a space for *religious* existential culture in public life is precisely an awareness that existential culture is something that everyone – not just the religious – has a personal stake in.

About the author



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[i] The Who Cares About Unbelief? roundtable series was hosted by UCL's **Secularity and Secularism Studies** in relation to the **JTF-funded Scientific Study of Non-religious Belief** project. Two events took place in 2016, at the **Association for the Sociology of Religion conference** in Seattle and at **UCL Institute of Advanced Studies** in London.

[ii] *The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (OUP, 2016) provides further guidance on categories.

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