(Dis)Believing and Belonging: Investigating the Narratives of Young British Atheists[1]

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Abstract

The development and public prominence of the 'New Atheism' in the West, particularly the UK and USA, since the millennium has occasioned considerable growth in the study of 'non-religion and secularity'. Such work is uncovering the variety and complexity of associated categories, different public figures, arguments and organizations involved. There has been a concomitant increase in research on youth and religion. As yet, however, little is known about young people who self-identify as atheist, though the statistics indicate that in Britain they are the cohort most likely to select 'No religion' in surveys. This article addresses this gap with presentation of data gathered with young British people who describe themselves as atheists. Atheism is a multifaceted identity for these young people developed over time and through experience. Disbelief in God and other non-empirical propositions such as in an afterlife and the efficacy of homeopathy and belief in progress through science, equality and freedom are central to their narratives. Hence belief is taken as central to the sociological study of atheism, but understood as formed and performed in relationships in which emotions play a key role. In the late modern context of contemporary Britain, these young people are far from amoral individualists. We employ current theorizing about the sacred to help understand respondents' belief and value-oriented non-religious identities in context.

Keywords: *Atheism, Youth, UK, Belief, Sacred*

Phil Zuckerman (2010b, vii) notes that for decades British sociologist Colin Campbell's call for a widespread analysis of irreligion went largely unheeded (Campbell 1971). This situation is changing with the publication of edited volumes such as Zuckerman's *Atheism and Secularity* (2010a) and

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Michael Martin's *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2006), and the founding in 2008 of the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), developments prompted by the rise of what has been characterized as the 'New Atheism' (Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris 2004; Stenger 2009).

Social scientific research is contributing to greater understanding of the breadth and complexity of contemporary non-religious identities (Arweck 2012). What has still been particularly lacking, though, is in-depth consideration of young people, despite the fact that atheists are relatively young (Voas & Day 2007; Zuckerman 2009). Similarly, the academic discipline of youth studies has up until now engaged very little with the study of religion, and recent work combining the two areas has generally still not addressed non-religion specifically (Collins-Mayo & Dandelion 2010; Possamai 2009).

There is related survey research (Hunsberger & Altemeyer 2006). In *Soul Searching* and *Souls in Transition* Christian Smith and colleagues present data from the US-based National Study of Youth and Religion gathered with non-religious as well as religious teenagers (Smith 2005, 175; Smith 2009, 581). Lisa Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton (2011) have since used data from this survey in order to try to access young Americans' lived religiosity or lack of it, and Christel Manning (2010) has innovatively investigated the raising of children in secular/atheistic families in the USA. These, though, are rare, North-American-based examples of work investigating the non-religiosity of young people.

The present article contributes to a new, burgeoning literature (also testified to by postgraduate research in the area (Cotter 2011b)) through presentation of data collected in 2011 via interviews with and the completion of personal profiles by a sample of people in Britain aged between 16 and 26 years old who identify as atheist and volunteered to participate. Their narratives of (dis)believing, belonging and activities related to atheism are presented and analyzed using a framework informed by current sociological work theorizing belief and the sacred in late modernity, and in comparison to others' findings. The appropriateness of studying 'non-religion' from a perspective shaped by the study of religion is also addressed.

The surveys show that there are a lot more people who will say, when asked, that they do not believe in God than people who will also identify themselves as 'atheists'. While church attendance has declined in Europe, the 2008 round of the European Values Studies shows people who consider themselves atheists to be a small minority, except in France with a rather larger 15 per cent of the total population.[2] A recent international poll found

2 <http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu/evs/research/themes/religion/> accessed 12 August 2012.

the number of people globally describing themselves as religious to have declined by 9 per cent since 2005 with most of the shift being towards claiming to be 'not religious' whilst remaining within a faith tradition, although the number stating being a 'convinced atheist' also increased by 3 per cent.[3] Such shifting patterns indicate how complex the spectrum of religiosity and secularity is (Riis 1994).

Approaching Atheism

Gavin Hyman's work (2007) reminds us that atheism arises out of a particular Western Christian setting, and that there exist various forms, such as Romantic, scientistic, feminist and Marxist. Atheism is certainly not new (Buckley 1987), but the degree and tone of media debate and intensity of international circulation of atheistic ideas does appear to be so (Amarasingam 2010).

Lois Lee (2012, 131) defines non-religion as: 'anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion', and distinguishes atheism within this broad category. Paul Cliteur (2009, 1) defines atheism negatively, stating that 'an atheist does not believe in the god that theism favors'. Zuckerman pays attention to atheists' moral states, picking up this issue of negative definition: 'It is often assumed that someone who doesn't believe in God doesn't believe in anything, or that a person who has no religion must have no values. These assumptions are simply untrue. People can reject religion and still maintain strong beliefs. Being godless does not mean being without values' (Zuckerman 2009, 953). Our findings bear this observation out.

Being defined negatively in terms of what it is not is a perennial issue for atheism. Given its nature and our training as two qualitative sociologists of religion, we approached atheism in a manner informed by the social scientific study of religion. Yet, we found no single pre-existing framework within this field (atheism implies, after all, a relationship to theism rather than religion *per se*), or the new study of non-religion adequate for analysis.

As Teemu Taira notes: 'The idea that religious beliefs are hypotheses, or claims about the world, is asserted by the New Atheists as a given, although actually it is a proposition that needs to be demonstrated, furthermore, what is needed is to show how beliefs work in the lives of believers' (Taira 2011, 119). This article goes some way towards showing how beliefs work in the lives of young atheists. As will be seen below, respondents operate with a

3 <http://redcresearch.ie/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/RED-C-press-release-Religion-and-Atheism-25-7-12.pdf> accessed 19 August 2012.

similar understanding of religious belief as that described by Taira. Yet this emic understanding of belief is also insufficient. Hence whilst prioritizing belief, we understand it as embedded in context and relationships. Recent literature exploring the notion of the sacred in secular settings casts further light on these atheist narratives.

Belief and the Sacred

The content of belief is performed through the telling of public stories, which establish behaviour, relationships and identity (Day 1993). We rehearse, explain, evaluate and justify in order to position ourselves as part of a legitimate conversation, identifying with some and distancing ourselves from others, and hence 'one could study how people use stories to select, reject, or justify participation in religious groups or practice, how belief or lack of it is involved to explain behaviour, how religion figures in the reconstruction of life events and stories…' (Day 1993, 227). Abby Day reviews how the anthropology and sociology of religion have regarded belief, concluding that: 'in conditions of late modernity, belief to many people is an expression of how they belong to each other' (Day 2011, 27). Hence (dis)believing and belonging are deeply mutually implicated.

Belief is also deeply related to emotion, which begins with society and relationships rather than the individual (Riis & Woodhead 2010, 52). We are born into pre-existing worlds of feeling, which supply emotional vocabularies and set our range of potential emotional experience.

Campbell (1971) challenged what he saw as the crude functionalism of sociologists of religion such as Milton Yinger (1957), reducing irreligion to a (poor) substitute for religion which fails to fulfill the individual's need for answers to questions of ultimate concern. Yet, there has been a growth in the neo-Durkheimian approach within the study of religion, applying a non-ontological understanding of the sacred and thus eschewing such reductionism. It is beyond the scope of the present article to review the extensive literature on the sacred (see Idinopulos & Yonan 1996 for detail). We draw upon recent work which emphasizes the socio-culturally contingent and emotional nature of the sacred and thus helps connect the secular and religious in a non-reductive manner.

Gordon Lynch argues that in late modern societies there are multiple sacred forms, that is, historically-contingent instances of 'what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life' (Lynch 2012,

29). In decoupling the concept of the sacred from the religious, Lynch shows how in societies defined by plurality there remain deeply held collective commitments, symbols and emotions shaping life. Decline of institutional religious belonging does not mean amoral rationalism (Lynch 2012, 163–4). Similarly, though she prefers to talk of 'special' rather than sacred things, Ann Taves also sees these as not necessarily having to constitute a religion (Taves 2009, 162).

Kim Knott (2010a) questions Taves' rejection of the term 'sacred', which she finds of greater value for investigating deep seated values and norms. Knott (2005a; 2005b) and Veikko Anttonen (2005) adopt a spatial analysis of the sacred, addressing how boundaries are created and maintained in context. Knott has subsequently progressed from locating the religious in the secular to identifying secular sacreds (Knott 2010a; 2010b). Lynch (2012) does not see the distinction between religious and secular sacreds as meaningful. Certainly the term 'secular' is a contested one, as is 'religious', and the two do not form a true binary (Martin with Catto 2012). Nonetheless, we find Knott's distinction of the 'secular sacred' helpful, as it underlines that non-negotiable beliefs and values are to be found in non-religious as well as religious contexts (Knott 2010b).

Utilizing these theoretical ideas as our framework, we analyze how (non)belief for young atheists living in a late modern society is formed and performed through relationships, bound up with emotions, and shaped by social and cultural structures, creating a simultaneous sense of belonging and distancing from religious 'others'.

The Study

In the original research design we aimed to interview 16 participants aged 16–25, and began with a visit to a local British Humanist Association (BHA)[4] meeting, deeming this a likely source of recruits. We were proved wrong. Advertising the call for young participants describing themselves as atheist on social networking sites proved much more effective, and 37 valid responses were received, mainly from students at British universities.[5] Respondents were asked to complete a personal profile via email, giving place of residence, place of study or work, subjects studied if at university or school, or nature of work, and a brief description of what had influenced

4 A national association founded as the Union of Ethical Societies in 1896 and becoming the BHA in 1967: <http://www.humanism.org.uk/about/history> accessed 12 August 2012.

5 We are grateful to all who responded to our call.

them to become atheist. We also enquired if they would like to proceed to a face-to-face interview or email or telephone follow-up to the initial response. In addition to conducting interviews, we attended related events and reviewed various forms of British and American online atheist material suggested by the participants themselves.

Respondents were spread across England and Scotland and we were able to interview 24 out of those willing, who were selected purposively to ensure a gender balance and mix of backgrounds (see Table 1; we have used initials and general locations in order to preserve anonymity). The personal profiles for the remaining 13 supplemented these data. Interviews took place either at Lancaster University where the project was based or at the participants' study or home location. They lasted on average just over an hour and were recorded and fully transcribed. Participants were spread roughly equally between male and female, which was somewhat surprising, given that men are more likely to describe themselves as atheist in the UK (Brown & Lynch 2012).

Informants were studying a range of subjects, including the natural and social sciences as well as arts and humanities. Four participants had not been to university and had immediately entered employment on leaving school, in one case at age 16 rather than 18.[6] Two were still at school, one of who was due to enter university in October 2011. The sample is biased in favour of the more educated, which is in keeping with the statistical profile of non-religion in Britain (Brown & Lynch 2012),[7] and all were white, which also fits with the national profile.

There was no set list of questions for the interviews, as it was felt important to let conversation develop from the information supplied by the respondents themselves in their profile. Given the project context, the focus was inevitably upon their atheist identities, but stories were allowed to flow. We take the interview itself as a performative context (Day 1993).

Transcripts, profiles and notes were systematically reviewed and discussed, and themes developed through dialogue with other researchers through conference presentations, and via an online feedback forum for participants. Janet Eccles' previous empirical research focused upon British Christian women, and Rebecca Catto's on non-Western missionaries. Eccles is an older researcher from a background within the Reformed Christian tradition in North East England, who might now be described as Quaker/

6 In the UK schooling is compulsory up until age 16.

7 Further research investigating what variations, if any, there might be between different socio-economic groups would be productive.

agnostic; Catto is a younger researcher raised as a Catholic in South East England, also now 'agnostic'. Both what we hold in common and what is different have proved constructive for scrutinizing the data and developing the analysis.

Given that the study involved a small-scale non-randomized sample, our findings of course cannot be generalized to the wider young British population. Having volunteered to participate in a study focused upon young people's atheism, it would seem highly likely that these respondents had reflected upon their atheism more and were keener to discuss it than young British atheists in general. However, at this stage, the data are not available from randomized studies to confirm or deny this presupposition. Hence, it is simply a caveat to be borne in mind whilst reading our findings. Similar findings from other relevant, non-generalizable studies nonetheless suggest that our results may be indicative of broader trends.

(Dis)Believing

As would be expected given our recruitment strategy, almost all respondents chose to describe themselves as 'atheist', with 'humanist' the second most popular option from those provided on the form (Atheist/Humanist/Secularist/Free Thinker/something else). Despite beliefs not being a focus of our questions, the language of belief suffused their discourse. RC, a female university student raised by a Protestant father and Catholic mother against a sectarian background in Southern Scotland, stated:

> I believe in the non-existence of god rather than I don't believe. Same thing but to me, you know, it does make a difference because it is more of a positive spin on it. [...] It's something I can grasp and that I can take ownership and this is my belief. Yeah, and when I sort of read about...well, there's no god, let's do things our own way, let's not have to be nice, because, you know, there's going to be issues from gods, you can be nice off your own back, sort of thing, 'cos it's good to help others, it's good to do things in a positive way…

The placement of 'dis' in parentheses in the title to this article is important, because respondents were keen to assert the positive content of their beliefs rather than merely disbelief in god. GE, another female student, from a liberal Christian home and studying Theology, put it as follows: 'atheism, it's a negative, you don't believe in anything... but I don't think,

because, humanist, I've got a book about humanism and I thought maybe that describes, because I do believe in like the goodness and the morality of humanism.'

Discussions in interviews related to religion led instantly to discussion of belief, religion being defined in terms of individual belief in god and the supernatural, with respondents reacting strongly against a perceived assumption that religion has a monopoly upon morality. About her society's charitable activities, the president of a Scottish atheist student society said: 'but we're not motivated to earn supernatural brownie points. We're not doing it because we think god's going to like us; we do it because we think we probably should.' The language of belief here is used to exclude, distinguishing HM and her group as morally superior to theistic believers. Similarly, MC, a student in the North West, said: 'not putting ourselves against some supernatural who I don't believe exists and for whom there exists no proof but I'd rather see that it is just us the human race and it's for us to kind of do well in our lives, not anything to do with a supernatural power…'

Even when discussing death and the loss of close relatives (three interviewees had lost their father), no supranatural beliefs were expressed. In addition, four interviewees specifically mentioned their rejection of complementary and alternative medicine because they are not evidence-based, and two expressed a similar view of horoscopes. Although religion narrowly conceived in terms of Judeo-Christian monotheistic belief is the main form in direct contrast to which these interviewees present their atheism, other forms of non-evidence-based belief also attracted criticism and skepticism.

Evidence and proof are important to the interviewees. Though not all have studied or are studying science at university, science is valorised:

> So, in a way, for scientific progress, I would say yes, you should seek the truth through science, but in saying you should just get rid of religion or being aggressive to people that are religious I don't support that, at all. People who have their own beliefs and then you force your opinion on them, you're doing the same thing as the fundamentalist religious. (BG)

Here equality and freedom trump imposition of non-religious beliefs. MC resents feeling he had religion imposed upon him at school: 'That's part of the problem, they've kind of tried to tell me how to believe.' Hence he values the freedom to believe, but struggles to live this out always: 'but then I now kinda feel I want to... I don't want to tell them [religious people] they're wrong but I really do.'

Belief is emotional as well as intellectual for these young atheists, and attitudes towards religion ambivalent. Although respondents reported being able to appreciate religion as an anthropological phenomenon, stereotypical views persist, for example, the assumption that a Christian will be homophobic. Religion is generally equated for these respondents with conservative Evangelicalism and/or Islam. High expectations of correspondence between beliefs and behaviour were also noted, as Collins-Mayo and colleagues also found in research into 'unchurched' young people's engagement with Christian youth clubs (Collins-Mayo, Mayo et al. 2010). Religious friends and strangers are criticized for not behaving in line with their beliefs: e.g., a Muslim housemate who has sex outside of marriage.

As Cotter (2011b) found in research with non-religious university students in Edinburgh, institutional religion is viewed as damaging – the cover-up of child abuse in the Catholic Church was frequently cited – yet individual faith can be acceptable as a coping mechanism. The line is crossed when people try to 'force' or 'ram' their religion 'down one's throat'. Freedom means doing what you wish, as long as it does not negatively affect others. Hence teaching Creationism as science in schools was an issue often raised, because it gives children an incorrect understanding of how the universe came into being. Faith schools were perceived as worrying, in that they might teach Creationism and other false beliefs. On the other hand, the freedom of parents to raise a child in their religion was upheld as more important for some of our respondents. Many reported quite positive experiences at Christian state-funded schools. Secularism was rarely raised unprompted, though, when asked, most agreed that 26 Anglican bishops should not have automatic seats in the upper chamber of Parliament and that the law should be secular.

Like other young people in the West, religious and non-religious, these informants embrace the Golden Rule ethic (Day 2011; Smith & Denton 2005; Vincett & Collins-Mayo 2010). They describe following what they believe is the right thing to do and generally wishing to be tolerant and open-minded: '…I have still that side in me about respecting people's church because I grew up in one and also I'm a like scared… a politically correct person that doesn't like the idea of bashing any religions…' Zuckerman (2012, 10–11) similarly finds American apostates to be liberal, progressive and pro women's and gay rights. Faith in humanity, freedom, equality and the rational pursuit of the truth and science are prized. These values can come into tension with religion and each other.

All respondents had specific stories of what had led them from religion or indifference to religion to a publicly atheistic stance, which distinguishes

them from the British secular mainstream, in which religion is generally not discussed (Voas & Day 2007). This lack of belief is developed in relationships. Emotional encounters with explicitly religious people – particularly the Christian Union (CU)[8] on university campuses – appear to have reinforced atheistic stances:

> this was in the living room [in a student hall of residence] and I said to him [a member of the CU], 'So, when.... you pass, what do you think happens?' And he said, 'if I've been righteous and good I'll go to heaven' and then I said: 'What about your family? What happens to them?' And he said, 'Well, I'm afraid that unless they convert to my faith they're going to burn in hell.' And that for me, that was it, like I... before then I was a complete atheist anyway, but that sort of… that's something that sticks with me for… that's always going to stick with me like an example of what religion has not only done to him but what it's done to the relationship with his family because then he is the moral authority in his family. He's the sort of highest being in his family and he actually believed, because his family didn't sort of rejoice in the Word of God then he... that they're going to burn in hell for eternity which I just thought was the worst thing I'd heard because it was so casual as well. (BG)

As Christopher Cotter (2011b), Abby Day (2011) and Giselle Vincett & Elisabeth Olson (2012) have found, these young people are far from being atomized individualists, despite not affiliating with an organized religion. It is clear in their narratives that they do have deeply held commitments, which they associate with their atheism. In keeping with Edward Bailey (1997), James Day (1993) and Abby Day (2011), we find that belief is formed and performed through relationships and narratives, and expressed in emotive language. As Lorna Mumford (2011) has found with older individuals involved with non-religious organizations in London, their intellectual arguments for atheism and against religion are associated with emotional experiences. Mumford cites Ole Riis and Linda Woodhead (2010), who show how we can rationalize judgments, having come to feel them to be valid. SE, who had recently completed a teaching degree with a specialization in Religious Studies, told us:

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8 'The Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowships: The Christian Unions' is a charity supporting evangelical Christian student groups across the UK: <http://www.uccf.org.uk> accessed 27 August 2012.

> I never never really believed but I was always.... they were always telling me about it at school, so I thought it must be true but I had always had this little niggle but when my dad died it wasn't a niggle any more. I was just sure that I didn't believe.

In Relationship

The presentation thus far underscores that belief (and lack of belief) is bound up with belonging. Interviewees emphasized the significance of upbringing: 'if I had been brought up in a different country, I would believe something else'. All reported coming from loving, supportive backgrounds, even where there had been divorce, the loss of a parent, or tension due to their atheism. Peter Hopkins et al. (2010) characterize the response of Christian young people in Glasgow to the religiosity of their parents in terms of correspondence, compliance, challenge, and conflict. They also emphasize the influence of siblings, teachers, grandparents and friends. A similar pattern can be found in this group's description of their backgrounds and journeys to atheism.

Many participants said religion was not a subject discussed at home: 'because I've never been offered religious explanations, when I heard them [at primary school] they seemed bizarre and unjustified'. In contrast, a female student from a Mormon family described feelings of guilt and tension in rejecting the religion of her parents, despite the family remaining close and loving, especially as now only one of five siblings remains within the church. One male student, who had been president of his university's atheist society, stated that his mother changing from being a Christian to a humanist 'opened the door' for him:

> I don't think I ever really believed enough to want to do anything about it, but the idea of god is obviously everywhere in general culture so as a kid, you kind of think it exists. I don't know. And moved over to the... barely sitting on the fence of agnostic for quite a long time and then when my mum kind of decided she didn't need religion, I thought, 'well, I suppose I really don't' and when I went through GCSE sciences and did A level Physics, I got really interested in science, and, do you know what? There's no evidence for it and plenty of evidence against it, erm... so, what's the point? That sort of brought me to my current view, which is pretty solidly atheist now.

Another male student's speaking up at home about his atheism encouraged his mother to state she also was an atheist. Even if children do not inherit

the stance of their parents, their parents are influential and traffic is two-way (Hopkins et al. 2010).

VJ described her (divorced) parents as not religious, but her atheism had caused conflict with an evangelical Christian aunt, who criticized her for taking the Easter vacation from university (because her aunt regarded it as a Christian holiday and so VJ as hypocritical to take it whilst simultaneously rejecting Christianity): 'I was taken aback when she said that, the tone of voice when she called me an atheist; I was kind of a piece of dirt on the bottom of her shoe. I went home and cried afterwards.' VJ also said that her grandmother is sad that she, her mother and brother do not believe in something, because she feels they are missing out. Thus we see demonstrated the performance of belief and lack of belief in relationships occasioning considerable emotion.

SM is a young policeman unique in our sample in having a young family of his own and one of the few to have had no involvement with higher education. He has no problem with the liberal Methodism espoused by his father. It is interactions with his in-laws, who are leaders in an independent charismatic church, which have moved SM towards actively asserting an atheist identity. He went with a friend to their church, met his wife for the first time, but found it: 'A very strange place and just the preaching there and things made me start to question and think… I never really believed in god before that but that's when I really started to disbelieve in god.' His wife subsequently became pregnant before marriage. Her father suggested she have an abortion and her brother told her that she and the baby would 'burn in hell'.

This is an example of how painful conflict with family can be, to the point that rejection has moved SM from agnosticism to atheism. GE has felt able to come out as gay to her parents but not as an atheist, and others reported avoiding clashes with grandparents, friends and colleagues over religion.

Atheism is an identity developed through conflictual and convivial personal interactions for our sample. Whilst some suppress the identity in particular relationships in order to preserve the peace, two young women reported that it was a deal breaker for romantic relationships. One, KC, discussed her shock at having discovered her boyfriend with whom she lives praying shortly after the death of a grandparent:

> I was very upset by it, extremely upset. I was like, 'I can't believe you think you're a Christian, because if you are, then I don't know you at all.' But I think it was the shock that he did something after two years that I had not

> known about. And we live together and everything so... But I think it was very much the fact that he thought he believed…

So disbelief can also be deeply emotional and committed. An atheist identity can foster modes of belonging as well as disconnect, through belonging to a student group with likeminded people, for example. Having shown how young atheists narrate the formation and development of their atheistic beliefs and disbeliefs through relationships, we now consider how (dis) belief relates to action.

Action

'I don't spend my life doing things because I don't believe in religion', BJ told us, capturing the uncertain relationship between belief and behaviour for respondents. Similarly, BG said: 'I don't believe I have a cause, I just think I don't have to have any affiliation with religion or a belief in a supernatural being or anything like that.'

For the purposes of the study, we defined 'Organized Atheism' as offline or online engagement with a specific non-religious organization. Table 1 shows that half our interviewees were involved in such a way, and that only six out of the 24 were at the time of our interview affiliated to a non-religious community. In a research note on his 2007 web survey of 698 Oxford University students concerning non-religious identities, Stephen Bullivant found that ''disbelieving without belonging' is very much the norm, especially among the young' (Bullivant 2008, 364–5). Yet, atheists, humanists and secularists have been organizing in the UK since at least the nineteenth century (Fowler 1999), and four interviewees were currently or had been president of their student non-religious society. These societies are affiliated to the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies (AHS), which was founded in 2008 and has been growing rapidly since.[9]

Seemingly such organizations have struggled and continue to struggle to formulate positive action (Budd 1977), as RC and GE struggled to articulate the positive content of their atheistic beliefs above. As seen, HM mentioned that her society engages in charitable work. VJ discussed the activities of her society. She personally has done some fundraising for a secular charity, but generally society activities have comprised meetings and talks:

9 <http://www.ahsstudents.org.uk/> accessed 15 July 2012.

> they [the AHS]... kind of suggest that people do Reason Weeks, kind of where you get speakers, run workshops, basically stuff like that, so that you raise awareness, a bit like the events the Christian Union and the Islamic Society run, they tend to have in Christian Union Awareness Weeks and stuff like that. So we try to do something similar in the sense that it's a week of events run by the society but in a more 'let's talk about things' rather than 'let's question our beliefs', although we do go to the Awareness Weeks for the other religious societies, they encourage that because they want questions, sometimes (she laughs).

GE has been LGBT officer at her university and so actively campaigning for rights. BJ, quoted at the top of this section, discussed the voluntary work that she undertakes, but she did not regard this as motivated by her atheism.

Just as there was little discussion of voluntary work or activism connected to respondents' atheism, so too was ritual rarely raised. In response to a question about why she had described herself as a humanist on her personal profile, RC said that she was not affiliated to the BHA but had attended a few humanist weddings. The BHA and Humanist Society of Scotland (HSS) train celebrants to perform weddings and funerals, and the numbers taking up these secular ceremonial options are increasing (Brown & Lynch 2012, 339). RC described how the ceremonies she had attended had been tailored to the couples, including a gay couple undertaking a civil partnership, and it was good to have 'all the niceties without feeling hypocritical'.

PS described finding her father an 'ally' when her Anglican mother asserts that she ought to go to church at Christmas. Sometimes a respondent's mother or grandmother had taken them to church at Christmas when they were younger, and VJ justified still celebrating Christmas in terms of it being a time for family. WT had recently lost his father. He talked about attending a CU Christmas carol service at his university city's historic Anglican cathedral despite disliking the religious content, because it gave him a 'fuzzy feeling' and reminded him of attending as a family when younger. Now he gets frustrated with his two older brothers for refusing to attend the Christmas carol service at their local church:

> We're not going and I got annoyed with them because it was always like a nice family outing just before Christmas and they were like: 'It means nothing to me. It's just a wasted hour.' And I thought: 'you've got to put that aside. It's quite nice and even if it's boring it's kind of something nice to do every Christmas with the family.'

The relative youth of our respondents may partially account for their lack of reflection upon rites of passage: weddings, funerals and births of children were generally remote experiences. Yet it is interesting that only one of the three interviewees who had lost their father raised any concern regarding ritual, and the one respondent with children, SM, made no mention of a ceremony, or feeling the need for a non-religious substitute for a baptism, for his children.

Atheism appears not to be associated with particular, formally ritualized behaviour, but rather with disengagement from, tension with or developing an alternative from religious ritual. It is through online behaviour that respondents' atheist identities seem more to be developed and expressed.

Online and Material Culture

SM told us that he had learned almost all he knew of atheism online, and found some form of belonging through engagement with popular media and online communities. PD, whose younger brother had also become an atheist and often engaged with online resources, wondered whether we had noticed that: 'there's quite a lot of internet culture around a lot of this stuff as well.' Zuckerman (2012, 171) notes the growth of the internet as a resource for US apostates, helping them in a way not previously possible to connect with like-minded others and feel more comfortable in the world. The use of American sites and videos appeared to be feeding concern about the situation in the US in terms of the political power of conservative religious groups and what was perceived by interviewees to be widespread belief in Creationism. Some of these fears were then transposed to the British situation.

The American New Atheists Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett were both mentioned, with MC responding to a question about what had motivated him to attend a Muslim student event at his university by saying:

> I wanted to be able to argue a lot better against religions and I realised I needed to be a lot better... I needed to know a lot more about faiths. You know, I watch people and I've read people like Dawkins and Hitchens and Sam Harris and I've read the books and I'm always impressed by just how clever and quick they are. That's something that's impressed me and maybe they can be role models ...erm... I watch them in debate and they're just... it's phenomenal how quick they are... I mean, if you're going to criticize faith as aggressively as I do, I need to know a lot more about it.

In almost every interview Richard Dawkins was mentioned, with many owning, if not having read, *The God Delusion*, but his approach was also criticized as being too aggressive and intolerant by many (other than MC). This finding echoes Bullivant (2008, 366), who reports that 18.1 per cent of his respondents had read *The God Delusion*, including 71.6 per cent of those considering themselves to be atheist or agnostic, with some also finding the tone too 'aggressive', 'arrogant' or 'abrasive'.

British comedians who publicly identify as non-religious and incorporate criticism of religion into their stand-up comedy routines have also come to the fore recently. Two such comedians, Robin Ince and Josie Long, both posted our call for project participants to their Twitter accounts, and this boosted our response rate significantly. The following extended quote from RC (in response to a question about whether she feels part of a humanist community) summarizes the relationship between comedy and an online non-religious British community:

> there is a community there, you don't need to be actively involved in it but it's nice reading about it and I use Twitter as well and a lot of, even comedians, that I follow and stuff, they're involved with the Humanists' Association.....
> Eccles: Anyone in particular?
> RC: I mean, Robin Ince is [*she laughs a lot*] the first one that comes to mind. But I mean, I think, lefty British comedians, it tends to be sort of the usual stance but again, it's almost a given among the comedians that I'm interested in.
> Eccles: So in a sense you feel part of this 'cyber community'?
> RC: Yeah and I don't feel I need to be constantly looking at it all or I need to actively be doing things but it is nice to have it there and knowing there are a helluva lot of like-minded folks and, you know, wanting to post things…

The *Atheists' Guide to Christmas* features 'contributions from the world's most entertaining atheist scientists, comedians, philosophers and writers… to help you enjoy Christmas' (Sherine 2009, xii). This and 'Nine Lessons and Carols for Godless People',[10] which PD had attended, are illustrative of the comedy/non-religion connection. PD and another male student also mentioned listening to 'The Infinite Monkey Cage', a BBC radio science and comedy show, which Robin Ince presents alongside the atheist astrophysicist Brian Cox. Professor Cox's BBC TV programme 'Wonders of the Universe',

10 <http://newhumanist.org.uk/1917/nine-lessons-and-carols-for-godless-people> accessed 15 July 2012. This is an annual commercial event, which plays with the title of the Anglican annual Christmas service broadcast on TV from King's College Cambridge 'Nine Lessons and Carols'.

spectacularly charting and explaining the birth and death of galaxies and broadcast during the interview period, was also mentioned as an example of how the universe is magnificent in and of itself without recourse to supernaturalist explanations of any kind.

Their atheist stance is not *demanding* particular actions of these young people, but engaging with New Atheist literature, associated comedy and blogs and forums is common behaviour for affiliated and non-affiliated respondents alike. A shared culture of Anglophone atheism (Cotter 2011a) emerges. The books purchased, if not read, may be taken as an example of a material culture, but, having conducted interviews mainly in public locations, we did not encounter other examples of a shared atheistic material culture, apart from VJ wearing her Atheist Society hooded top to the interview. A start has been made on investigating non-religious material culture by doctoral student Katie Aston (2009), while Patrick McKearney, also a doctoral student, is investigating atheist comedy culture (Cotter 2010).

Majority or Minority?

Our study leads us to the tentative conclusion that disbelieving in religion is more important to British young atheists than formal non-religious belonging. Yet informal belonging to an imagined community (Anderson 1991) through media consumption and engagement is also common. Thus there exists a certain ambivalence for young atheists living in the late modern context of 'Christian, secular and religiously plural' Britain (Weller 2005, 73). In being white and, generally, from a nominally Christian background in terms of family and/or schooling, socio-economically included, and, arguably, part of the majority in terms of not presently belonging to a religious group (Lee 2012, 173), our respondents appear to be part of the mainstream in British society. In contrast to Mumford's (2011) and Brown's (Brown & Lynch 2012) older respondents, who were affiliated to non-religious organizations in the UK, and frequently reported anger and bitterness towards religion, our respondents were confident in expressing their atheism and, as seen, generally open to learning about religion and accepting of individuals' rights to be religious, whilst representing religious people as the unusual minority.

From an investigation of religious discrimination at UK universities, Paul Weller et al. (2011) report expressions from some atheist and agnostic respondents of discomfort with the institutionalization of religious observance (a particular issue at UK universities with a church foundation), and concern that diverse religious beliefs are acknowledged in a way that non-

religious beliefs are not. Our three interviewees studying Theology and Religious Studies reported a sense of 'minority status' in their classes. KS, a History student taking a Religious Studies minor, recounted:

> It was modernity we were doing, secularism a bit more, and she [the student tutor] put these jokes up about religion, on the wall, and said 'this is disgusting we don't think this should happen' and I sat there thinking 'I actually now find this quite offensive now, myself. That all this year I haven't criticized religion at all, yet the atheists are being beaten up in this particular seminar.' I didn't say anything, I just sat there seething, and I don't think it's fair at all.

SE said that she had struggled in vain to find a teaching position, because many (publicly-funded) schools in her local area have either an Anglican or Roman Catholic foundation and she needed a reference from a religious practitioner, which she was not in a position to provide.

Expressing one's atheism certainly seems more difficult for those with religiously-committed parents, such as LA and GE. Science teacher Alom Shaha recently published *The Young Atheist's Handbook* (2012) about his experience of growing up in a 'a strict Bangladeshi Muslim community in South-East London' and the struggle developing his atheist position for 'those who may need the facts and the ideas, as well as the courage, to break free from inherited beliefs'.[11]

In sum, non-religious people can and do feel discriminated against in contemporary Britain. Yet other international contexts such as India and the USA appear far less comfortable for atheists (Quack 2012; Smith 2010). It is in the context of personal relationships such as with religious parents, grandparents, partners or aunts that interviewees reported feeling the most difficulty.

The Non-Religious, the Secular and the Sacred

Kim Knott defines the 'secular sacred' as 'non-negotiable matters of belief and value that do not derive from formally religious sources but that occur within the domain of 'non-religion'' (Knott 2010b, 126). Given that Knott (2010b) identifies free speech as a 'secular sacred', we suggest that there are similar beliefs and values that have become non-negotiable in the lives

11 <http://alomshaha.com/> accessed 15 July 2012. Shaha's book launch was attended by Robin Ince, the BHA's chief executive and atheist philosopher AC Grayling, amongst others.

of these young, and other, non-religious people's lives: science, reason and freedom (Budd 1977; Cotter 2011b; Fowler 1999; Quack 2012). Such 'secular sacreds' contribute to a collective identity expressed and reinforced through particular communication structures (Lynch 2012). This is certainly not to say that such values are exclusive to non-religious people, rather that we find the repeated combined articulation of them in related discourse to be distinctive and definitional.

The sacred has a shadow side: it can divide as well as bind (Lynch 2012). In simultaneously religiously plural, Christian and secular modern British society, collective identification with these secular sacreds can lead to a distancing from the (constructed) religious Other. In various offline and online spaces, deeply-held values and beliefs are challenged and developed, such as in the living room, the classroom, or on Twitter. It is when threatened or challenged that the sacred can erupt into mundane, everyday life, and strong emotion is involved in such moments, as we have seen in the encounters informants recount.

The religious and the secular are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless, a reified division between the two has social force for respondents. It would be a direct contradiction of their self-understandings to depict their atheism as somehow functionally, essentially religious; fulfilling an assumed gap left in their life by an absence of religion. However, it would also be a misrepresentation to deny non-religious people and groups' definitional relationship with religion in terms of difference from it. Employing this neo-Durkheimian notion of the (secular) sacred helps avoid such pitfalls. It highlights convergence as well as divergence: religious and non-religious young people can share respect for 'sacred' forms such as tolerance and relationships (Vincett et al. 2012). Rather, the frame helps us to understand the religious and secular as in a dynamic relationship, and moves us beyond interviewees' emic understanding of belief as strictly propositional and prior to experience, without losing the centrality of the concept.

Conclusions

Secularization in terms of declining participation in organized Christianity in Britain does not necessarily mean desacralization and moral decline, as some have appeared to assume (Anderson 1992). However, there is less acceptance of traditional institutional belonging amongst non-religious and religious young people alike (Day 2011; Vincett & Collins-Mayo 2010; Woodhead 2010).

The young people included in this study have not been brought up in a fully secular society. They have grown up with at least some religion – mainly Christianity – in their lives, if only at school, though general unconcern/indifference regarding religion is assumed to be the norm. Based on our findings and those of others cited in this article, we suggest that to become an atheist in Britain today requires a conscious effort. There is no set road map to follow. In many senses the young atheists included in this study are making it up as they go along, aided by the internet and like-minded others. This unites them with some of their age group, whilst creating boundaries with (sometimes imagined) religious others.

We maintain that atheism, by definition, requires distinct yet related treatment from religion. The tools of the qualitative study of religion do not automatically map onto the study of the non-religious, and there is much more work to be done in developing the analysis of contemporary atheism, a relatively small but growing phenomenon globally. We propose that a possible fruitful approach for future research is to consider belief and a lack of belief as performative and relational, linking them to that which subjects hold as sacred and non-negotiable in their particular context.

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Table 1. Interviewees

Key. **F** = female **M** = male; **UG** = undergraduate **PG** = postgraduate; **A** = atheist **Ag** = Agnostic **F** = Freethinker **H** = humanist **S** = secularist; **secondary education** = between ages 11 and 18 **selective** = state-funded school which selects pupils on criteria such as ability and religiosity as well as locality; **BHA** = British Humanist Association **NSS** = National Secular Society (Details as at time of interview.)

Initials	F/M	Age	Occupation	Non-Religious Label(s) Chosen	Present Location	Reported Background	Organized Atheism
1. AG	M	21	Physics UG	A	North West England	Parents divorced, no religion at home, state educated	
2. BD	M	21	Physics UG	A	North West England	Lost father, home not religious, state educated in North West England	
3. BG	M	21	Sociology UG	"something else"	North West England	Home not religious, Christian state education in North West England	Member of online atheist & agnostic forum
4. BJ	F	21	Politics & Philosophy UG	rejects God	North West England	Parents together & no affiliations to avoid domestic Protestant/Catholic conflict, state educated in Midlands	
5. GE	F	21	Theology UG	A/H	Midlands	Parents together, liberal Christian, state educated in South East England	Follows BHA on Twitter
6. GS	M	24	Technical writer	Ag/A	London	Parents together, father Jewish, state educated in London	
7. HA	F	21	Unemployed	A/H/S	London	Parents together, household not religious, single sex-state secondary education in London	
8. HAd	M	20	Philosophy & Sociology UG	H	North West England	Parents together, private Christian and non-Christian secondary education in Cumbria	President of university humanist society
9. HM	F	21	History UG	A	South East Scotland	Parents together & not very religious, state educated in South East Scotland	President of university humanist society
10. KC	F	21	Environmental Sciences UG	A	North West England	Parents together, no religion in household, single-sex state secondary education in London	
11. KK	M	21	Maths UG	"Yes to all"	North West England	Parents divorcing, Catholic household and Catholic state education	

Initials	F/M	Age	Occupation	Non-Religious Label(s) Chosen	Present Location	Reported Background	Organized Atheism
12. KS	F	21	Linguistics PG	A	North West England	Child of Jewish father's 2nd marriage, mother Anglican, Christian state education in South East England	
13. LA	F	26	Laboratory technician	A/F/materialist	Eastern England	Parents together, Mormon household in Eastern England	
14. MC	M	21	Politics and International Relations UG	A	North West England	Parents together, felt religion not pushed growing up, Christian selective state secondary education in Central England	
15. PD	M	19	Computer Engineering UG	H/S/Sceptic	Southern England	Parents divorced, mother Christian before becoming humanist, Christian state education	President of university atheist society
16. PS	F	18	History UG	"Yes to all"	South West England	Parents together, mother Anglican, private Anglican secondary education in South West England	Planning to join university humanist society
17. RC	F	25	German UG	A/H	North West England	Parents together, father Protestant, mother Catholic, Protestant secondary education in Southern Scotland	Uses BHA website
18. RE	M	21	Theology & Religious Studies UG	A	Midlands	Parents divorced, some Christianity at home, state educated in Eastern England	Former member of BHA & NSS
19. SE	F	25	University co-ordinator	A/H/S	North West England	Lost father, household not religious, state educated	
20. SM	M	24	Police	A	South East England	Lives with wife & 2 children, father liberal Christian, left state education aged 16 in South East England	Reads BHA magazine
21. VJ	F	20	Law UG	Ag/A/H/S/ Sceptic	Southern England	Parents divorced & not religious, privately educated in Channel Islands	Former president of university atheist society
22. WG	M	25	Online advertising	"all of these"	London	Parents together, home not religious, Christian selective state secondary education	Member of the BHA
23. WI	M	24	Retail	A	London	Parents together, home not religious, state educated in South East England	
24. WT	M	20	Biology UG	"all of them"	North East England	Lost father, household not religious, Anglican private secondary education in London	Member of university humanist society