Chapter 10
Living Non-religious Identity in London

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In this chapter I consider three aspects of lived non-religious experience identified though fieldwork among members of local non-religious meeting groups in London, England. My first consideration is the significance of emotional events and experiences in some participants' accounts of what motivated them to reject religious belief and to assert their non-religious position. While a non-religious stance is often characterised as a rational, reasoned viewpoint based on intellectual disagreement with theological propositions and contradictions between scriptural narratives and scientific knowledge, evidence from my participants suggests that the rejection of religious beliefs may often be initially motivated by an individual's emotional response to a specific event or experience within their lives. The perception that decisions based on reason and evidence are considered more valid than those based on emotional reactions may explain why so many people subsequently frame their rejection of religious beliefs in reference to scientific discoveries and historical evidence.

The second aspect for consideration is how British political engagement with religious institutions impacts upon my participants' understanding of their own non-religious self-identity. I suggest that the influence of religious ideas and organizations within the public and political spheres contributes to a perception that religious affiliation is considered normative by wider society. This perception leads some non-religious people to conceal their lack of religious faith, either partially or completely, in order to avoid provoking familial rejection, conflict in their professional lives, negative reactions from others, or out of concern for the feelings of others.

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Lastly, I will consider the ways my participants express their opposition to religious influences within public and political life. Based on the evidence gathered through my research, I argue that most of my participants demonstrate little opposition to individuals holding private, personal religious beliefs. Instead, what concerns them most is their view that some religious ideas and practices can have a detrimental impact on the lives and happiness of others. Therefore I contend that opposition to religious influences on public and political life stem more from a perceived clash between their own 'sacred' values and some religious ideas and practices, rather than purely disagreement with theological propositions.

The research data contained within this paper is the result of two periods of fieldwork conducted between April and June 2011 and from April 2012 to June 2013. Both periods of research involved participant observation at the meetings of three local non-religious groups, one for atheists, one for humanists and one for ex-Muslims. While the meetings of all three groups primarily function as social gatherings among 'like-minded people', with regular social meets as well as one-off events such as theatre trips, summer picnics and comedy nights, each of the groups embodies a slightly different ethos and aim. The atheist group promotes itself as an activist organization and encourages members to become involved in activities and campaigns promoting secularism; the humanist group regularly hosts events with guest speakers on current social and political issues and also runs a monthly book club, reflecting a concern with knowledge, education and current affairs; while the ex-Muslim group views itself as a support network for members struggling with the difficulties of rejecting Islamic teachings and traditions. Despite the differing aims of each group, they share many members in common and often organize joint events.

To supplement data gathered during group meetings I have also conducted an online survey and a number of one-on-one interviews, monitored the discussion boards of two web forums related to atheist issues, spent time observing the work of the staff at the British Humanist Association (BHA), and subscribed to newsletters produced by the BHA, National Secular Society and Atheism, UK.

Although non-religious individuals comprise a wide continuum of identities and standpoints and we should be wary of treating them as a monolithic group (Cotter et al. 2012); the people I met during my field research share many common experiences and opinions which form the basis of this chapter's analysis. However, it must be noted at the outset that this research project was designed to specifically target individuals who actively assert their non-religious stance through membership of local meeting groups, online forums or national organizations. Lee (2012, 131) defines non-religion to be "anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion." The purpose of these groups and organizations is to cater for the needs and concerns of non-religious people, placing them, and by extension their membership, firmly within the remit of this definition. Further research will be necessary to determine whether any of the conclusions contained in this chapter have relevance among those individuals who do not consider their lack of religious faith to be a significant aspect of their lives or identity. Furthermore, this field research was conducted solely in the central London area and caution should be used regarding the applicability of my findings beyond that specific geographical location.

10.1   Accounts of Emotional Experiences Influencing My Informants' Decisions to Reject Religious Faith

One legacy of the Western Enlightenment, with its desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality and reason rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation (Outram 1995, 3), is a perceived hierarchical opposition between reason and emotion, intellect and instinct, scientific knowledge and religious belief. A hierarchy in which decisions resulting from rational judgements based on evidence are often considered more valid than those which stem from emotional responses.

Researchers exploring the emotional dimensions of religious experience challenge the idea that decisions can be made solely through reason and deliberation alone, uninfluenced by emotional responses. Taking the view that the human condition of 'being in the world' is simultaneously embodied, cognitive and evaluative (Merleau-Ponty and Bien 1973), Riis and Woodhead (2010, 27–30) argue that it is through emotions that humans first make judgements about situations, and that our emotional stance shapes our identity, actions, experiences and thoughts. Mitchell (1997, 80–85), in his discussion of religious experience in Malta, states that while criticism of 'logocentrist' approaches to belief within anthropology gave rise to a focus on embodiment and practice, "Anthropologists … keen to collapse the Cartesian duality of mind and body … have been less willing to interrogate a similar duality between cognition and emotion." Mitchell argues that emotional knowledge, created through feelings, should be considered equally valid as knowledge acquired through other forms of cognition.

Campbell (1971) made a similar criticism regarding the assumption that the increase of non-religious individuals in Western society was just part of an ongoing intellectualising process. He pointed to the feelings of awe, euphoria and despair, described by many nineteenth century freethinkers as accompanying their loss of faith, as evidence of the emotional dimensions of 'irreligious experience'. In a more recent publication, Bullivant (2008) examines contemporary reports of emotional 'irreligious experience' posted on a popular atheist web forum. Most of these accounts describe the rejection of a former religion as a positive experience; contributors recount feeling "joy" or "euphoria," a sense of "liberation" or "freedom from guilt," but a few found their loss of faith to be a negative experience and wrote of being "scared," "upset," "isolated" or "desolate."

However, Bullivant notes that it is only a small proportion of contributors to the online forum that describe their loss of faith in reference to emotional experiences. The majority cite intellectual disagreement with propositional religious beliefs as the motive for their non-religious stance. This concurs with other research which has highlighted the prevalence of intellectual doubts regarding the validity of religious teachings in individuals' explanations for their rejection of religious belief (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Caldwell-Harris et al. 2010).

In my own research, I initially found participants would cite their motivation for rejecting religious beliefs in reference to intellectually reasoned arguments and the contradictions between religious teachings, modern scientific discoveries and

historical evidence. I often heard people discuss how through science, religion has been shown to be "false," or just "myth" and "superstition." However, as my research progressed I began to notice the influence of emotional events and experiences on some participants' decisions to reject their former religion or to move from a non-theist position, comprising simply of an absence of belief in supernatural agents, to a strong atheist one, involving a moral opposition to religious beliefs and values (Lanman 2011, 38).

One participant, Jane, had been raised Roman Catholic and referred to herself as a "very religious child." During our initial informal conversations, she discussed her reasons for no longer believing in God with reference to contradictions between scientific and historical evidence and the biblical narrative. But during an in-depth interview she recounted to me the specific moment when she realised she was unable to accept the teachings of her religious faith:

> I was in midnight mass, I was 14 and I liked going to church . . . it was Christmas Eve and I just realised that everything that was being said I was spoofing it . . . ran a complete satire in my head the whole time. Really upset me because I actually believed . . . that sense of being part of something you didn't understand, I loved that . . . so I went home and sobbed my heart out.

While Jane justified her rejection of religious belief through intellectual arguments, her initial loss of faith did not stem from a rational assessment of available evidence but from what she describes as: "sudden and instant insight, thinking this is all a bit silly."

Another participant, Peter, is an ex-clergyman, who now works as a humanist celebrant. He is very well read on the subjects of science, philosophy and obviously theology, and many of his arguments against religion are intellectual in nature. However, Peter himself recognises that it was his emotional response to a specific event which led him to reject religion and leave the clergy. Peter was raised in a very religious family, but he explained that even at a very young age he noticed inconsistencies in religious teachings. Rather than leading to a rejection of religion Peter's doubts led him on a quest for answers; he became very involved with Sunday school and church discussion groups, and later went on to study a degree in theology. Yet his doubts remained; he told me, "by the time I was ordained it was questionable whether they should have ordained me . . . [I] took the line [that] God is entirely a human construction . . . [That] religion is a good thing but entirely a human construction."

Despite not believing in God, he still considered the church to be a valuable social institution and feels he would have probably continued in his profession had it not been for the death of a very close friend, who had fought against the restriction on female clergy to become ordained.

> Within 18 months of her priesting she was found to have cancer and died. I sat with her through a lot of her last illness. I remember holding her hand as she was lying in bed and she said 'where is God in all this?' And I said 'you know what I think, there is no answer to that question' . . . and she'd given her whole life to fighting for it [to be ordained] . . . that was a terrifically painful experience.

In Peter's case it is not accurate to talk of a loss of faith as such, he already held intellectual doubts about the existence of God; but it was the emotional experience of losing a close friend that motivated his decision to leave the clergy and reject his religious identity in favour of an openly non-religious one.

Emotional responses to particular events were not only given by participants describing their loss of a former religious faith, but also by individuals who had never been religious but had taken the decision to move from a previously non-theist position to an active atheist one. Mike, a gay man in his mid-thirties, was raised in a non-religious home. He said:

> Always knew I was an atheist . . . not too keen on God idea and all this but that was about it, no militant side . . . until we [Mike and his partner] got given *The God Delusion*. 'Read *The God Delusion* and got really upset, annoyed by all the stuff I was unaware . . . I knew being gay . . . the pope, condoms etc., etc. . . . but didn't feel that strongly . . . *God Delusion* woke us up.

Mike's reaction to Dawkins' (2006) book was not just an enlightened understanding of intellectual arguments against the existence of God, reading it made him feel "upset" and "annoyed" and it was this emotional response that motivated his decision to join the local humanist group.

Another of my participants, Bob, had never believed in God and always considered religion to have no relevance in his day-to-day life. For Bob it was the sense of anger, shock and sadness he felt over the terror attacks in New York and London which motivated him to research non-religious organizations and join the BHA. He explained "[The] events of 9/11 and the London bombings . . . [I] felt something had to be done about this, trawled the internet . . . found the BHA." Emotional responses to people dying in terror attacks or wars often appeared to stimulate doubts regarding religious belief. At meetings of the atheist group I heard members refer to 9/11 and 7/7, the genocide in Bosnia, the troubles in Northern Ireland and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as motivating factors in their questioning of religious faith.

"Emotions are both feelings and cognitive constructions, linking person, action and sociological milieu" (Rosaldo 1984, 304) and it is our emotional stance which "renders life meaningful or meaningless" (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 28). My participants' emotional responses to particular events and experiences in their lives became cognitively interpreted in relation to their understanding of, and attitudes toward, religious beliefs. This "emotional knowledge" (Mitchell 1997, 80) then functioned as the initial motivation for the rejection of their former religious beliefs, or their assertion of a more active atheist identity.

Expression of this identity can subsequently be seen to be validated through engagement with intellectual arguments regarding the contradictions of modern science and religious beliefs; "Just as Christian belief can be, and often is, founded on an emotional response in a given situation, to be confirmed later by intellectually satisfying 'evidences'" (Royle 1968, 130). The perception that decisions based on reason are considered more legitimate than judgements stemming from emotional instinct possibly explains why so many people prefer to explain their lack of faith in reference to intellectual arguments, especially given the popular characterisation of atheism constituting a rational, reasoned stance.

10.2   The Influence of Religious Ideas and Institutions in the Public and Political Spheres Contributes to Participants' Understanding of Their Status as 'Non-religious People'

Secularism as a political ideology emerged in response to the specific political, economic and religious conditions of early modern European states. However, there is no one model of secularism; each modern secular nation-state has developed its own approach to the relationship between religious and state authority. Some states adopt a pluralist approach to religion by officially recognising multiple religious institutions. Some see religious belief and practice as an entirely private matter, and offer no state support, financial or otherwise. Others predominantly support one main religious institution but do not prevent or hinder the practices or beliefs of other faiths. Secularism is therefore "... not a simple matter of absence of 'religion' in the public life of the modern nation-state. For even in modern secular countries the place of religion varies" (Asad 2003, 5–6).

In Britain, the Church of England maintains its position as the official English national religion, with the monarch as Supreme Governor, 26 Church of England bishops hold seats in the House of Lords by right of office, faith schools are subsidised via state taxation, a daily act of collective worship is required in state maintained schools, faith representatives hold seats on regional assemblies, and the remit of the All-Party Parliamentary Interfaith Group is to raise awareness among MPs of the religious dimensions of current issues. Additionally faith communities are seen as "key containers" of social capital (Furbey et al. 2006, 2) and multi-faith and interfaith community initiatives are encouraged and financed by central government.

While, in a multi-faith society such as Britain, it is clearly necessary to respect the beliefs and practices of religious individuals, many of my participants believed that the opinions and concerns of non-religious people were not accorded similar respect. One respondent to my online survey wrote "I feel that I should respect their [religious people's] beliefs, but do not feel they have to respect mine," while another stated they felt the "present government gives the clear impression of being pro-religion."

The purpose of this survey was to explore the level and forms of participants' engagement with non-religious organizations, social groups and online discussion forums, and to explore opinions and attitudes regarding the role and influence of religion in British society. The survey included a mixture of check box selection questions and open-ended text input type questions. Initially the survey was advertised on the discussion boards of the three participating groups. However, group members circulated the survey link via social media and email, and just under a quarter of responses came from individuals who indicated they were not members of any non-religious social group.

One question asked respondents to indicate their opinions regarding the role of religion in society, politics and the media by selecting from a range of

pre-designed statements. Of 265 survey respondents 91 % agreed with the statement "religious organizations have too much influence on politics," with 72 % agreeing "life in Britain is too influenced by religion." Only 2 % agreed with the statement "I am happy with the place of religion in British society." Shore and Wright (1997, 4) contend that political policies codify social norms and values; they give authority to certain discourses and ascribe status to particular lifestyles. Political engagement with religious groups and institutions creates the impression, among my participants, that within wider society (and within political circles especially) having a religious faith is generally considered to be a positive personal attribute which is socially beneficial.

Lois Lee (2011a) discusses the emerging 'post-neutrality' view of secularism which contends that secularist policies are actually anti-religious; advocating the complete privatisation of religion and upholding the dominance of secular views. Proponents of this view point to the expectations imposed upon religious people to keep their opinions and beliefs out of the public domain.

> In the name of freedom, individual autonomy, tolerance, and cultural pluralism, religious people – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – are being asked to keep their religious beliefs, identities and norms 'private' so that they do not disturb the project of a modern, secular, enlightened Europe (Berger et al. 2008, 66–67.)

In Britain the conflict between the secular values of society and the right of individuals to live according to their personal, religious convictions has been highlighted in a number of recent court cases. These cases include: the British Airways worker prevented from wearing a cross visibly over her uniform (Moore 2009), the teenager banned from wearing a chastity ring at school (The Guardian 2007), and the teaching assistant suspended for refusing to remove her *niqab* in front of male colleagues (BBC News 2006).

However, Lee's (2011a) argument is that both religious and non-religious people sometimes feel expected to make compromises in order to uphold the secular peace. During her field research among non-religious individuals in Britain, she found that people engaged in a complex negotiation of self-defining labels and would sometimes conceal their non-religious identity and opinions, for fear of causing offence or being seen in a negative light. My own field research supports this argument. My participants often described situations where they felt it would be prudent to conceal their lack of religious faith, either partially or completely, in order to "fit in" or avoid upsetting others.

For some people concern that being non-religious might detrimentally impact on their professional lives led them to publicly profess a religious affiliation. One participant stated "I applied for a job at a Catholic school and felt I would be better off lying on the form to say I was religious"; another wrote "Hard to 'come out' in army – stuck to C of E as 'flag of convenience'." A couple of the atheist group members are reluctant to be photographed at events and meetings in case their employers come across the pictures on the group's website. Another member spoke of being cautious about posting anti-religious material on his Facebook profile in case it jeopardised his career in the civil service.

For other participants, the importance of maintaining family relationships led them to keep their loss of faith a secret. Atheist group member George told me he had been a staunch believer for 30 years before becoming an atheist, but he has still not told his parents for fear of "hurting and upsetting them." One survey respondent stated he "married in church to please wife and wife's father." And in the ex-Muslim group there are quite a few members who continue to engage in religious practices, rather than risk familial disapproval or rejection.

Even those people who preferred to be completely candid about not having a religious faith sometimes displayed concern about how their non-religious position might be interpreted by others. My interviewee Steve describes himself as a "hard-line atheist." Steve was a police officer for 15 years and he explained to me how the first time he publicly expressed his atheist standpoint was when he was called to give evidence in court and, rather than take the oath on the Bible, he asked to take the affirmation. He told me "it caused a bit of a fuss . . . people went 'ooh, are you a bad person?'." Of course the people in the courtroom did not literally ask if he was a bad person; this was Steve's impression of how he thought they would react to his atheism, and his perception that being atheist might cast doubt on his integrity as a police officer.

More recently a member of the local humanist group, who is completely open about being non-religious, discussed attending a meeting for people interested in setting up entrepreneurial initiatives. He had been very impressed by the number of wealthy attendees who proposed initiatives based on philosophies which could be described as humanist. Nevertheless, as this was not a humanist event, he still felt it inappropriate to discuss his own humanist stance. In line with other research in this field (Lee 2011a; Pasquale 2007), I noted that many of my participants were reluctant to openly describe themselves as 'atheists' due to its negative associations and meanings. My participant Peter raised this issue during our interview, he told me:

> A friend [and fellow celebrant] was virtually chucked out from doing a funeral when she used [the word] atheist to the family . . . there are very, very negative connotations around . . . it's to do with if you're atheist . . . no morals . . . likely to be a wife-beater, child murderer, really nasty person . . . it's fairly common among the celebrants that I know that there is some negative experience and they are careful not to use the word.

While most people I spoke to accepted the term 'atheism' as a description of their philosophical position vis-à-vis religion, they often preferred to use alternative terms when describing their identity, such as humanist, rationalist, bright, agnostic, secularist, freethinker, anti-theist, and naturalist.

It could be argued that sometimes concealing a non-religious stance, or interpreting a social interaction as hostile or negative, may result from internalised self-disapproval (West et al. 2011); that the anticipation of hostile reactions leads to avoidant measures being taken, and that what is assumed to be hostility from others is actually just curiosity (Jones, personal communication via email, 2012). In some instances this may well be true; people who perceive their lack of religious faith to be viewed negatively by wider society will be more likely to be reticent about expressing their atheism, and to react more sensitively to questions regarding their non-belief, perhaps unnecessarily.

Certainly it must be noted that these sentiments were not shared by all of my participants. One of my interviewees is particularly active in civic and community initiatives in his local area, some of which regularly bring him into contact with politicians and senior civil servants, and he does not consider that his lack of a religious faith is in any way disadvantageous.

However, for some participants the open admittance of a non-religious stance had provoked actual negative, and sometimes quite distressing, reactions. In my survey I asked "Have you ever encountered a negative reaction when someone found out you were atheist or humanist?" Most responses mentioned just having experienced general disapproval, expressions of concern for their immortal soul or questions about their perceived lack of morality. But some respondents recounted specific incidents of rejection and discrimination. One wrote about his "experience of being physically assaulted in order to force me to pray for my soul," another had been "abandoned by family, faced death threats, friends won't speak to me." One person wrote of how his future mother-in-law had broken up his relationship with his fiancée when she found out he was an atheist. Another person recalled being thrown out of Boys' Brigade, aged 10, because he admitted he did not believe in God, and one person had even experienced being "told my disability was a punishment from god."

At a meeting of the atheist group, Anthony, who settled in Britain from abroad many years ago, spoke of a constant stream of family members flying in to visit him from his home nation with the express intent of re-converting him back to their religious faith; while Joan, a lady in her late fifties who belongs to the local humanist group, finds it difficult to deal with the disagreements caused by conflict between her own non-religious views and those of her very religious sister.

Whether reluctance to admit a non-religious position stems from internalised self-disapproval or results from previous personal experience of a negative encounter, it is clear from the evidence of my participants that openly admitting a non-religious stance is not always the straightforward assertion of individual identity and opinion that might be expected in a society which endorses the values of secularism and pluralism. It is likely that there are many more non-religious individuals in Britain who currently conceal their lack of faith, or continue to outwardly profess religious affiliation, rather than risk being judged negatively by family or wider society. The tendency of participants to conceal their lack of religious belief within particular contexts suggests an internal self-assessment of their own non-religious identity as externally judged to be, at the very least, 'different' and possibly even socially inferior or deviant.

While the political engagement with religious beliefs and institutions is unlikely to be the sole cause of this perception, I would argue it certainly contributes to my participants' understanding of the status of non-religious people in British society. Gey (2007) argues that although Western, liberal, secular, democratic governments have come a long way from the persecution and denial of rights to atheists, they still tend to favour religious belief, and that this can lead to the marginalisation and "quasi-legal ostracism" of atheists; this is echoed in the words of one of my participants who simply stated, "As an atheist I feel like a second class citizen."

10.3　Opposition to the Influence of Religious Ideas on Public and Political Life Results from a Perceived Conflict of Values, Rather than Purely Intellectual Disagreement over Propositional Beliefs

The secularization thesis, which predicted the decline and eventual demise of religious belief as an inevitable consequence of modernity, was for a long time a dominant and largely unquestioned paradigm within the social sciences. However, the increased visibility of religion in the public sphere, and the emergence of new religions and new forms of religiosity, has raised doubts over the accuracy of this thesis (Lee 2011a); and among academics this narrative of straightforward declining religiosity has largely fallen out of favour.

> For a time some thought that the onslaught of science, comparative religion, uncertainty, and the rest – in a word, the onslaught of modernity – meant or would mean the gradual decline and disappearance of the religious tradition. This no longer seems obvious. (Smith 1991, 3)

Yet among my participants I sensed a confidence that secularization, in the form of a complete separation of religious and political authority, would still happen, but that it was now no longer an inevitable consequence of modernity and instead was something that needed to be striven for. Court cases challenging the presence of religious beliefs in public life, such as a recent High Court ruling outlawing the holding of prayers during local council meetings, provide evidence of this drive for secularization.

Most of the members of the groups I work with are engaged in some form of campaigning for increased secularization, whether that involves actively joining demonstrations and marches such as the one organized by the Secular Europe Campaign (2011), or just being a paid up member of a campaigning organization like the BHA or National Secular Society. However, I often heard members state that they were not concerned about personal, private expressions of religious faith. It was when religious beliefs and institutions appear to exert influence over social or political issues that they became a source of anxiety and a target of campaigning. My interviewee Jane expressed this view, she told me "It's the relationship between church and state I want to break . . . I'm not interested in spitting at Christians"; while Mike said he would "Definitely campaign so they [religious people] get out of my life. Political life should not be religious . . . schools should not be religious" but he went on to say "I won't campaign for the end of a religion . . . just to stay in their own world."

While it is a matter of debate as to whether secularization really leads to a religiously neutral public and political space, or whether it is just the official endorsement of one particular viewpoint (Scanlon 1998, 64), my participants see secularization as the only way to ensure both freedom from religion and freedom of religion. They argue that only in a completely secular state, where religiosity is treated as entirely a private matter, can citizens be both protected from coercive religious practices and have the right to freely follow whichever faith they choose.

Some of this opposition to religion's presence in the public sphere stems from irritation over the 'unwanted intrusion' of religion into their own personal lives. At an atheist group meeting one attendee told me, "I'm not bothered about the man praying in his house, it's just when religion affects my life, stops me doing things I want to do." Emma, who volunteers as an organizer for the local humanist group, defended her stance opposing religion in public life by explaining she would "happily leave religion alone, if religion would just leave me alone." However, the desire for the increased secularization of social and political life is not exclusively self-serving. The influence of religion in society not only prevents them from living the religion-free life they desire, but they also view it as a way of legitimizing ideas and practices they believe would be deemed unacceptable in any other context; i.e. objections to same-sex marriage, infant circumcision, attempts to deny women access to contraception and abortion services.

I contend that we can better understand my participants' opposition to religion in the public sphere if we see it as resulting from a perceived clash between their own deeply held, 'sacred' values and the ideas and practices of some religious ideologies; rather than purely stemming from a disagreement with propositional religious beliefs.

This assertion is borne out by statements made by my participants; such as the member of the atheist group who told me that if people were just "free to believe any old thing they liked it would be fine," it's when "they act on those beliefs it becomes a problem." Or the claim by one interviewee that he has no desire to "destroy harmless religious beliefs," suggesting a value judgement is invoked to distinguish beliefs considered harmless from those which have social consequences perceived to be harmful.

In his analysis of atheist literature and publications LeDrew (2012) identifies a divergence within official atheist discourses between those which take a scientific approach to critiquing religious claims, and those which favour a humanistic one. The discourse of scientific (or 'New') atheism emphasises the importance of evidence, knowledge and education; often views religion as a by-product of evolutionary psychology; and focuses on the lack of evidence for God's existence. While humanistic atheism is more concerned with issues of human well-being, it sees religion as socio-culturally produced, and focuses on the harm which has been caused by organized religion.

My participants appear to equally engage with both forms of official atheist discourse but they interpret and utilise them in different ways and in response to different contexts. The scientific discourse is utilised as a response to the theological propositions contained within Holy Texts. It supports the rejection of religious claims regarding the existence of God, and the refutation of scriptural explanations for how the Earth was formed and how humans were created. Through a scientific critique of religious 'truth' claims, this discourse legitimizes my participants' personal decision to reject propositional religious beliefs, and supports their opinion that religious believers must be misguided, uninformed or in need of educating. But on their own, these religious individuals, and their beliefs, do not appear to constitute

any great source of anxiety. It is only when religious beliefs and ideas extend beyond the individual and appear to exert influence at the level of the social that they become a cause of anxiety and a target of active campaigning.

When discussing their reasons for objecting to the influence of religion in public and political life my participants are far more likely to advance arguments based upon the humanistic atheist discourse, than the scientific one. This discourse is less concerned with what people actually believe focusing instead on how those beliefs become translated into social practices, and the impact those practices have on the lives of individuals in society, particularly what they see to be religion's violation of moral principles such as human rights, equality and individual freedom.

A number of recent publications (Anttonen 2000; Knott 2010, 2013; Lynch 2012) have put forward the notion of the "secular sacred," or "sacred forms" as a concept through which we can understand people's commitment to the non-negotiable fundamental principles of modern secular life; such as freedom, human rights, equality and justice. The "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 2010, 14).

Rejecting ontological theories of the sacred in favour of cultural sociological ones, Lynch (2012) argues that sacred forms are both culturally constructed and historically contingent. He states that the sacred is "a particular form of cultural signification in which symbols, objects, sentiments, and practices are experienced as expressions of a normative, absolute reality" (16). These "sacred forms" are more than just what we might consider to be 'good', they form the basis of our most fundamental assumptions; "children simply are precious. It is always honourable to die for one's nation," he explains (28). Lynch contends that social life is mostly conducted in the realm of the 'mundane', which he defines to be the logics, practices and aesthetics of everyday life, and that it is often only when sacred forms become threatened by the 'profane', those things that threaten to pollute or transgress a sacred form (134), that they come to figure in the foreground of consciousness (28).

Cotter's (2012) research among "notionally non-religious" students in Edinburgh highlights this. He mentions that among his participants "'being non-religious' was generally unimportant and had little impact upon day-to-day life" but that "most claimed that their non-religiosity came to the fore when challenged by particular situations . . . particularly when their sacred values are challenged." Similarly, Catto and Eccles' (2013) study of young British atheists employs the term "secular sacred" to describe the non-negotiable beliefs and values of non-religious people, in particular the values of equality, reason, freedom and science. They note that while such values are not exclusive to non-religious people they consider the "repeated combined articulation of them in related discourse to be distinctive and definitional" (55).

Central to my participants' sacred values is the notion that humans only have one life. Consequently they believe that every individual must be free to determine, and pursue, their own conception of what constitutes a good life, as long as it does not detrimentally impact on the lives of others. They demonstrate a strong

commitment to human rights, justice, tolerance, and equality for all, and view individual autonomy and personal freedom as essential for leading a fulfilled and happy life. When the ideas or practices of a religion impact on people's lives in ways conceived to be harmful, or likely to curtail their ability to fulfil their own conception of a good life, they are judged to be violating these sacred values. In a reversal of traditional ideas about what constitutes the sacred, it is religion itself that becomes conceptualised as profane.

For example, the most oft-mentioned concerns about 'religion' raised during meetings included discriminatory attitudes towards women and homosexuals, the physical and psychological harm caused by infant circumcision, the socially divisive nature of faith schools, the detrimental influence religious ideas may have on political debates about abortion limits and the legalisation of assisted dying, the consequences of abstinence-only sex education, and the negative impact that teaching creationist beliefs and arguments from authority in schools might have on the development of children's ability to think critically and independently.

It is not purely because these practices are religious that they provoke objections, rather it is because they are perceived to transgress the values of tolerance, equality, social cohesion, individual freedom, personal autonomy and the protection of children. Rather than simply an intellectual disagreement with theological propositions generating an opposition to religion in all forms, it is the violation of their non-negotiable, fundamental, sacred values by particular religious ideas and practices that motivates my participants' desire to campaign for increased secularization. As my interviewee Peter explained it: "the fact that the things we are against are motivated by religion is a side effect. It is the things we are against I want tackled."

10.4   Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed three significant aspects of non-religious lived experience that I identified through my discussions with members of non-religious meeting groups. I have noted that asserting a non-religious stance is not always the result of reasoned intellectual deliberation, but may often stem from an individual's emotional response to personal or public events. The assertion of this stance subsequently appears to become validated in reference to the arguments of the scientific atheist discourse, possibly due to the perception that decisions based on reason and evidence are more valid than those stemming from emotional responses. Further research is needed to ascertain how prevalent emotional responses are in the assertion of a non-religious identity, and how we account for differences between people who express an emotional narrative and those who maintain their motivations are purely intellectual in nature.

Having made the decision to assert a non-religious stance and identity, these individuals then find it necessary to develop ways to express and negotiate their new non-religious status within society. While some encounter no difficulties in expressing their non-religious identity, many find the presence of religion in the

public sphere uncomfortable and engage in complex negotiations of self-definition and expression, often involving the concealment of their non-religious stance within specific contexts in order to avoid familial rejection, professional complications, public censure or offence.

While the official role of institutionalized religion in society and politics is unlikely to be the sole cause of an individual's reticence to openly admit a non-religious stance in particular situations I would argue that it does endorse a perception of religious affiliation as normative. Identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations (Jenkins 2004, 23) and an individual's identity "is partly shaped by its recognition, or misrecognition; it is damaging if society mirrors back a confining or demeaning picture" (Taylor 1994, 26).

Furthermore, it is this official status of religion in society that my participants are most opposed to, arguing that a complete separation of political and religious authority is the only way to ensure every individual is able to pursue his or her own conception of what constitutes a good and fulfilling life, whether that includes religious belief or not.

Almost all of my participants insist they have no objection to individuals holding private religious beliefs, indeed many would argue that they fully support their right to do so; what concerns them is when religion extends beyond the private realm and exerts influence on society and politics. In particular they demonstrate concern over those religious ideas and practices they assess as detrimentally impacting on people's lives. I have argued that this indicates that their opposition to religion stems more from their perception that some religious beliefs and practices violate the sacred values they hold dear; rather than an outright objection to all forms of religious belief *per se*.

One question this raises is whether the identification of religion as a transgressor of secular sacred values emerges as a result of an individual adopting a non-religious stance, or whether it can operate as a motivating force in their initial assertion of this stance. The transgression of sacred values is often experienced as an emotional response such as anger, outrage or despair, invoking a desire for action or retribution; exemplified by those of my participants who spoke of their emotional response to terror attacks, wars or instances of discrimination or persecution as motivating their decision to assert their non-religious stance and to join a non-religious group.

In similar research to my own, involving participant observation and interviews with members of atheist meeting groups in the United States, Smith (2011, 224–225) noted that intellectual reservations regarding the likely existence of God did not independently result in the assertion of an atheist stance. While clearly lacking a belief in God is a necessary component of an atheist viewpoint, Smith contends that "…doubts about God alone are not sufficient for participants to adopt an atheist identity." Instead he noted that moral issues were of central importance to his participants' decisions to reject religion and assert their atheism.

Does being non-religious lead people to identify religion as a transgressor of certain sacred values, or does an assessment of religion as 'harmful' lead to the assertion of a non-religious stance? Most likely it is a complex interaction of a variety of factors, but one I consider would be worth further investigation.

The final question I feel this chapter should address is why does any of this matter? The 2011 census of England and Wales reported a significant rise in the number of individuals identifying as having no religion; 25 % of respondents selected this option, a rise of 10 % from the previous census a decade before. In the same time period the number of individuals who identified as Christian dropped from 72 % in the previous census to 59 % this time ('2011 Census' 2012), a figure much more in keeping with other surveys measuring religious affiliation in the UK (Lee 2011b). Moreover, this changing religious landscape cannot be fully explained as simply the result of cohort replacement. Voas (2012) estimates that 13 % of those individuals who identified as Christian in the 2001 census, and who were still alive at the time of the 2011 census, no longer chose to select this option. While some of these individuals are likely to have identified as having a different religious affiliation it is reasonable to deduce that a large percentage are now accounted for within the no religion category.

Of course identifying as having no religion does not equate to having no religious beliefs. But whether we view this as evidence of the accuracy of the secularization narrative (Bruce 2002), or the impact of new and different forms of religiosity (Woodhead 2012, 27), what it does show is a significant decline in the number of individuals that indicate affiliation to organized, institutional religions. This is particularly impacting on those religious institutions which currently receive political endorsement and state financial support.

The no religion category now accounts for a quarter of the population of England and Wales; it is the second largest 'faith' group, after Christianity. And within this group an increasing number of people are choosing to assert their non-religious stance via membership of local groups, such as the ones I work with. The local humanist group has increased its membership from 1,349 to 1, 871 in the past year alone. Actual meeting attendance rarely reflects these figures; very few meetings achieve even a 10 % attendance rate, but this does not indicate that a large number of members are 'non-active' often different members will choose to turn up to different types of meetings. Furthermore, just within this geographical location alone there are a number of alternative non-religious groups, such as the Skeptics in the Pub, and groups like these exist in most regions throughout the country.

Religious beliefs have been shown to influence people's value systems and operate as a source of social and political attitudes (Andersen et al. 2005; Kotler-Berkowitz 2001; Lee 2011b). Religiosity is strongly linked to opinions on a wide range of social issues, such as abortion (McAndrew 2010), and remains a significant determinant in British electoral behaviour (Kotler-Berkowitz 2001, 525). Changes in the levels, and forms, of religiosity in Britain are likely to be accompanied by, and contribute to, changes in attitude on a wide range of issues (Lee 2011b, 174).

The increasing number of individuals choosing to express their non-religious stance through membership of local groups and national organizations, through which they become engaged with arguments and campaigns for greater secularization, is likely to create implications for future party political and government policies, and the role of institutionalized religion within British society. Conse-quently gaining a greater understanding of the lived experiences of non-religious

people, and identifying what motivates and underlies their moral and political judgements, is essential for our understanding of the ongoing relationship between religion and politics in British society throughout the twenty-first century. In the oft-quoted words of Bainbridge (2005, 24), it is only "By learning more about the lack of faith, [that] we can understand better the role of faith in modern society."

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