Chapter 5
The Cultural, the Nominal, and the Secular: The Social Reality of Religious Identity Among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada

Amarnath Amarasingam

5.1 Introduction

The labels we use are important. When individuals call themselves "Christian" or "Muslim" or "spiritual but not religious," they evoke very different images of what constitutes their religious or non-religious life. If it were that simple, however, the study of religion, as well as non-religion and atheism, would be somewhat straightforward. What complicates matters is the tendency of some individuals to *label* themselves using terms that may not actually *describe* themselves. Some of the ways in which this trend has been examined in the academic literature is with concepts such as "fuzzy fidelity" (Voas 2009), "cultural religion" (Demerath 2000), "belonging without believing" and "believing in belonging" (Day 2006). Indeed, as Demerath (2000, 127) points out, countries like Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden exhibit a "common syndrome" of cultural religion by which "religion affords a sense of personal identity and continuity with the past even after participation in ritual and belief have lapsed." He goes on to argue that while this phenomenon may be "one of the world's most common forms of religious involvement" it is simultaneously "one of the most neglected by scholars" (Demerath 2000, 127).

This chapter attempts to rectify this neglect by moving the conversation forward in several different ways. First, by focusing on the religious identities of Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Canada, I move beyond the tendency of many studies to focus mainly on European Christians or Christianity in Europe. In other words, what is often neglected in the Western conception of atheism, with its commonly assumed rejection of an Abrahamic God, is the overlooking of non-Abrahamic traditions and the (non)belief systems of immigrant or diaspora communities who now live

A. Amarasingam (✉)
Postdoctoral Fellow, Resilience Research Centre, Dalhousie University, Halifax, NS, Canada
e-mail: amarnath0330@gmail.com

© Springer International Publishing Switzerland 2015

L.G. Beaman, S. Tomlins (eds.), *Atheist Identities - Spaces and Social Contexts*,
Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies 2,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-09602-5_5

in the “West.” Complicating this matter is an “all or nothing” assumption—that either one is religious or is an atheist—that does not always translate into the lived reality of those whose cultural backgrounds or upbringings may be complicated by other ethnic or political factors. In this volume Beyer’s notion of the punctuated continuum touches upon this reality.

Second, I argue that sociologists of religion need to pay particular attention to “other salient identities” that may impact an individual’s adherence or rejection of religion, such as ethnic identity, social movement identity, “national” identity, and so on. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that those members of the Tamil diaspora who are particularly connected to the conflict in Sri Lanka have a tendency, first, to move away from the religion of their upbringing while maintaining nominal adherence and, second, to connect more deeply with universalistic or social justice oriented spirituality (Amarasingam 2014). This chapter further develops the first tendency with respect to scholarship on cultural religion, belonging without believing, as well as non-religion studies. While this chapter focuses more on religio-cultural as well as ethnic and national identities than strictly atheist identities, it does argue that more attention needs to be paid to *how* religious, non-religious, or atheist identities could be formed through an interaction with an individual’s other salient identities—such as ethnic and cultural.

5.2 The Sri Lankan and Broader Social Movement Context

Sri Lanka is a small island off the southern coast of India, roughly the size of 25,000 square miles. Its close proximity to India has meant that Indian religious, cultural, and social influences have always been significant. Sri Lanka, despite its small size, is ethnically and religiously diverse. According to the 2012 census, the total population of Sri Lanka is 20.2 million people. According to the census, the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka is the Sinhalese (75 %), the vast majority of whom are Buddhist. The Tamil community in Sri Lanka, roughly 15 % of the total population, consists of Sri Lankan Tamils (11 %) and Indian Tamils (4 %). The vast majority of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka is Hindu, but with a significant number of Christians. Sri Lankan Muslims are also an important ethnic group, and make up about 9 % of the population. The smaller ethnic groups (1 % in total) consist of the Burghers (descendants of European settlers), the Malays (descendants of settlers from the Malay Peninsula who arrived during the Dutch and British colonial period), and the Veddas (the indigenous peoples of Sri Lanka).

In addition to Indian influence, for over 400 years, all or parts of Sri Lanka fell under the control of successive waves of European powers: the Portuguese (1505–1658), the Dutch (1658–1796), and the British (1796–1948). In order to better understand the role of religion in the history of the Sri Lankan civil war, the British colonial period is significant in providing a context for the Hindu and Buddhist revivals of the nineteenth century (Blackburn 2010; Bond 1988). These revivals are best characterized as a kind of fusion of ethnic and religious identity.

Although Buddhism did play an important role in the ethnic and religious revival following independence from the British in 1948, it often *manifested itself* in secular policies. In other words, Sinhala nationalism, while intimately tied to Buddhism, was often put into practice through land colonization, language legislation, and educational policies which were discriminatory based on ethnicity. While these policies could indeed have produced a religious response from the island's (largely Hindu) Tamil population, this did not occur, and the Tamil nationalist response, particularly in its turn to militancy, was often equally secular. This broadly secular and non-religious context, it will be argued, informs not only the Tamil Canadian diaspora's political identity, but exercises influence over youth and their ir/religious identity as well.

While a full examination of the course of the civil war cannot be undertaken here, it should be sufficient to point out that following communal violence during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s—including the riots/pogroms of 1977, 1981, and Black July 1983, as well as the subsequent Indian involvement in the training and funding of Tamil militant groups—the civil war reached levels of destruction that were hitherto unforeseen (Swamy 2003; Thiranagama 2011; Weiss 2011). Consequently, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers) became one of the most feared rebel groups of the twentieth century, equipped with an air force, a navy, an intelligence wing, an international propaganda and funding structure, as well as close to 10,000 well-trained cadres ready to die for the cause of national liberation (Swamy 1994).

The Tigers, while fighting for an independent state within the island, also began to deeply influence the nature of Tamil identity. They framed the movement along linguistic and ethnic lines, but received support from many Hindus and Christians in the Tamil community. As the civil war became more violent, hundreds of thousands of Tamils left the island and settled in countries like Canada, the UK, the United States, Norway, and Australia among others. The LTTE has received support from members of these diaspora communities since the late 1980s. Under the "cover" of a series of organizations, the LTTE had been raising funds and other kinds of support for their war effort for some years. As Stewart Bell (2004, 27) noted during the war, "When it comes to fundraising, the Tamil Tigers are unrivaled. They have used every conceivable tactic—government grants, front companies, fraud of every type, migrant smuggling and drugs." According to successive reports by the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS), the LTTE received anywhere between $1 million per month to $2 million per year from the Canadian Tamil diaspora. In addition to fundraising, diaspora leaders have long been accused of engaging in sophisticated propaganda campaigns, radicalizing the youth of the community, and political lobbying on behalf of the Tigers. Theorizing about ir/religious identity among Tamil youth in Canada, in other words, cannot be entirely divorced from such nationalist or activist stirrings in the diaspora community. To properly understand religious as well as atheist and non-religious identity in the Tamil diaspora, as well as many other politicized diaspora communities, requires understanding the full social reality in which individuals live.

5.3 Non-religion and Cultural Religion

Many scholarly studies of phenomenon like "cultural religion" or "belonging without believing" have often been too restricted to Christians in European countries, and have often failed to examine more micro or meso-level movements that individuals may be a part of in other contexts, and how such involvements may impact religious, atheist, or secular identity. In other words, for our particular case study, does increased ethnic allegiance (to "Tamil" identity or the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka) influence how individuals conceive of their ir/religious identity? A recent study by Ingrid Storm (2009) of people who are neither very religious nor very non-religious suggests that "belongers" are "on average more proud of their nationality" than others. To be sure, this nationality can be something other than Polish or Swedish, and could apply to nationalist social movements as well.

The notion of cultural religion adds much complexity to not only the study of religion and ethnicity, but also the study of non-religion and atheism. It would indeed be comforting if this phenomenon only existed on the fringe, a worldview only espoused by a minority of individuals. But, as Jay Demerath (2000, 136) argues, cultural religion "may represent the single largest category of religious orientation." He goes on to rightly point out that there is a kind of "oxymoronic quality" to cultural religion. It involves, he (2000, 137) argues, "a label that is self-applied even though it is not self-affirmed. It is a way of being religiously connected without being religiously active. It is a recognition of a religious community but with a lapsed commitment to the core practices around which the community originally formed. It is a tribute to the religious past that offers little confidence for the religious future." To be sure, many atheists in the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Canada still prefer to be somehow "religiously connected" to their cultural heritage, even while professing their current atheist identity. Teasing apart the different threads of an individual's identity—atheist but culturally religious or non-religious but with strong ties to ethnic identity and so on—often proves quite difficult. However, as I argue below, a clear picture of atheist and non-religious identity only arises after understanding how many of these threads actually interact.

My attempts to investigate this issue proved to be more complicated than I initially imagined. While I intentionally limited my research focus to Canadian Tamil youth—to presumably "keep things simple"—the variety of viewpoints were astonishing, and very much in line with current research in the sociology of religion. I spoke to atheists who still identified as Hindu or Christian, to Christians who periodically attended Hindu temples, to Hindus who said they were 'spiritual but not religious', and so on. Such responses are reflective of the often ambivalent relationship my respondents had with their religious, atheist, or non-religious identity. For those who were deeply committed to nationalist politics in Sri Lanka, religion simply did not seem very important. In fact, it was seen as fundamentally divisive to what should be a unified Tamil identity, based on ethnicity.

Even more than, or perhaps in addition to, notions of cultural religion and belonging without believing, Abby Day's recent work on a phenomenon she

calls "believing *in* belonging" proved particularly useful. Day recalls the moment she began to think differently about the role of religion in the contemporary context. During an interview with a respondent named Jordan, Day (2009, 265) noted an unusual statement he made: "I'm Christian, but I don't believe in [something/anything]." Day's (2009, 265–266) general conclusion, arising from fieldwork with Christian youth in Yorkshire, was "that people 'believe in' their human affective relationships in preference to Christian doctrinal beliefs, even when they claimed Christian identity on the census." Much of Day's recent work is important for understanding my interviews with Tamil youth in Canada as well. While my results are not identical to Day's, many of those I interviewed still identified as "Hindu" or "Christian" because it was the religion of their upbringing and it was the religion of their families back home in Sri Lanka. This nominal "belonging," however, did not preclude an often radical break with the religio-cultural elements of their families. In other words, as Day suggests, they "believed in belonging" but also believed that their belonging does not have to dictate how or whether they believe. As one Tamil man in Toronto put it:

> If I do anything Hindu, it's because my mom told me to do it. If there's anything Hindu that I do, it's maybe that I do the readings and I try to follow the teachings but any of the temple-going stuff or doing pujas or observing *natchathiram* [horoscope]—if my mom tells me to do it, then I trust my mom's word on those things, and then I would do it. But I wouldn't go out of my way to do it. But beyond that, I try to do things on my own, like what I would call secular Hinduism [laughs]. I know it sounds oxymoronic but it *is* that, I call it secular Hinduism because it's not so much the idol worship and all of that, but it's the secular teachings you can take away from that that I try and...
>
> Interviewer: *Which are?*
>
> Which are like, you know, duty unto others is a huge concept, right? So those kinds of things, I believe, are quite universal. I find that Christian [notions of] charity is the same kind of concept. So those kinds of things I think are secular that I can take for myself and share it beyond myself. So, I have a group of friends—we're all stuck in the secular Hindu phase. We don't really want to go to the temple but we don't mind discussing these things.

My respondent's self-identification as a "secular Hindu" is in line with Voas and Day's (2010) recent urging of sociologists of religion to move away from dividing individuals into the religious and non-religious. As they (2010, 1) note: "Clearly there is a broad middle ground occupied by people who are neither especially religious nor overtly secular." According to Voas (2009) this middle group is not insignificant, roughly making up half of the European population. Indeed, the term "secular Christians" may accurately describe the nature of this broad intermediate group: "These are people who call themselves Christian, but who for all practical purposes are secular. They live in a world centered on their social relationships, in which God has no everyday role. They do not expect God's help, fear God's judgment, or believe that things will happen *God willing*. They are indifferent to religion for the good reason that it gives them nothing of practical importance" (Voas and Day 2010, 2).

While Voas and Day's research focuses primarily on Christians in Europe, many of their insights are directly applicable to the Tamil youth I spoke with in Canada,

both Hindu and Christian. An important subcategory of secular Christians identified by Voas and Day are individuals they call “Nominal Christians,” which, for our purposes, can also include “Nominal Hindus.” As they (2010, 11–12) point out, individuals in Western countries often still specify their religious background when asked on a census or by a researcher, just as they can name the place of their birth or their mother tongue. What is less clear is why they choose to specify themselves as such, even as the salience of their belief or religious outlook is on the wane. The nominally religious “are unsure whether God exists, but in any case he does not play a part in their lives. They do not engage in religious practice and do not give the matter much thought. They do not refer to God or religion in answer to questions about what they believe in, what is important to them, what guides them morally, what makes them happy or sad, their purpose in life or what happens after they die” (Voas and Day 2010, 12). Day (2006) divides the nominally religious into three sub-varieties: natal, ethnic, and aspirational. The first two groups, natal and ethnic, are significant for our current discussion.

Natal nominalists are clear that thinking about their religious or non-religious identity is not a major concern. For natal nominalists, religion is “something you are born into” and something that is part of your upbringing, but also something that has waned in significance. Throughout my own research with Tamil youth in Canada, I encountered many who would likely agree with this classification. They may check off “Hindu” or “Christian” on a survey, and may attend temple/church if their families asked them to, but on a daily basis, religion is not “on my radar.” They are attached to a culturally religious identity because of historical and familial reasons, but find that they can just as easily live their life as an atheist or secular individual. Indeed, understanding this complicated interaction between a kind of cultural *identification* and atheist/secular *identity* has often been neglected in the academic literature.

Day’s second group, ethnic nominalists, were also highly prevalent among my respondents. These individuals would describe themselves as Hindu or Christian “as a way of identifying with a people or culture, and to position themselves as different from others” (Voas and Day 2010, 12). In other words, many youth I interviewed would identify as Hindu or Christian not as a way of emphasizing the importance of religion in their lives, but rather to highlight the *inevitable* links that they saw between religion/culture/ethnicity that they could not easily pick apart. As Voas and Day note, individuals would also emphasize that, in Canada, their Hindu identity was often “assumed” or imposed from outside. As such, some of my respondents explicitly made statements like, “I guess the Canadian public would see me as a Tamil Hindu.” In a pluralized environment like Canada, calling oneself Hindu may serve as an important marker of one’s overall *cultural* identity. For many respondents, it seemed as if they wanted to keep their personal religious evolution separate from the “numbers game” taking place with the census results. In other words, they may identify on the census as “Hindu” or “Christian” because *they think* that is how the Canadian public perceives them and, secondly, it is one (perhaps easy) way to respect their heritage, their upbringing, and their culture. For many,

this created a distinctive "I'm Hindu/Christian, but" category, which allowed them to self-identify with their cultural upbringing, while at the same time allow for personal ir/religious change and development.

As Voas and Day (2010, 16) make clear, "As religion becomes less influential in society, it is increasingly possible to have a religious identity without sharing a religious worldview ... Christianity has been sufficiently dominant in Western societies that an equivalent label seemed unnecessary until recently. Religious diversity in combination with widespread irreligion has now made self-identification as Christian meaningful. What it means may have little or nothing to do with religion, however." As one male respondent pointed out:

> I was born into a Hindu family but I don't think ... I mean studying science and stuff, it's hard to take things literally. I wouldn't say I'm an atheist and I wouldn't say I fully believe anything religiously. I look at Hinduism and I see it as more full of guidelines than anything spiritual or religious—just basic how to live your life so that it's better for you—not as an afterlife type of thing. I've always had problems with how Hinduism tells you not to eat meat, but then if you do eat meat you don't eat it on Friday or Tuesday. I've had conversations with other people on that topic. The best answer I ever got was that the only reason why they do that is so that you're able to exercise some kind of self-control at some point, even though you do eat meat. The main goal of that is to exercise self-control, so I mean religiously I don't follow anything, but if my mom is doing something in the temple and she wants me to go, I'll go.

A Tamil woman stated that initially she was religious simply as a form of "risk management," but later developed a more emotional attachment to the Hindu tradition of her parents. She expressed that she does not understand the rituals, and is pretty sure that her parents are equally confused by them, but considers them to be unique and "cool."

> There are certain religious things that I do because ... say weddings, for example, there are certain aspects of the wedding ritual—like the *thali* [marriage necklace] and stuff like that—that just seems like it is fun to do. It is not because of religion, it is more of a practice that is kind of cool. No other culture does it or no other religion has it. I am not talking ill of my parents, but I don't think they know why they do half the things they do. I don't think they know 90 % of why they do it, and as you grow you start to question these things, especially if your social circle or those that you associate with have come from different backgrounds, different religions—some are atheist, some are secular. You start to open your mind outside of what mom and dad have told you, so you start to question a lot of things.

She goes on to note that when it comes to having children of her own, the "risk management" approach would likely prevail again. She mentions a popular ritual that is performed by many Hindu families on the 31st day following the birth of a child. On this day, the newborn's hair is shaved off, as the hair from birth is thought to contain undesirable traits from past lives. According to my respondent, it is best to perform these rituals just to be sure that the child is safe going forward. It is evident that dividing individuals into broadly secular and religious categories misses the "broad middle ground" on which this particular respondent clearly resides.

> I think of me having children. Would I do certain things like shaving their head on the 31st day and all of that? I would do it even if I don't know the background of it, because it is too big a risk not to do it, and assume something may happen in their lifetime, and then feeling

> a lifetime of regret: 'Oh my god, had I done that, had I done this, that, and the other thing'. I think with marriage it would be the same thing. I would want to incorporate certain things [rituals] out of the fear that if I don't then, 'oh my goodness I might have a failed marriage'.

Much of Voas and Day's work may sound similar to Grace Davie's now-famous "believing without belonging" thesis (Davie 1990, 1994). However, there are important differences. Davie, drawing mainly on data from the European Values Survey, argued that the majority of Britons continued to believe in God even as they saw no need to attend religious institutions. While some scholars have accused Davie of being imprecise with her use of the word "belief" (Day 2010), others have pointed out, perhaps rightly, that the important question is not whether an individual believes, but what their not-belonging may say about their belief. As Voas and Crockett (2005, 14) have noted: "Whether or not they are confident that God exists, it is apparent at the very least that they doubt the Almighty much minds whether they spend Sunday in church or in the shops. Nor is it simply a matter of believing in a god who does not take attendance: they evidently do not believe in a god who is sufficiently important to merit collective celebration on any regular basis. Put simply, increasing numbers of people believe that belonging doesn't matter."

Voas and Crockett (2005, 14) go on to suggest, "Many people in Britain have beliefs about the rights and wrongs of fox hunting, but comparatively few are either participants or protestors. It is not enough to find that people accept one statement of belief or another; unless these beliefs make a substantial difference in their lives, religion may consist of little more than opinions to be gathered by pollsters." Similarly, Voas and Day (2010, 13) point out, "The point is simply that we cannot conclude from the fact that people tell pollsters they believe in God that they give the matter any thought, find it significant, will feel the same next year, or plan to do anything about it. While economists claim that there is no such thing as a free lunch, survey responses come very close." Understanding the full social reality of individuals, then, also involves moving beyond the "oxymoronic" quality of cultural religion. If, as Demerath suggests, particular labels are self-applied but not self-affirmed, then understanding individual identity involves taking seriously those aspects of their identity that *are* self-affirmed and examining how these identities may inform their religious, atheist, or secular worldview.

5.4 Holes and Scaffolding

In addition to a kind of nominal religious identity, many respondents also argued that they often approach religion as a "resource," even as they evinced a deep-seated respect for their religious and cultural heritage. From nominally religious identity, then, we move to important discussions of Tamil youth and new identity formation, signified by their "picking and choosing" new ideas and viewpoints from different religious traditions and spiritual philosophies. Such changes lay the broader landscape for our later discussion of how ethnic as well as social movement identity inform Tamil youth and their ir/religious identity.

This reflects Roof's (1999, 136) contention that in the contemporary world, religious communities form the "outer limits on fluidity" for many individuals. Roof recalls the case of a female Jewish respondent who spoke of her religious identity in terms of "holes" and "scaffolding": "I believe in the Jewish tradition *and* I believe in the importance of cherishing the earthy, the feminine, and the mystical. I used my own experiences to 'fill in' the holes left by the scaffolding," she told him. As Roof (1999, 136) points out, her discussion of holes and scaffolding reflects how many people approach religion today: "'Holes' for her refers to things she wished her religion had provided but had not, such as a closer connection with the divine, an experience of mystery, and spiritual empowerment . . . but that was only one side of her story. There was the 'scaffolding' to which she referred, too: her Jewish tradition had provided a structure on which she could build." As one Tamil man in Toronto pointed out, he found many holes in his Catholic upbringing which had to do with the Church's views on social issues. While his Catholic "scaffolding" was present, and further complicated by his inter-faith parents, the "hole" was filled by a more spiritual and universalistic worldview. As he told me:

> If I had to fill out a form or something I would put down Roman Catholic but I guess my own religious belief is . . . I would like to call it universal. I think I was very fortunate to come from—like my parents are very respectful of other religions and they themselves are from two different religions—so I think I was very fortunate to grow up in that atmosphere. My mom is Hindu and my dad is Catholic. I guess growing up I was exposed to both forms of religion and, I don't know, I think I just got to a point where I put faith before religion. I don't value religion that much. I think it is really important to believe in God but not necessarily follow any particular religion.
>
> Interviewer: *Why is faith important?*
>
> Well, first of all I believe faith is important, but it is more so that religion is *not* so important. To me I would say that, number one, I believe it is more of a manmade thing, it is more of a tool put to use. A lot of negative comes from it in my opinion, and I think many times the negative can overshadow the positive or the reason that it was made in the first place. I guess I would like to think that I am very liberal-minded and I can't see any religion conforming to my own ideals.
>
> Interviewer: *Would you call yourself spiritual?*
>
> Yes. I think initially I will acknowledge that there is a God but I won't use any forms of . . . religious forms [to communicate] with God. I feel like all that was said before me and I kind of had to discover him on my own, and I can call him Jesus, I can call him Allah, I can call him Krishna, I can call him whatever I want, and I can call him nothing. I can step into any place of religion and I still communicate with my God. I don't think [for] something so incomprehensible [there] should be any sort of barring on how we communicate [or] talk to God. I don't think we should conform our thoughts and our ideals to religion.

While this may sound similar to Day's notion of "nominally" religious individuals, Roof's argument highlights an individual's recognition of how embedded they are in the culture and traditions of their upbringing, yet also "confronting the fact that the inner life may not be fully formed or contained by tradition as received, and that by pulling together from other sources, often resources neglected from within one's own tradition, new and enriched meanings are possible" (Roof 1999, 137).

The particular argument that I put forward here is that while the "scaffolding" (cultural religion) may persist and continue to hold significance for many Tamil youth, academics have theorized the "holes" without taking full stock of ethnic identity or the various social movements with which individuals also identify. In what follows, I deal successively with ethnic identity and social movement identity to argue that scholarly theorizing about religious, non-religious, or atheist identity cannot be entirely divorced from the various other micro and meso-level commitments that animate an individual's social reality.

5.5 Ethnic and Social Movement Identity

As suggested above, it was clear throughout my field research that, for most Tamil youth in my sample, ethnic identity was more important than religion. For some, there was simply no distinction, and they could not pinpoint the differences. As I continually pushed them throughout the interview process to think more about these differences, if they in fact existed, many, especially those who identified strongly as Hindu/Christian *and* Tamil, simply laughed off my persistence as "impossible." For others, since Hinduism or Christianity was not exclusive to Tamil identity, it was often experienced as being of secondary importance. As one Tamil woman pointed out:

> Tamilness isn't exclusive to Hinduness, right? So I feel like I can't impose that on [people]. I know there's tons of Tamils who are lapsed [Hindus or Christians] and it doesn't exclude them from being Tamil. I think that it's almost like a Venn diagram right? There are places where they overlap, but it's not exclusive. I have a lot of friends who are Indian and who are Hindu, but the way they express their Hinduness is similar to ours. So it doesn't make it exclusive to Tamils. At the same time I have a lot of friends who are Sri Lankan but who are not Hindu and, for whatever reason, there's so much in common there.

In interviews with Tamil Christians, however, the distinction between ethnic and religious identity was often more prevalent. For some Christians, religion, and the religious kinship they felt with other Christian communities around the world, was more important than the fact that they were *Tamil* Christian. Interestingly, even while some Tamil Hindu youth felt that *there was* a distinction between Hinduism and Tamil ethnic identity, Christian Tamils at times expressed a feeling of being an "ethnic outsider" due to the fact that they do not share the majority religion. As one female youth noted in frustration:

> I ran into a lot of people who don't view Christians as Tamils. I never found that earlier, but I find Hindus really question Tamil Christians like, 'you're not really Tamil'. That has brought out a defensive side in me. It started with my best friend. I don't think she really knew what she was talking about. She said, 'you guys are not traditional.' I said, 'What do you mean by tradition?' What exactly do you mean by tradition? What about Christian culture excludes me from being Tamil?' And I find that happens a lot—the idea that the majority of [Tamil] Hindus do reject Christians as buying into a Westernized culture. However, I think [Christian] Tamils, if you look at them historically, have incorporated a lot

of Hindu culture into their day-to-day practice in order to avoid major conflicts. But I think for me, my identity as Tamil is more important than my identity as Christian because being Christian is a faith choice. Being Tamil's not a choice.

Interviewer: *Do you think there's something Hindu about your Tamil identity?*

For sure, in the sense that Hindu culture has definitely impacted it—the culture has a lot of Hindu religious rituals built into it. As Christians, especially in Sri Lanka, I think we subscribed to almost all of them. But as my family became very, very ultra-religious, we've excluded a lot of those. However, things like the puberty ceremony or anything like that—people still do them. They just don't put the whole Hindu statements at the top. You have something else. It does have a cultural base but we choose to practice or not practice Hindu rites. But have Hindu rites become cultural norms? Yes, and I think we have a lot of that in our culture, for sure.

Another Tamil Christian man reflected on what some of the tenets of his Catholic faith would mean for the "Tamil people" with whom he felt an equally strong connection. When I asked him whether there was something "Tamil" about how he practiced Catholicism, he responded:

Yeah, there are a lot of Hindu elements I would practice in Catholicism. Like we probably invest more of our prayer into saints than most Catholics would, which has very much a polytheistic feel to it. We have a lot of the Evil Eye, bad karma stuff, and some Hindu rituals you do at home. We actually once got into a huge fight with our pastor. We invited him over for lunch, and he was a pretty outspoken guy so I felt a little less guilty about it, but I remember him once saying at the end of the day, the tenet of Catholicism is that all people have to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord before they enter Heaven. And I think everyone was just kind of up in arms because, as a Tamil, that eliminates ninety per cent of your own people on that tenet alone! So yeah, the very fact that we wouldn't... like I still don't believe something like that.

Interviewer: *So at that point, you ended up defending your...*

My Tamil identity, yeah, absolutely, yeah. But could I say that I prioritize one over the other? That's very difficult to say.

Interviewer: *That was actually going to be my next question.*

Right, because you can actually think... even in the exercises, if you were to go through your family or even for yourself, picking somebody or choosing someone to marry, we prioritize Catholicism very highly, to the point where my mother would say she'd prefer I marry a Catholic, if it came down to it. Whereas my father would probably go the other way. But ultimately, it's more that I be allowed to raise my kids, not exclusively Catholic, but at least exposed to Catholicism. So for me personally, I don't think I could prioritize one over the other. I think they're both relatively equal.

Interviewer: *What's more important to you in a partner, her being Tamil or...*

Her being Catholic? I don't know. That's probably why I'm not married yet! I really don't know. That's a very good question.

In other words, while some of my Christian respondents at times experienced a distinction between their religious and ethnic identities, many Hindu respondents, especially those who expressed a strong commitment to Tamil nationalism, went out of their way to point out that Tamil identity included many religious groups. They had a vested interest in presenting 'Tamil' as an inclusive ethnic identity marker,

even if non-Hindus at times expressed a sense of exclusion. However, they were also quick to point out that a heightened commitment to religion would likely lead to the fracturing of Tamil nationalism. There was a widespread perception, then, that religion is fundamentally divisive. As one youth in Toronto pointed out:

> First of all we call ourselves Tamils. Not Hindu Tamils or Christian Tamils or Muslim Tamils. With the Tamil community, that's the uniqueness of it, right? We all come under one umbrella, which is we classify ourselves as Tamils, and I think that's important, or we would have a split community. And I think the reason it's important not to associate the Tamil struggle with any religion is because religion is a way to help people find themselves, find a purpose to life, or trying to find someone to follow. But people use religion as a way to show superiority or to show that, you know, one religion is better than the other or stuff like that. So, I think that kind of politics should never be brought into the Tamil cause.

Another respondent, while identifying himself as Hindu, noted that religion does not matter and breeds disunity in the Tamil community. As he told me:

> I pray to my Hindu god and I go to church too sometimes. When I go to Montreal, I go to church. I don't mind. My brother's girlfriend is Muslim, so we have all the religions in the family. Forget the religion. We are all human. Religion is important, but you don't go against one of them, right? One guy told me, 'God has abandoned Sri Lanka. That's why people are fighting and there are a lot of [people dying]. If there is a god then he could have stopped the war.' I told him, 'There's not only Hindu. There's Christian, there's Muslim, everything. So what do you expect?'

As should be evident, many Tamil youth in Canada are undergoing profound changes in how they interpret and live the religions of their upbringing. If we were to conclude our discussion here, it may be accurate to conclude that Tamil diaspora politics, particularly in the post-LTTE period, and perhaps like the LTTE itself, will be largely secular in its outlook. However, I wish to complicate the matter a little further, as the large-scale identity shifts experienced by many Tamil youth is not in fact entirely secular. Indeed, diaspora politics and its transition to a more transnational, non-violent, human-rights oriented activism is deeply influenced by universalistic and cosmopolitan sensibilities that are increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. While this section slightly deviates from the larger theme of this book, I argue that it is important to more fully understand the layers of influence that form an individual's identity, ranging from a nominal adherence to the religion of one's upbringing to the interaction of social movement activism with this identity, to how the broader cosmopolitan ethos interacts with and influences both. Indeed, atheist identity arises out of or is at least influenced by the interrelationship of all of these forces.

For many I interviewed, the local, ritualized, and often limited nature of their own traditions are seen as insufficient to address the needs of individuals who wish to fashion a more global ethic. As their identities and political sensibilities are transnational, it should not surprise sociologists of religion that their religious beliefs go beyond the borders of their faith with equal ease. As Roof makes clear, contemporary religious and atheist identities are characterized by a concern for equality, human rights, tolerance, and inclusivity. This does not mean, of course, that such an ethic of humanity or an increasingly cosmopolitan worldview precludes any

commitment to nationalism. As Levitt (2008, 785) makes clear, “While, in theory, cosmopolitanism seeks an allegiance to humanity writ large, in reality everyone belongs to social groups, networks and culture . . . every contemporary cosmopolitan is somehow rooted somewhere. Each individual cobbles together his or her own combination of universal and particularistic ethnic, national and religious elements” (see also Appiah 1998).

Related to what Roof, Levitt, and others have put forth is a phenomenon that Nancy Ammerman (1997) has called “Golden Rule” religion. Individuals who practice Golden Rule religion are neither highly religious nor highly secular. Instead, they are mostly concerned with treating others with respect and dignity, caring for their families, doing good, being a good person, living a good life, and being civically committed. Treating others as you would like to be treated is not spouted as a “throw away” catchphrase having little actual significance, but as a deeply held belief that animates their daily life. In critiquing how these individuals are often discussed in the scholarly literature, Ammerman (1997, 196) points out, “Implicitly, most observers seem to measure strength of belief and commitment against a norm defined by evangelicalism, equating that with ‘religiosity’ and painting these non-exclusivist, less involved practitioners as simply lower on the scale.” I suggest that ‘lay liberals’ are not simply lower on the religiosity scale. Rather, they are a pervasive religious type that deserved to be understood on its own terms.

However, it is not only scholars who often use this “norm defined by evangelicalism” or the example of the strictly observant Hindu to gauge the religiosity of their research participants. In many of my interviews with Tamil youth in Canada, I found that they themselves were measuring their level of religiosity with some mythical “Hindu” who practices the religion perfectly and in its entirety. Most respondents, when I asked them what it meant to be a “strong Hindu,” hesitatingly stated something about rituals and temple attendance. Even as they were not entirely sure what a “strong Hindu” was, they inadvertently measured their own religiosity up against it and found that they came up short. What is also interesting is that regardless of whether they saw themselves as a “strong Hindu” or “spiritual but not religious,” many described their religious outlook in terms of what Ammerman has called “Golden Rule Christianity,” or for our not-exclusively-Christian purposes, Golden Rule religion/spirituality. For those I interviewed, for instance, it was less about what they believed and far less about “traditional” Hindu ritualistic practices. As Ammerman (1997, 202) writes, “What I want to suggest, in fact, is that ‘meaning’ for Golden Rule Christians consists not in cognitive or ideological structures, not in answers to life’s great questions, but in practices that cohere into something the person can call a ‘good life’.” While their definitions of the good life are not uniform, most individuals agree that grand societal change is not what they are after. Rather, they only wish to leave the world a better place, even if only one life is affected, by their having lived in it (Ammerman 1997, 203). As one Tamil man put it:

> I'd like to say I'm spiritual, but not exactly very religious. Again, it's for the same reason. I think religion divides people, right? I come from a Hindu background, but I don't really differentiate myself as a Tamil Hindu. I'm very tied to my Tamil identity, but I don't really associate myself with any specific religion. But I'm spiritual, I'm just not religious. I believe that there is a God. And I believe that, you know, there is obviously something that runs us. And I respect that and I respect people who commit a lot of time, you know, trying to make a change in the world. And I respect those who serve fellow human beings, so I see spirituality in that way. But I don't see being faithful to God by going and pouring milk on, you know, the altar and calling it being religious when there are kids in the world that really need that milk. Why throw it down the drain? So I see—like my spirituality comes from helping somebody that is in need. So whether it's people back home [Sri Lanka], whether it's somebody in Darfur, or whether it's, you know, somebody that is at a Salvation Army shelter, if you're helping a person that is in need, you're basically serving God. That's the way I see it. To me that's what it means to be spiritual.

A Tamil woman, heavily involved in social activism, similarly pointed out:

> Yeah, my spirituality, my politics . . . I'm religiously committed. I'm religiously committed to . . . like I'm willing to invest everything I have into social justice. Yeah, I could say that. I believe in it. It's where I invest my hope, it's where I invest my emotions, my sweat, my blood, my tears. This is what makes change, you know? Some people believe that going to temple will make change, will make things better, that there are bad times. Religion says that if you participate in this ritual . . . for me, participating in a demonstration is my way of saying that. This is how we're going to make change in real life, by lobbying, by changing, by organizing people . . . The purpose of life, for me, is to ensure that, whether it's holding a door for someone, whether it's helping someone along the way, it's just the way I am. I've always been like this since I was a kid, I guess. It's just like, if we stand there and we are a bystander, then we are complicit in the injustice that's going on and so that's why I take it upon myself to be an active participant and not be a bystander, because otherwise you can't control it and you can only control it so far. But the work that you do has to be influential.

This broader worldview about social justice and politics, one that I suspect most atheists and secularists would not disagree with, is in line with Christian Smith's (2009) research on religion and American youth. Much like with many of my Tamil respondents, Smith points out that when individuals were asked if it was easy to know what is right and wrong in their daily life most respondents noted that it was easy. As Smith (2009, 46) states, "Many hardly had to even think about it. When then asked how hard it is to know right and wrong—regardless of how difficult it is to do what is morally right—again, nearly everyone said it is easy. Morality is like common sense; unless you are actively resisting it, it is not hard to know what to do or to do it." Smith similarly points out that youth today are, in essence, philosophical consequentialists: if individuals hurt other people, it is plainly wrong; if they help others, it is the right thing to do. However, as Smith notes, many youth cannot explicate *why* they think hurting others is morally reprehensible. As he (2009, 47) argues, "To them it is just obvious . . . They did not appeal, for instance, to God's will, natural law, utilitarian principles, the Bible, or any other supposed source of universal moral truth to justify this belief. 'Don't hurt others' functions instead as a kind of free-floating, unjustified supposition that informs intuitive moral feelings and opinions." It is these kinds of spiritual and cosmopolitan beliefs—variously described by Levitt, Appiah, Smith and others—that influenced many of respondents' views on the conflict in Sri Lanka. In other words, as noted, virtually

none of the Tamil youth I spoke with thought that Hinduism or Christianity, first, had anything to do with the civil war in Sri Lanka and, second, had an influence in forming their own opinions about the future of the conflict. As one Tamil woman put it:

> I guess the way I try to live my life is to treat everyone with kindness and respect. So I mean with the conflict [in Sri Lanka], all we need to do is treat everybody with kindness and respect and really take care of each other, do unto others what you would want done unto you. And that's not what's happening right now.

One Tamil man in Toronto noted that while he did not fully support the LTTE, he felt an attachment to them arising out of his morals and values. As he pointed out:

> I understand why people consider Prabhakaran [the leader of the LTTE] a prophet or whatnot, because he has moved a lot of Tamils with his words and bravery, I guess. But probably, I am very secular in terms of what I think in politics as well. Why I think I have an attachment to the LTTE is because I feel like no one stood up for us, and the LTTE is the only one who actually did that. In the long run, I don't know if that was very helpful—we lost 80 thousand people, but it's just the principle, that we're being treated badly and, you know, like you have to say something to that, you have to do something against that, I believe, and I think the LTTE did that. I'm not sure if it was a good idea or not, but based on the principle, I think it was a good idea, so I would side with them.

Another Tamil man, when asked about how he viewed the relationship between religion and politics, responded after some reflection that his spirituality was very important:

> Like on a personal level, yes, I think it is really different from... I want equality and I would love to believe, I would really love to believe that if we role reversed everything, if Tamils were the majority in Sri Lanka and I was still of Tamil descent and Sinhalese were the ones being discriminated against, I really really would love to believe that I would support the Sinhalese cause in that scenario. So in that case, yes. I don't believe I am in this cause because I am a Tamil. I believe I am in this cause because of my spiritual values and my value of human life and my morals and dictating what is right and wrong.

To conclude, for many Tamil youth religious identity, ethnic identity, and diaspora activism (social movement identity) are intimately intertwined, with each influencing and informing the other. As discussed above, it cannot be assumed that Tamil diaspora activism is influenced simply by inherited religious traditions (be it Hinduism or Christianity). Rather, Tamil youth are equally influenced as their North American counterparts by broader religious changes taking place, which inevitably colors how they view the conflict in Sri Lanka, the plight of minority populations in the country, as well as the role of the diaspora going forward. Discussion of diaspora politics, particularly the post-LTTE turn to a kind of transnational human rights activism, will be significantly one-dimensional if the changing religious and spiritual identities of Tamil youth are not taken into account. Similarly, discussions of religion, atheism, and secularism will be equally misinformed if scholars fail to understand the different micro and meso-level movements that individuals are a part of, which also color their ir/religious identities. Individuals do not become atheists or secularists in a vacuum, and thus it is important for scholars to better understand the varying factors that impact the development of religious or non-religious identities.

Much of the scholarship on religious identities in North America remains bifurcated. Mainstream, white, and middle-class individuals are thought to undergo large-scale religious changes. They become more secular, atheistic, adopt spiritual-but-not-religious sensibilities, and/or practice a syncretistic form of religion. However, studies of religious identity in ethnic or immigrant communities are often limited to understanding generational differences in religious practice or the relationship between religion and ethnicity. It is too often assumed that the religious changes experienced by immigrant populations and their children are somehow *contained* and are, in some way, free from the influence of the large-scale changes scholars see taking place in the broader North American landscape. This approach is not only short-sighted, but also hinders our ability to more fully understand diaspora activism as well as the role of religion in imported conflicts.

As we recognize, then, that the labels we use are important, we also keep in mind that sometimes these labels are inadequate to fully capture the full social reality of individuals and their religious or non-religious life. Ethnic identities, social movement involvement, adherence to other groups, political or otherwise, all shape and influence their religious or secular worldviews. When individuals call themselves "secular Hindus" or say that they would select Roman Catholicism "if they had to fill out a form or something," but actually believe very different things, it reveals much about what we do not know about contemporary religious life and also suggests that we ought to re-examine what we think we do know.

References

Amarasingam, Amarnath. 2014. Religion, politics, and Tamil militancy in Sri Lanka and the Diaspora. In *Religious radicalization and securitization in Canada and beyond*, ed. Paul Bramadat and Lorne Dawson, 201–228. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Ammerman, Nancy. 1997. Golden rule Christianity: Lived religion in the American mainstream. In *Lived religion in America: Toward a history of practice*, ed. David D. Hall, 196–216. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. 1998. Cosmopolitan patriots. In *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, 91–114. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bell, Stewart. 2004. *Cold terror: How Canada nurtures and exports terrorism around the world*. Mississauga: Wiley.

Blackburn, Anne M. 2010. *Locations of Buddhism: Colonialism and modernity in Sri Lanka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bond, George. 1988. *The Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka: The religious tradition, reinterpretation, and response*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

Davie, Grace. 1990. Believing without belonging: Is this the future of religion in Britain? *Social Compass* 37(4): 455–469.

Davie, Grace. 1994. *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Day, Abby. 2006. *Believing in belonging: A case study from Yorkshire*. PhD dissertation, Lancaster University.

Day, Abby. 2009. Believing in belonging: An ethnography of young people's constructions of belief. *Culture and Religion* 10(3): 263–278.

Day, Abby. 2010. Propositions and performativity: Relocating belief to the social. *Culture and Religion* 11(1): 9–30.

Demerath III, N.J. 2000. The rise of 'cultural religion' in European Christianity: Learning from Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden. *Social Compass* 47(1): 127–139.

Levitt, Peggy. 2008. Religion as a path to civic engagement. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(4): 766–791.

Roof, Wade Clark. 1999. *Spiritual marketplace: Baby boomers and the remaking of American religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Smith, Christian. 2009. *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Storm, Ingrid. 2009. Halfway to heaven: Four types of fuzzy fidelity in Europe. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(4): 702–718.

Swamy, M.R. Narayan. 1994. *Tigers of Lanka: From boys to guerillas*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.

Swamy, M.R. Narayan. 2003. *Inside an elusive mind: Prabhakaran*. Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications.

Thiranagama, Sharika. 2011. *In my mother's house: Civil war in Sri Lanka*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Voas, David. 2009. The rise and fall of fuzzy fidelity in Europe. *European Sociological Review* 25(2): 155–168.

Voas, David, and Alasdair Crockett. 2005. Religion in Britain: Neither believing nor belonging. *Sociology* 39(1): 11–28.

Voas, David, and Abby Day. 2010. *Recognizing secular Christians: Toward an unexcluded middle in the study of religion*, ARDA Guiding Paper Series. State College: The Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University. http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp.

Weiss, Gordon. 2011. *The cage: The fight for Sri Lanka and the last days of the Tamil Tigers*. London: The Bodley Head.