

Not so indifferent after all?

Self-conscious atheism and the secularisation thesis*

COMMENTING ON THE LACK of self-conscious atheists in apparently secularised Western European societies, the British sociologist Steve Bruce has argued that strong expressions of unbelief are in fact symptomatic of *religious* cultures. In 1996's *Religion in the Modern World*, for instance, he writes: 'it should be no surprise that, though there are more avowed atheists than there were twenty years ago, they remain rare. Self-conscious atheism and agnosticism are features of religious cultures and [in Britain] were at their height in the Victorian era. They are postures adopted in a world where people are keenly interested in religion.' (Bruce 1996: 58.) Likewise, discussing possible 'endpoints' of European secularisation in 2002's *God is Dead*, Bruce states:

In so far as I can imagine an endpoint, it would not be conscious irreligion; *you have to care too much about religion to be irreligious*. It would be widespread indifference (what Weber called being religiously unmusical); no socially significant shared religion; and religious ideas being no more common than would be the case if all minds were wiped blank and people began from scratch to think about the world and their place in it. (Bruce 2002: 42, my emphasis.)

Paradoxical though it may sound at first, Bruce's basic argument makes considerable sense. The idea that certain forms of particularly positive atheism – by which I mean a definite belief in the *non*-existence of a God or gods, as opposed to the simple *absence* of a belief in the same (negative atheism)¹ – might

be motivated, conditioned, or reinforced, by *contrast* with certain, socially prevalent religious beliefs or practices is scarcely controversial. After all, it would be strange to take one's atheism seriously in a society where no one took theism seriously. A society that is indifferent to manifestations of religion (such as Bruce and others depict many late-modern western societies as being) ought, therefore, to be just as indifferent to manifestations of 'nonreligion'.²

Furthermore, one may gather a reasonable amount of empirical data to support Bruce's contention. His own example of nineteenth-century Britain is, of course, a classic case. Not only was this a notably religious period (especially when compared to much of the subsequent century), but it was in many ways also a golden age for British unbelief: the era of Charles Bradlaugh, George Jacob Holyoake, Annie Besant, John Stuart Mill, George Eliot; the mushrooming of 'humanist', 'rationalist', 'secularist' and/or 'ethical' societies (several of which, in one form or another, continue to this day); and the hard-won beginnings of social respectability (see Campbell 1971: 46–96; Wilson 1999; Berman 1988: 191–221; McGrath 2004: 112–43). Other, less famous examples might also be cited. During the 1905–6 religious revivals in southern Wales, for instance, no less than ten new branches of the National Secular Society were inaugurated, each of which then gradually closed as the revival's fervour lessened (Campbell 1971: 124). Later still, this time in Australia, the New South Wales Humanist Association was founded in the wake of the evangelist Billy Graham's successful visit to Australia in 1959, with similar organisations soon following elsewhere in the country (Black 1983: 154). These instances do not, of course, prove Bruce's

* Thanks are due to both Lois Lee and Frank L. Pasquale for their insightful comments on ideas in this paper.

1 On this way of defining 'atheism', see Martin 1990: 463–76.

2 On the terminology of 'nonreligion' and its relationship to other categories, see Lee 2012.

thesis. Nonetheless, his hypothesis is both intuitively plausible, and empirically well-supported.

A significant problem arises, however, from precisely the new visibility of atheism in parts of Western Europe. However we choose to characterise this, and from whenever we choose to date it, the recent, surprising popularity of – or, at the very least, interest in – various expressions of self-conscious, and (primarily) positive, forms of atheism rather complicates the Brucean ‘features-of-religious-cultures’ thesis. The problem here lies, of course, in the fact that many of the countries in which this ‘new visibility’ is being displayed are not – or, at least, do not obviously *seem* to be – particularly ‘religious’ cultures.

Britain is a case in point (although I believe that similar things could be said for other countries). Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, for example, was first published in September 2006 – by any measure, a watershed moment in Anglo-American atheism’s recent history – and promptly established itself in the bestseller lists in Britain, as elsewhere. (By January 2010, *The God Delusion* had sold over two million copies in its English edition alone – although, of course, not all in Britain itself. By the same time, the German edition, just one of over thirty translations, had sold a quarter of a million copies.³) Yet that same year, many standard British religious indicators were, in fact, at an all-time low. In the 2006 British Social Attitudes Survey, for example, only 54 per cent of Britons reported a religious affiliation.⁴ This was the lowest percentage recorded since the Survey began in 1983, although it has since declined further, to 50 per cent in the 2010 data (Lucy Lee 2011). Detailed statistics from the Church of England (England’s established, and largest, Christian denomination), moreover, show that figures for, among other things, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, funerals, and usual Sunday attendances were also at their lowest level since at least 1900 (Church of England 2011: 28, 31). In most cases, too, these figures have since further declined. In short, Britain in 2006, or at any point since, was not *obviously* ‘a world where people [were] keenly interested in religion’. And while I have focused here on Britain (and will continue to do so throughout this paper), I believe I am right in saying that the same can be said for a significant number

3 Figures reported by Dawkins himself, on the messageboard of his own website: <http://richarddawkins.net/articles/5000#455619> (accessed on 30.11.2011).

4 Data available online at: <http://www.britsocat.com/Home> (accessed on 24.11.2011).

of other, predominantly Western European nations. The ‘new visibility of atheism’ – beginning (or at least greatly accelerating) in the mid-2000s; and displayed in booksales, media and popular interest, and increasingly so in statistics themselves – thus presents us with a notable sociological puzzle.

Now there are, of course, several possible explanations of this puzzle. Perhaps the Brucean ‘features-of-religious-cultures’ thesis is wrong (or, at least, admits of anomalous exceptions). Or perhaps Britain is, almost all statistics notwithstanding, a highly religious place (along with much else of Western Europe). In this paper, however, I intend to argue neither of these things directly. Instead, I would like to sketch and develop an idea that a number of British sociologists, along with a non-sociologist like myself, have recently begun to explore: the possibility that predominantly secular (or nonreligious) societies, where relatively few people are interested in *being* religious (i.e., believing, practising, and/or affiliating religiously), might nonetheless be ones where people are, in some significant way, interested *in* religion. Note that this represents a significant difference from the above-quoted position of Bruce, where ‘religious cultures’ and ‘world[s] where people are keenly interested in religion’ were conflated. Note, too, that a key argument of Bruce’s is that a thoroughly nonreligious culture would be one of ‘widespread indifference’. The idea that contemporary Britain is just such a culture is commonly encountered: Samuel Bagg and David Voas, for example, titled a recent overview of religion in modern Britain ‘The Triumph of Indifference’ (2010). But this is precisely what I want to question. As such, I will argue that the ‘new visibility of atheism’ itself, along with other largely qualitative data (at both ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels), suggest that, whatever else may be true of contemporary British religion, *indifference* is far from accurate as a general characterisation. I will do this by focusing on three main bodies of evidence: the apparent ‘new visibility of religion’ in general; certain major national events (following Grace Davie); and, crucially, recent fieldwork by Lois Lee.

The ‘new visibility of religion’

In previous work (Bullivant 2010), I have made the case that, despite a low (and, in many cases, still falling) incidence of Britons actually *being* religious, certain forms of ‘interest’ in religion remain comparatively buoyant. Front-page newspaper articles and high-profile television documentaries concerning a

broad range of religiously-relevant topics (positive and negative) are frequent occurrences. Following José Casanova's theories on the 'deprivatisation' of religion, in part this evidences a willingness of religious groups and leaders to 'go public', rather than to remain in their 'assigned place in the private sphere' (Casanova 1994: 3). But, of course, it takes two to tango: it surely also reflects a sustained receptivity on the part of the media to report on, and the public to read and hear about, religious topics. This receptivity is, naturally enough, both ambiguous and selective, with a bias towards the scandalous and sensational. Nevertheless, this does not easily equate to *indifference*. And nor, for that matter, does the fact that enrolments on religious studies courses at both school and university level are, or at least have been, steadily rising (Reisz 2008). The number of students taking Religious Studies A-level (a school-leaving qualification, normally taken aged 18), for example, has grown from around 8,500 in 1993, to over 22,000 in 2011.⁵ While many factors are undoubtedly accountable for this, students' interest in learning *about* religions is presumably at least one.

The rise of Islamist terrorism – or, more specifically, its rise to prominence in the media and popular mindset – following the US hijackings in 2001, the bombings of Madrid and London in 2004 and 2005, the Danish cartoon controversy of 2005 (and the related murder and bombing in 2010), and other tragedies, must also, of course, partly account for interest in (and anxiety about) religious issues. We may note also the impact of Christian ('Christianist?') terrorism in Europe, following the atrocities committed in Norway in 2011. It is, moreover, no coincidence that many recent expressions of 'self-conscious atheism' broach the topic of Islam, and particularly Islamically-inspired terrorism, in detail (Pasquale & Kosmin, forthcoming). These are all, of course, obvious instances of 'the new visibility of religion'. But it is important to recognise that the general phenomenon was well-evidenced even before 9/11 (Hoelzl & Ward 2008: 1–2). And, we might suggest, it is arguably an existing interest in religion which drives the

5 These figures are based on official statistics released by the Joint Council for Qualifications. Figures for 2001–11 can be found online here: http://www.jcq.org.uk/national_results/index.cfm (accessed on 14.12.2011). The figures for 1993–2009 have been collated and made available online as part of the supremely useful 'British Religion in Numbers' project: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/#RSExams> (accessed on 14.12.2011).

media and popular emphasis on specifically *religious* explanations – '72 virgins' as the reward for martyrdom, for example – for terrorist acts, at the expense of political, cultural or economic ones.

Again, as I have also previously argued elsewhere, this new visibility of (and interest in) religion helps us to understand the new visibility of (and interest in) atheism in a couple of ways. On the one hand, it helps to show that – and, to some extent, why – twenty-first century Britons are not, generally speaking, 'indifferent' to religion (or at least, not in any straightforward way; the way that, for example, most of them are 'indifferent' to baseball), but might genuinely be, albeit in a certain 'detached' and selective manner, 'keenly interested in religion'. And on the other, it helps explain what recent expressions of positive atheism are reacting against: *not* (as in Victorian Britain) the highly religious nature of their fellow citizens and their culture at large, but rather specific, public, disproportionately visible, and often 'problematic', manifestations of modern religion. This is a point to which I shall return.

Major national events

Grace Davie has, with characteristic insight, drawn attention to certain 'major' episodes in British life – for the most part, unexpected tragedies or, at least, controversies – as 'provok[ing] renewed reflection about the religious situation in this country and its possible futures' (2000a: 113). Writing in 2000, she included among these the 1989 disaster at Hillsborough football stadium (in which 97 Liverpool fans were crushed to death), the Dunblane massacre of 1996 (in which a lone gunman killed 16 children, their teacher, and himself, at a Scottish primary school), Princess Diana's death in 1997, and the sacking of the England football manager Glenn Hoddle in 1999 for remarks about karma, disability, and reincarnation (Davie 2000a). She has since commented, in a similar vein, on the events surrounding the death of Pope John Paul II and the subsequent election of Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 (Davie 2007). Davie argues that each of these 'significant events' in the life of Britain, 'all of which provoked – or were provoked by – an unexpected "religious" response and associated debate', offer 'valuable material for the sociologist of religion – material which is qualitative rather than quantitative and which requires careful and sensitive interpretation; it does not replace but needs to be set alongside [statistics suggesting large-scale religious decline]' (2000a: 117).

Davie has developed these ideas over a number of publications (see also Davie 2000b). And I have to say that I am very glad that she has, for it has taken me a long time – several years in fact – properly to appreciate the significance of these kinds of large-scale, qualitative data for understanding British socio-religious culture. These are, by their very nature, multifaceted, multilevel phenomena, necessarily conducive to a wide range of interpretations. For my own purposes here, I wish to focus on just two such examples – one of Davie’s (the events surrounding Pope John Paul’s 2005 death), and a more recent one of my own (the 2010 Visit of Pope Benedict to Britain). In both cases, I believe, we find evidence of the kind of widespread ‘religious non-indifference’ that I believe is needed to contextualise the recent prominence of British self-conscious atheism.

Given John Paul II’s global status, Davie is quite right that ‘No one was surprised ... when the world turned towards Rome as it became clear that the Pope was dying’ (Davie 2007: 106). But she continues: ‘Few people, however, anticipated the scale of the reaction that followed, as almost every country suspended “normal” activities in order to mark the event’ (*ibid.*). In Britain – a country with only a sizable minority of Catholics, and among whom religious practice is

not especially high (though it tends to be higher than in other mainline Christian denominations) – the events surrounding his death, funeral, and the subsequent election of Benedict XVI received sustained, ‘wall-to-wall’ media coverage. Arguably more significantly, the planned royal wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles, scheduled for the day of the funeral, was postponed to allow the heir to the throne, the Prime Minister, and the Archbishop of Canterbury to attend: this was the very first time, *nota bene*, that any incumbents of these positions have attended a papal funeral since at least the Reformation. The announcement of the date for the 2005 General Election, and even the popular Grand National horse race, were also postponed. Without delving too deeply here into this ‘strange juxtaposition of events’ (Davie 2007: 107), suffice it to say that these would be strange reactions for a wholly religiously indifferent country.

The state visit of John Paul II’s successor, Pope Benedict XVI, in September 2010 casts all this into even starker relief. For of course, John Paul might reasonably have been explained as an anomaly: a ‘one-off’ religious leader whose charisma, media-savviness, constant travelling, impact upon major world events, and indeed, simply his long time on the job



The papal visit in Westminster, London, England. Taken on the 17th of September 2010. Wikimedia Commons.

(at over 26 years, he was the second longest-reigning pope in history), might pique the interest of even the most jadedly indifferent of secular Europeans. By contrast, Benedict, normally depicted in the British media as either a retiring, donnish old man, or as a repressive autocrat ('God's rottweiler', the 'Panzer Cardinal'), was thought unlikely to attract much interest, enthusiasm or affection *even* from Britain's Catholics in the run-up to the Papal Visit. Indeed, prior to the Visit it was common to read media reports prophesying a 'damp squib', characterised by badly organised, half-empty events, and a pope amply demonstrating how out of touch he – and, of course, the faith he represents – is with modern Britain, British Catholics, and especially young people. Not insignificantly, such expectations (or, at least, fears) were not uncommonly met with even among British Catholics who were themselves excitedly looking forward to the visit, and who also knew large numbers of others who were. (I include myself in this group.) Such people had, it seems, 'internalised' the *perceived* indifference not only of the nation as a whole, but of people like themselves.

This is not the place to present a full analysis of the visit itself, its popular and media reception, or its continuing legacy. Suffice it to say, however, that by pretty well all accounts, the Papal Visit was a triumph – a fact that seemed to take everyone, including its organisers, by surprise. The official events themselves were not only very well-attended, but Catholics and non-Catholics, and *especially* young people, flocked to line the route of the Popemobile, cheering and waving flags. So positive was the popular reception of Benedict, in fact, that the front page of the *News of the World* (at the time, Britain's biggest-selling Sunday newspaper) described him as the 'People's Pope' – an undoubted allusion to Diana, the 'People's Princess' (and not, it should be stressed, a comparison that British tabloids make lightly). That is not to say, of course, that the Pope's reception was uniformly positive. In fact, each of the scheduled events attracted small but significant protests concerning a range of very diverse issues (including the sexual abuse crisis, non-ordination of women, contraception, state funding of the Visit, and the Church's affirmation of the possibility of salvation for non-Catholics). But, positive or negative, the one thing that the popular and media reaction to the Papal Visit *wasn't* was 'indifferent'.

Indifference and London's nonreligious

My previous two examples hinting at British religious 'non-indifference' (however uneven, selective and/or ambiguous this indeed is) have dealt largely with broad, macro-phenomena. What I wish to look at now is, to my mind, the most interesting and telling data, looking at the views, opinions, and attitudes of contemporary, British, self-identifying 'nonreligious' people. The data themselves, and a significant amount of their interpretation, are 'borrowed' (with very generous permission) from the PhD thesis of Lois Lee. Lee's pioneering research is based on a series of detailed interviews with people living in London (as a proxy for a modern, western, 'secular' city) who would describe *themselves* as being either 'nonreligious' or 'not religious'. Among her many significant findings, two are particularly germane here.

In the first place, the religious 'none' category has long been criticised by sociologists as being a mere catch-all, residual category (e.g., Pasquale 2007); a forced, 'default' affiliation artificially masking a diversity of incompatible positions (Vernon 1968, Hout & Fischer 2002, Bainbridge 2005, Bullivant 2008). Yet many of Lee's subjects clearly take 'none' itself, and (more usually) 'nonreligious', to indicate a positive, substantive identity – one which they have thought through, and which they favour over more seemingly 'precise' affiliations. In these cases, at least, 'none' does not signify a lack of engagement with, or interest in, the subject of 'religion'. In Lee's words: 'They suggest that people sometimes identify as "nonreligious" proactively and that it is wrong to assume that the "nones" are always nothings' (Lois Lee 2011: 167). This does not imply, of course, that the category is always chosen or used in this way. But, at the very least, it cannot be assumed that a relative popularity of the 'none' option, at the expense of other *apparently* more 'reflective' or 'engaged' categories such as atheist or secularist, is in itself evidence of religious indifference (as it sometimes taken to be).

Secondly, an even more striking finding from Lee's work is the fact that people who present themselves as being indifferent to religion, and genuinely perceive themselves to be, often turn out not to be so at all. One interviewee, for example, began with the comment that her own identification as 'nonreligious' stems largely from the fact that 'I don't really give [religion] a huge amount of thought very often.' This was then immediately, implicitly contradicted with lengthy, and clearly previously thought-out, commentaries on a wide range of religion-related subjects: her adamant about not having a church

wedding, the (non)religious identities of her acquaintances, her partner's religious views, reactions to religious topics she had read about, etc. (Lois Lee 2011: 170). Another interviewee constantly stressed his own indifference, and the absolute unimportance of religion to him, yet spoke at length on three *centuries* of his ancestors' religious history, the religiousness or not of his acquaintances (all judged against the benchmark of his own *lack* of interest), and the significance that his and his wife's *shared* indifference had to them (as Lee [2011: 173] wryly remarks: "The importance of sharing "indifference" gives the lie to that term'). Further instances of this general phenomenon emerged in her asking self-professedly 'indifferent' people whether they could imagine themselves in a long-term relationship with 'a religious person'. This often elicited an emphatically negative response. Referring to her findings in this area more generally, Lee states that

apparent instances of areligiosity are often a matter of appearances only. Simply put, people who identify as 'indifferent to religion' are not indifferent to religion. This gives rise to a new question, which is why are people classifying themselves in this way if it does not reflect the substance of their position? (Lois Lee 2011: 169.)

Even among the self-professedly indifferent, therefore, there are strong signs – and indeed puzzling ones, deserving of much further investigation – that British socio-religious culture is not quite what it seems.

Not so indifferent after all?

The prompt for this paper was a puzzle presented by the recent rise of certain, self-conscious forms of atheism. Simply put, the puzzle is this: if (*à la* Steve Bruce 1996: 58) 'self-conscious atheism and agnosticism are features of religious cultures ... [and] are postures adopted in a world where people are keenly interested in religion', then how on earth have certain Western European societies at the beginning of the twenty first century suddenly given rise to them? I have focused here on Britain – in some ways, arguably, the European epicentre of the New Atheism – but I think that similar things could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for other countries too. To rather understate the case: these are not obviously highly religious cultures.

While there are several possible solutions to this puzzle, I have *sketched out* only one here. This relies

on the premise that 'religious cultures' and 'world[s] where people are keenly interested in religion' are not necessarily coextensive – i.e., that people with only low levels of religious belief, practice and/or affiliation can nonetheless still be 'keenly interested in religion'. Or to put it another way: that a lack of actually *being* religious does not necessarily equate to indifference. Spelling it out here, it might sound obvious. However, this has, I would argue, been the unspoken assumption of much previous writing on the sociology of religion in contemporary Britain (at least) – including, I should say, my own! – and has framed many of our intuitions concerning how 'secular' societies ought to behave. This much is clear, I think, from the frequency with which words such as 'surprising' and 'unexpected' have appeared in this paper, whether from myself, or quoted from others. The 'religious' reactions to national tragedies, the attention of the media and civil society to the funeral of Pope John Paul, the success of the 2010 Papal Visit, and the new visibility of atheism itself have all been described in these terms. All of these, however, are only surprising or unexpected against an assumption of religious indifference – an assumption which *should* become weakened (although it appears not have been) by each new 'surprising' and 'unexpected' display of what I have been calling, rather torturously, 'religious non-indifference'. Yet as we have also seen, so ingrained is this assumption – that Britons not only are, but perhaps ought to be, *indifferent* to religion – that it penetrates even to the individual level: hence we witness the equally 'surprising' phenomena of Lois Lee's demonstrably non-indifferent religious 'nones' exhibiting, to themselves as well as to others, a 'false "indifference" and "areligiosity"':

Bruce may well, of course, be right that the 'end-point' of secularisation 'would be widespread indifference; ... no socially significant shared religion; and religious ideas being no more common than would be the case if all minds were wiped blank and people began from scratch to think about the world and their place in it' (Bruce 2002: 42). But if so, then even so unreligious (in terms of the standard indicators of belief, practice, and affiliation) a country as Britain is very far indeed from this situation. On the contrary, there is good (and growing) evidence to suggest that it is *both* largely nonreligious, *and* largely religiously non-indifferent. This is, moreover, a socio-religious culture that, perhaps, renders *unsurprising* a number of interesting phenomena – by no means excluding a new visibility of self-conscious atheism. ■

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