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**Contemporary Nonreligion in Britain and
the USA: Theoretical and Empirical
Studies**

by

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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (by Published Work) in
Sociology

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Introduction

The eight texts comprising the main body of this PhD submission each address empirical and/or theoretical questions in the sociology of religion and, more specifically, in its nascent subfield of **nonreligion**.¹ This relatively recent academic coinage is a deliberately broad term – ‘a general definition that qualifies it as the master or defining concept for the field’ (Lee 2012a: 130) – that principally refers to ‘Phenomena primarily identified in contrast to religion, including but not limited to those rejecting religion’ (Bullivant and Lee 2016). It thus includes a wide range of social and cultural manifestations of **atheism**, **agnosticism**, **indifference**, **nonreligiosity** (e.g., religious non-practice and **non-affiliation**), **secularity**, and other ‘religion-adjacent’ topics. In more concrete terms, the specific instances of ‘nonreligion’ treated herein include: the various meanings of such core terms as ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’, by both scholars and the wider public (not least with a view to interpreting social surveys which employ these terms); the socio-cultural causes and reception of the **New Atheism**, and what clues it gives about the prevailing religious ‘temperature’ in its host cultures; the prevalence, growth over time, and demographic profile of those who identify as having ‘**no religion**’ (**nones**, the **nonreligious**), according to major national social surveys; and the extent, causes, and effects of **lapsation**, **disaffiliation**, and ‘**nonversion**’ within the Catholic Church, as a case-study of how wider trends of **secularization** have played out concretely at the meso-level of particular denominations. In addition to ‘constitut[ing] a substantial original contribution to knowledge’ (University of Warwick 2017: 3.4) within the sociology of nonreligion, I hope that

¹ Although not part of the main doctoral submission, the Appendix to this portfolio features relevant excerpts from my and Lois Lee’s *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism* (2016), and is intended to serve as a ‘Glossary of Technical Terms’. In this covering document, those terms which receive a definition in the Appendix are given in bold on their first appearance.

this portfolio also demonstrates the theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions this subfield can make to the wider concerns of the sociology of religion.

As stipulated in Warwick's 'University Requirements for the Award of Research Degrees', a candidate's portfolio submitted for the PhD by Published Work must be accompanied by:

a covering document of 5,000 - 10,000 words [which] must explain the inter-relationship between the material presented and the significance of the published works as a contribution to original knowledge within the relevant fields. In addition, the covering document must include, as an appendix, a full bibliography of all the work published by the candidate. (ibid.)

In order to fulfil this requirement, the rest of this document is structured into three main sections.

In the first, I discuss the history of nonreligion within the sociology of religion. This seeks to explain both nonreligious topics' lack of direct attention throughout most of the twentieth century (albeit with notable, and telling, exceptions), and its sudden invigoration since the beginning of the twenty-first. The second section then considers the establishment of this new subfield over the previous decade or so, adapting some of Talcott Parsons' insights on 'institutionalization' and Robert K. Merton's theories of academic discipline/field formation. Together, these two sections constitute an exercise in 'the sociology of sociology' (cf. Curtis and Petras 1972; Bourdieu [1978] 1992). For Anthony King, 'Given the central importance of the sociology of knowledge to the discipline since the 1970s, it is perhaps remarkable that sociologists have rarely turned their sceptical eye on sociology itself' (2007: 502). Since this document already requires a significant degree of reflexivity concerning my own work and how it 'fits' within the wider field, it seems a natural setting to turn a 'sceptical eye' upon the sociology of (non)religion. Understanding this dynamic scholarly context is, moreover, a necessary precursor to evaluating the 'significance of the published works as a contribution to original knowledge' within, and responding to, it.

The third part introduces the publications I am submitting for examination, explains their thematic and methodological inter-relationships, and situates them within two wider contexts. The first of these is my own professional biography, as both a Bergerian ‘accidental sociologist’ (2011) and, rather less auspiciously, the ‘theologian turned sociologist’ against whom Bourdieu warns ([1978] 1992: 253). How it is that I came to write – and more to the point, came *to be able to* write – the materials collected here is a question that will, though briefly, be addressed. The second context is the history and recent development of the sociology of nonreligion, as detailed in the prior section. Since this subfield forms part of the sociology of religion as a whole, I will also indicate how my research relates to other areas (especially the empirical study of Catholicism). Naturally, it is in relation to this dual background that ‘the significance of the published works, as a contribution to original knowledge within the relevant fields’ must ultimately be judged.

Toward a Sociology of the Sociology of Nonreligion

‘No tradition for the sociological study of irreligion as yet exists and this book has been written in the hope that it will help to stimulate the development of just such a tradition’ (Campbell 1971: vii). So begins Colin Campbell’s landmark *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*. That his hope was not immediately granted is evident from the opening page of this portfolio’s first text, published 37 years later in 2008: ‘Historically, atheism has been neglected by the social sciences’; ‘The general dearth of sociological research of atheism [...] is well-documented’ (Bullivant 2008: 363).

A further five years later, however, Campbell’s book had become ‘canonised as a foundational text [...], called upon to foreground and legitimise the new-wave sociology of

irreligion' (Lee 2013: loc. 180).² As Campbell himself observed in the preface to a reissued edition:

Quite how long the wait would be before my hopes would be realised is rather starkly illustrated by the citation data for the book. [...] *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* was cited a mere five times between its publication [...] and 2006; in other words about once every seven years. However, by 2011 it had been cited some 86 times, meaning that between 2005 and 2011 it was accumulating some 14 citations per year; evidence that my hope that the work might spark an interest in the study of irreligion was perhaps being realised after all. (2013: loc. 102)³

From the vantage point of 2019, we may speak far less tentatively: the social-scientific study of **irreligion**, albeit now rebranded as the 'more or less synonymous' (Lee 2012a: 137 n. 1) nonreligion, is now firmly established. Furthermore, this extends far beyond the 'tradition for the *sociological* study of [nonreligion]' as originally envisaged by Campbell. While sociology will naturally be my main focus here, very similar and often-overlapping stories could equally be told from the perspectives of psychology, social and cognitive anthropology, history (Nash 2019), and political science. Before turning to this recent 'burgeoning' (Bullock 2017: 19), however, it is necessary first to explore the subject's general uninterest within the mainstream sociology of religion (and paralleled in the other social sciences) over the previous century and more.⁴

As is well-known, the discipline's defining figures of the nineteenth-century were themselves notably nonreligious. Yet they were not so – a point often missed – in any one-dimensional or uniform way. Max Weber's comment that 'We, religiously "unmusical" people find it difficult to imagine, or even simply to *believe*, the powerful role played by these religious elements in [early-modern Europe]' ([1906] 2002: 214) is, naturally enough, often quoted in

² This and the following references are to the Kindle e-book. In the absence of page references, I have therefore given the 'location' markers.

³ Using GoogleScholar's citation data, the book was cited a further 110 times from 2012 until the time of writing (October 2018). This is roughly the same yearly rate as Campbell gives for 2005-11. Note, however, that seemingly every publication during the early phase of 'the current and long-overdue upsurge of academic interest in atheism, secularity and nonreligion' (Campbell 2013: loc. 145) cited the book, precisely because there was little else *to* cite. Now there is a substantial, rapidly growing, and ever more specialized, body of citable literature.

⁴ This section develops and nuances an argument previously advanced by myself and Lois Lee (2012: 20-3), which in turn built on the earlier ideas of Colin Campbell (1971: 8-12) and Rodney Stark (1999).

this connection. Nevertheless, to his personal avowal of being ‘absolutely unmusical religiously and hav[ing] no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me’ he added the significant qualification: ‘But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious *nor irreligious*’ (quoted in Swatos and Kivisto 1991: 347; emphasis in Weber’s original). Note too the sweeping societal, political, and economic significance that Weber accords, however rightly or wrongly, to subtle changes in theological thinking in *The Protestant Ethic* ([1905] 1906). Such affirmation of the ‘independent causal significance of religious ideas’ (Parsons 1944: 187) is a far cry from many of his heirs’ tendency to regard religious thought and practice as essentially passive in the face of wider socio-cultural currents (Stark 2000).

It is a far cry too from the position of Karl Marx, for whom religious beliefs and ideas are primarily the epiphenomenal by-products of concrete political and economic realities. Like Weber, Marx’s own relationship with religion, personally and professionally, was rather more nuanced than is often supposed. Most notably, his famous ‘opium of the people’ paragraphs were written at a time when opiates were known chiefly for their analgesic and supposed curative properties (McKinnon 2005). For the hypochondriac Marx, himself an enthusiastic laudanum self-medicator, religion might help one cope with the painful symptoms of society’s ills: ‘the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions’ ([1843] 1970: 131). Though in doing so, admittedly, it could inure one from seeking proper treatment of the chronic underlying condition. But for Marx himself, in contrast to his later disciples for whom the very persistence of religion was – in proper Marxian terms – a testament to their failures to address the underlying social causes of alienation, religion itself was not the root problem: ‘The call to abandon illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions. This, the critique of religion is the critique in embryo of the vale of tears of which religion is the halo’ (ibid.; cf. Smolkin 2018: 10-12).

Among sociology's other canonical founders, Émile Durkheim and, earlier, Auguste Comte were perhaps most straightforwardly **secularists** and **positive atheists**. Even here, though, things are not quite so simple. If imitation is indeed the best form of flattery, then Comte's own wildly ambitious plans for a universal '**Religion of Humanity**' rather complicates the common and automatic conflation of **anti-theism** and **anti-religion** (Comte [1852] 2009; Wernick 2001; Gray 2018: 9-11). With some variation on the general theme, there is a long tradition of regarding Durkheim as, on Evans-Pritchard's phrase, 'a militant atheist, not just an unbeliever but a propagandist for unbelief' ([1973] 1981: 253; see Stark 1999: 46-7; Fuller 2006: 114-16). Yet even here, rather less clear-cut evaluations of Durkheim's overall stance towards religion are also available (notably Pickering 1984: 3-28). Furthermore, Durkheim's public remarks often betray a level of sympathy and nuance not normally associated with at least the *stereotype* of 'a militant atheist [...] a propagandist for unbelief'. Take, for example, his extemporized comments to a gathering of 'Free Believers and Free Thinkers' – neither group of whom he seems interested in personally allying himself with – in 1914:

In brief, what I ask of the free thinker is that he should confront religion in the same mental state as the believer. It is only by doing this that he can hope to understand it. Let him feel it as the believer feels it; what it is to the believer is what it really is. Consequently, he who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it! He is like a blind man trying to talk about colour. [...] There cannot be a rational interpretation of religion which is fundamentally irreligious; an irreligious interpretation of religion would be an interpretation which denied the phenomenon it was trying to explain. [Applause.] Nothing could be more contrary to the scientific method. ([1919] 1975: 184-5)

The diversity and nuance of their nonreligiosities notwithstanding, it is true that sociology's founding generation(s) jointly bequeathed to the discipline two notable characteristics: a high incidence of personal nonreligiosity among its leading practitioners (Gross and Simmons 2009; Smith 2003: 111-14; Yancey 2011: 49-111), and a programmatic tradition of regarding *religion* – at least in modern, western, 'developed' societies – as an

aberrant ‘social fact’ demanding special interrogation and explanation (see, paradigmatically, Durkheim [1895] 1982: 94-6). Conversely, being an atheist or otherwise nonreligious ‘was assumed to be self-explanatory; as the natural state of mature civilised men (and of not a few early sociologists) it hardly required any discussion, let alone explanation’ (Campbell 1971: 9). Also relevant, perhaps, is a general proclivity – albeit one with many exceptions – within the field to investigate things perceived as being strange or problematic (i.e., not one’s *own* beliefs). As Rodney Stark, for example, has complained: ‘the space a religious group receives in journals is almost directly inverse to its size and conventionality’ (1999: 57). These observations have received strong support in a statement of ‘twenty-three theses on the status of religion within American sociology’ jointly published by a group including Christian Smith, Nancy T. Ammerman, Elaine Howard Ecklund, and José Casanova:

In most of social science, the received presupposition is that the secular or secularity is a kind of space created with the disappearance or exclusion of religion. For most who operate under categories inherited from the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century social-evolutionism, the ‘secular’ suggests a kind of natural resting place – that is, a neutral territory or condition achieved when the superstitions and irrationalities of religion are dispelled, or perhaps a final destiny for ever-evolving humanity. In this sense, secularity itself is naturalized, made neutral or objective, and de-problematized as a particular historical and social formation needing explanation itself. (Smith et al. 2013: 921)

Nor, in recent years, have such criticisms been confined to American scholars. Note the trenchant comments of Margaret Archer et al., within the context of a wider critique of the ‘unexamined legacy of the enlightenment that we privilege atheism as the intellectual baseline and make religious belief alone something which is to be explained or defended’ (2004: 5):

Up to now in academic circles, the atheist has occupied a privileged position in all this plurality. Refraining from any beliefs about transcendent reality, atheism has appeared to be the position of value-neutrality in this arena, the rational default category against which all other beliefs are measured. [... But atheism] reflects its own experience, the experience of the transcendent absent. It cannot then be held, as it so often has been, especially in anthropology and sociology, that religion alone is something to be explained and not atheism as well. (ibid.: 12)

In this connection, it is important to note a number of twentieth-century exceptions to this general trend. These typically arose from milieux in which manifestations of unbelief and nonreligiosity were regarded, not as the largely unnoticed ‘normal’, but rather as deviant and requiring explanation (see Filsinger 1976: 232-3).⁵ As Durkheim himself observed in *The Rules of Sociological Method*: ‘Thus it constantly happens that a theorist lacking religious belief identifies as a pathological phenomenon the vestiges of faith that survive among the general collapse of religious beliefs, while for the believer it is the very absence of belief which is the great social sickness’ ([1895] 1982: 91).

Most obviously, such was broadly true for those in the Catholic-dominated *sociologie religieuse* tradition of Gabriel Le Bras and his disciples in France, the Low Countries, Italy, and elsewhere (Dobbelaere 2000). From the 1930s onwards, important studies, focusing directly on unbelief, indifference, and lapsation as growing religious and social problems, began to emerge. This was not only ‘sociology [...] at the service of the Catholic Church’ (ibid.: 434), but it was explicitly and proudly so. Given the peculiarity of this orientation within the wider sociology-of-religion world, however, its proponents could also not fail to be notably self-aware. As Theodore Steeman, a Louvain-trained sociologist, Franciscan friar, and later theology professor at Boston College, notes early into his *The Study of Atheism: Sociological Approach*:

What is it that the atheist does not believe in and why doesn’t he believe in it? And, why is it a problem that he does not believe in God? Evidently, the problem of Atheism is not a problem in its own right, but only in the context of some notion of normalcy linked to the believing attitude. [...]The study of atheism, therefore, presupposes that

⁵ While my focus here is on sociology, I tentatively wonder whether an analogous argument might be made for anthropology. For example, reading the early ethnographic accounts of Christian missionaries, it is striking how ready they are to ‘notice’ nonreligious and nontheistic beliefs and practices within certain traditional societies. For example, ‘endemic atheism’ and ‘without any religion, true or false’ were common descriptions of the Xhosa, Tswana, and Sotho peoples of southern Africa throughout the nineteenth century (Chidester [1992] 2014: 37-8). In general, these proto-ethnologists were not always appreciated by the generation of (professional) anthropologists who succeeded them – Malinowski, for example, was routinely scathing of work produced by the ‘curiosity of amateurs’ (1922: 9). Without denying the greatly increased rigour and insight the ‘pros’ brought to the field, in light of the above, one wonders whether perhaps the missionaries were better primed to spot traces of Steeman’s ‘conspicuous absence’ (or to interpret religiously ambiguous beliefs and attitudes in this way over another).

we treat the absence of God in the life of the atheist as a ‘conspicuous absence.’ (1965: 1)

This explicit construction of atheism as being a ‘conspicuous absence’, in contrast to a ‘notion of normalcy linked to the believing attitude’, was most strikingly manifest in the conference on ‘The Culture of Unbelief’ hosted by the Vatican in 1969 (Martin 1970). This was a remarkable event for several reasons. The sheer fact that ‘the first time that an international group of social scientists gathered to discuss this particular subject’ (Berger 1971: vii) should be planned and hosted in the heart of the Catholic Church – working in collaboration with the Sociology Department at UC Berkeley, no less! – was, understandably enough, a source of surprise and intrigue to the world’s media. But it makes perfect sense from the perspective adopted here. Note, further, the sheer calibre and profile of the speakers at this ‘Parley to Study Atheism’, as a *Washington Post* headline put it (Wollemborg 1969). Peter Berger was entrusted with inviting the social scientists and historians, who thus included (among others): Thomas Luckmann, Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah, Bryan Wilson, David Martin, Charles Glock, and Martin Marty.⁶ Among their theological interlocutors, invited by the Vatican, were the future cardinals Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, and (to Berger’s surprise) the American Protestant ‘radical’ Harvey Cox. Pope Paul VI himself addressed the conference and, during a private audience, ‘was kind enough to assure Talcott Parsons he was acquainted with his work’ (Martin 2013: 188).

Despite this pomp and circumstance, it cannot be said that ‘The Culture of Unbelief’ precipitated any serious or long-lasting focus on its subject matter within the sociology of religion. The likes of Parsons, Bellah, Glock, and Luckmann were naturally happy enough to write an ‘occasional piece’ in exchange for five days in Rome among friends and colleagues. But this was not the catalyst for any significant new focus on the topic beyond the conference.

⁶ Curiously, Berger notes of Brigitte Berger and Benita Luckmann, both sociologists of distinction: ‘our wives [...] though not formally invited, came along’ (2011: chap. 4).

In fact, several of the speakers used the opportunity to express scepticism at the value and/or viability of ‘Unbelief as an Object of Research’ (Wilson 1971; see also Glock 1971). Berger’s own summation puts it rather neatly: ‘I don’t think that any profound insights came out of this conference [...] But it was a fascinating event’ (Berger 2011: chap. 4).

The above paragraphs advance a brief and necessarily speculative explanation for the fact that, until relatively recently, irreligion/nonreligion was an infrequent and, even then, normally fleeting topic for serious sociological investigation. The basic point here is simply that sociologists are not themselves spared from the ‘labyrinths of conflicting relations of interest, power, control, resource flows, habitus, and so on that ought to make us question the world as given to us’ (Smith 2014: 26; see Bourdieu [1978] 1992), and which they are so skilled at identifying in others. Of course, this cuts both ways. Below, I shall advance an explanation for why, seemingly suddenly, the sociology of religion’s decades-long collective uninterest in nonreligious matters changed. Before doing so, it is worth emphasizing a number of outrightly practical matters which also affected the popularity of the topic. The first of these is simply that, until *relatively* recently, ‘religious nones’ only made up a small proportion of the population in many countries. This was particularly true in the USA. As demonstrated later in this portfolio using General Social Survey data [8], nones accounted for only 5-10% of the general population up until the mid-1990s: large enough to be noticed (e.g., Vernon 1968), but too small, diffuse, and inchoate to merit or repay sustained sociological attention. Avowed atheists, agnostics, or humanists were – and still are – an even smaller constituency. While a small number of worthwhile studies were published on the memberships of dedicated secularist and humanist groups (e.g., Campbell 1965; Black 1983), these too suffered from i) only attracting a small and atypical subset of the already-tiny numbers of avowed atheists and humanists; ii) generally showing few signs of growth or wider impact. In fact, some of the earliest such studies – which are of course now widely cited and fêted as having been

pioneeringly ahead-of-their-times – almost read as warnings to other scholars not to squander their time on such marginal phenomena. Thus Vetter and Green’s 1932 article on members of the now-defunct American Association for the Advancement of Atheism, tellingly published in the *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, frames ‘Atheists’ alongside ‘Single Taxers, Fundamentalists, [and] Communists’ as adherents of ‘extremes of social, political and religious outlook’ (1932: 179). To the best of my knowledge, it would take thirty-four years for an American social sciences journal to publish another article on atheism. The opening sentences of Demerath and Thiessen’s 1966 paper in *American Journal of Sociology*, however, are hardly a clarion call to get in early on a new and exciting subfield:

This paper offers a belated diagnosis of an organization that is currently in its death trance. The analysis follows the development and demise of a small-town Wisconsin free-thought movement or Freie Gemeinde which began in 1852, reached its zenith in the 1880’s, and then began to atrophy with the pursuit of legitimacy. The study is intended as both a perverse chapter in the sociology of religion and a paragraph in the theory of organizational change. (1966: 674)

Fast-forwarding to the present, it is clear that nonreligion’s sociological state of neglect no longer applies – or at least, it applies vastly less than it did in even the recent past. At the most basic and easily quantifiable level, the past decade or so has seen a rising tide of publications on, or closely related to, nonreligion (Nixon 2014: 14-16). This trend was already underway by 2008. The website of the **Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network** (NSRN) used to keep a running bibliography of such items, which I curated in its early years. While not necessarily an exhaustive record (its coverage of non-English items is, for instance, not totally reliable), it gives a fair impression of the subfield’s changing output. For each year from 2000 to 2005, fewer than 20 such pieces are recorded. The following four years, 2006 to 2009 inclusive, fluctuate from lows of 35 to a high of 56. 2010 and 2011, meanwhile, have 87 and 126 entries, followed by over 200 in both 2012 and 2013. By the time the bibliography was last updated in January 2015, 2014 already had 150 nonreligion-related publications to its name (Cotter 2015). With the pace of publishing ever increasing, and (concomitantly) the need

for new scholars entering the field to require help in seeking out relevant literature ever decreasing, the online bibliography was discontinued.

So what has changed? How are we to explain the sudden surge in sociological – and indeed psychological, anthropological, historical, etc. – interest over the past ten-or-so years? Furthermore, a key feature of nonreligion studies over this period has been its rapid ‘institutionalization’ (cf. Parsons [1951] 2005: 220-58). One can now speak, not merely of a ‘*tradition* for the sociological study of [non]religion’ (Campbell 1971:vii; emphasis added), but of a distinct subfield. How, and why, has all this come about?

To some extent, perhaps, it is too early yet to say. And, given what was said above about the ‘labyrinths of conflicting relations’ (Smith 2014: 26) afflicting even sociologists themselves, the theorizing of one who has been very much of an ‘inside’ observer of, and participant in, these developments has both its benefits and limitations. For Bourdieu, ‘the ruses of social pulsions are countless, and to do a sociology of one’s universe can sometimes be yet another, most perverse, way of satisfying such repressed impulses in a subtly roundabout way’ ([1978] 1992: 253). Yet since this kind of reflexive self-awareness did not stop Bourdieu writing *Homo Academicus* ([1984] 1988) on precisely his own ‘universe’ of French academics, this more modest project need not necessarily be thought doomed from the start. At a minimum, what follows may perhaps have value as a kind of ‘first draft’, for others to improve upon, if not tear up and start over.

In brief, I believe that, first of all, two (interrelated) sets of things happened in the late-1990s and very early 2000s which, taken together, boosted the relative attractiveness of studying nonreligion, especially among British and American social scientists. This in turn produced a still-small number of often-junior scholars who were, to the best of their knowledge, ‘lone wolves’. However, once their researches began to bear fruit in articles and conference papers, and they realized they were not absolutely alone, then a rapid period of networking

ensued – such that everyone working in the area was soon in touch with everyone else. This homophilous dense-clustering (to invoke the technical terminology of Social Network Analysis), acting in concert with the ‘relative attractiveness’ factors to be explained below, created a kind of virtuous circle: fueling more studies, more scholars noticing and joining in, and – ultimately – the founding of a bona-fide subfield. This latter, ‘institutionalization’ half of the story will be discussed in due course. Here, I shall spell out my ‘attractiveness’ theory in more detail.

On the face of it, the fact that social scientists suddenly started becoming interested in nonreligion in the middle-years of the first decade of the twenty-first century does not require much special explanation. For this was a period in which the media and book-buying public demonstrably also did – and in a big way. Most obviously, these years were the epicentre of the New Atheism, for which the best-selling books by Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, 2004; *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 2006), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great*, 2007) are the defining, though far from exhaustive, reference-points. As I argue later in this portfolio [3, 4, 5], New Atheism’s emergence and reception were social facts of no little surprise or significance, and ones therefore crying out for sociological interrogation.

New Atheism was undeniably *one* of the catalysts of the emerging social-scientific interest in the area: here was something that was clearly too obvious, and too ‘loud’, not to be written about. But it was by no means the only one. For a start, the New Atheism did not arise *ex nihilo*. It cannot really be understood apart from a much broader and more diffuse ‘flourishing’ of atheism and nonreligiosity, probably beginning in the nineties and rapidly accelerating in the noughties, not least after 9/11. Recent scholarship points to a growing, loose-knit movement – much of it centred online – of which New Atheism is but a single, and not necessarily representative, expression (see Kettell 2013; Davie 2015: 191-3; LeDrew 2016: 95-

123; McAnnalla et al. 2019: 41-4). Add to this the growing prominence of ‘no religion’ in social surveys. The ‘rise of the nones’ was already becoming a staple in the US media’s religion coverage in this period of ferment, with a regular stream of major national surveys (e.g., American Religious Identification Survey; Baylor Religion Survey, Pew Religious Landscape Survey) generating headlines on the growth of this demographic. In fact, significant media interest in nonreligion more generally also played a role in incentivizing academic interest in the topic. Having one’s work featured or cited in the news, or being asked to write an op-ed on a newspaper’s blog, is undoubtedly attractive to academics, for reasons both personal (a ‘Gilderoy Lockhart’ effect) and professional (e.g., REF ‘impact’ narratives, institutional PR). It is also comparatively rare: the arcana of much academic work, no matter how obviously exciting to fellow experts, does not always translate easily or predictably into sellable copy. Albeit with some striking exceptions (e.g., certain topics within the study of Islam; NRM scholarship, at least in the aftermath of ‘cult tragedies’; etc.), this is also true within the sociology of religion. Nonreligion studies has, over the past decade or so, proven a notable exception. For all that academics might complain about the superficiality and selectiveness of (some) journalistic coverage of their particular topic, there is no doubt that media interest has brought exposure and other benefits both to the subfield itself, and to many individuals working in it – myself included.

In short, atheism, secularity, and related topics were becoming harder for social scientists to ignore. They were also becoming much easier to study. As previously noted, quite apart from any more ulterior reasons, would-be researchers have long been hampered by the difficulties of ‘finding’ the nonreligious, especially in the USA. Obviously, the more nones and/or outright atheists or agnostics there are, the easier they are to identify and interview, and the more likely they are to turn up in largescale surveys in usable (sub)sample sizes. The internet too – long a vibrant space for atheist discourse and community-building (Cimino and

Smith 2011; Nixon 2014; Addington 2017) – has opened up all kinds of fieldsite possibilities for social research, only some of which have yet been exploited (see, e.g., Lundmark 2019 on nonreligious women YouTubers). Furthermore the ‘new visibility of atheism’ in the early-2000s both spawned, and attracted new attention towards, a large and diverse of events, groups, and other initiatives. These naturally have proven attractive to researchers as opening up possibilities of well-defined sites for ethnographic work: the perfect case-study for a PhD project or a small grant application, for example. The Atheist Bus Campaign, for instance, has generated a significant secondary literature of its very own (e.g., Tomlins and Bullivant⁷ 2016, with chapter case-studies from fifteen different countries). The Sunday Assembly, a ‘secular congregation’ often identified as part of a wider wave of ‘post-New Atheism’ or ‘New Atheism’, launched in London in 2013 before spreading elsewhere. It has already been the basis for PhD projects in England (Bullock 2017), Scotland (Cross 2017), and America (Frost 2017).

In addition to such demonstrable ‘supply-side’ changes – i.e., nonreligion becoming more obvious, interesting, and accessible to potential researchers – I contend that a much subtler, and admittedly more speculative, shift was afoot. As much recent scholarship has highlighted, identity politics have become a signal feature of recent atheist discourse, organizing, and campaigning. Once again, this applies especially in the US context. As Kettell notes:

[One goal] has been to raise the visibility of atheism with a view to countering adverse public perceptions and gaining mainstream acceptance. Key to this is the belief that the true size of the atheist (and nonreligious) constituency is far greater than is typically imagined, and that, drawing on the experiences of the gay rights movement, revealing the actual numbers will increase familiarity and undermine negative stereotypes. Among the principal methods being directed to the achievement of these aims include the ‘We Are Atheism’ and ‘Out’ campaigns, which encourage atheists to publicly identify themselves as such. [...] New atheism has self-consciously adopted a discourse rooted in a language of group rights and demands for equal treatment. This has been fuelled, to a large degree, by a desire to establish a sense of explicitly ‘atheist’ identity,

⁷ No relation.

and [...] to develop a greater notion of group membership, community and belonging. (2013: 65-6; see also Taira 2012; Amarasingham and Brewster 2016)

One important facet of all this was a growing self-consciousness among atheists and nonreligious of being a marginalized and/or persecuted minority within many societies. In America, this idea gained critical support in *American Sociological Review* in April 2006 (i.e., just as the sociology of nonreligion was about to take off). Penny Edgell et al.'s 'Atheist as "Other": Moral Boundaries and Cultural Belonging in American Society' used national survey data to show that 'atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups' (2006: 211). For example, two-fifths of Americans identified 'atheists' as a group 'not at all agree[ing] with my vision of American society'. By comparison, around a quarter of respondents cited 'Muslims' or 'homosexuals', who were the next most (un)popular choices. 'Atheists' also topped the 'I would disapprove if my child wanted to marry a member of this group' category, being chosen by 48% of those polled. 'Muslims' (34%) and 'African Americans' (27%), in second and third place, were again well beaten. According to the authors:

We believe that in answering our questions about atheists, our survey respondents were not, on the whole, referring to actual atheists they had encountered, but were responding to "the atheist" as a boundary-marking cultural category. (ibid.: 230)

That is to say, 'atheists' seem to function in American society as a 'symbolic other', demarcating a perceived boundary between the American and un-American, and – by extension – the moral and immoral.

In retrospect, the growing self-awareness of the nonreligious as i) constituting a coherent social minority group, with accompanying collective concerns and causes, and who are ii) demonstrably the objects of widespread stigmatization, marginalization, and (potentially) discrimination, looks like a combination of factors specifically designed to provide sociologists with both personal and professional reasons to study nonreligion. The high levels of nonreligiosity among sociologists and other social scientists are well-evidenced

(Wuthnow 1985; Ecklund and Scheitle 2007; Gross and Simmons 2009) and, as noted above, have long roots. Since social scientists are people too, then one would expect the growing identitarian awareness among the-nonreligious-in-general would also affect at least some nonreligious sociologists. Furthermore, the discipline of sociology is one that is particularly primed to investigate social problems, both due its particular purview and methods, and to the avowedly activist commitments, mentalities, and motivations of many of its exponents (Collins 1998). In light of the Edgell paper – which, as of March 2019, has been cited over 800 times – it come as no surprise that the topic of ‘anti-atheist prejudice’ has rapidly generated a substantial sociological literature (e.g., Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012). After all, if the nonreligious *are* a misunderstood and misrepresented minority in American society, then who better to help set the record straight than nonreligious sociologists themselves? Of course, it is not the case that all sociologists of nonreligion are themselves personally nonreligious, or personally committed to ‘the nonreligious cause’ – though many are. A good number could, moreover, be seen as proponents of a kind of *sociologie non-religieuse* (e.g., Zuckerman 2014; Cragun 2015). In any case, to put it mildly, the Vatican is no longer the primary champion of the subfield.

Nonreligion and subfield creation

An influx of individual scholars, even producing (by 2012) some two hundred-odd publications a year, do not in themselves a subfield make. Volume aside, arguably the most interesting feature of nonreligion studies over the past decade has been its rapid ‘institutionalization’. I use this term here in a double sense. Firstly, it refers to the *internal* process of building-up an architecture of ‘professional structures’ among scholars of nonreligion: dedicated networks, workshops, conferences, curricula, journals. This process involves a ‘differentiation’ (Merton [1961] 1973: 50-1) of the subject from other areas of the

sociology of religion, as being not only one of particular interest (i.e., enough to warrant and sustain this special attention and effort), but as needing to be addressed in a more rigorous and sustained way than has previously been the case. This, implicitly or (often) explicitly, includes criticism of the way in which the subject has hitherto been treated within the wider discipline. Hence, in the subfield's early days, the profusion of quasi-moral descriptors such as 'neglected', 'overlooked', 'excluded', 'marginalization', and 'dereliction of duty' by writers – including myself – decrying the situation *up until now* (e.g., Bainbridge 2005; Pasquale 2007; Bullivant 2008; Lee 2012b). It typically also involves such things as the refining and clarifying of key terms, the retooling of existing theoretical frameworks and/or the forging of new ones (cf. Parsons 1944), and the identification of particularly influential and pioneering texts or figures, both past and present. In general terms, this kind of differentiation is a standard phase in the establishment of academic subfields and/or subdisciplines (Hambrick and Chen 2008), as for example with the sociologies of sport or indeed religion itself (Malcolm 2014; Dobbelaere 1999). Perhaps the most instructive parallel here, however, is the formation of New Religious Movements (or New Religions) Studies from the 1970s within the sociology of religion, and which has itself now spawned several thriving sub-subfields (see Arweck 2006: 45-57; Bromley 2009; Chryssides and Zeller 2014; Ashcraft 2018).

Secondly, I also take institutionalization to involve the *external* process by which an embryonic subfield, and those working within it, gain the necessary recognition and 'legitimation' (Merton [1961] 1973: 51-2) from the wider discipline: in this case, the sociology of religion. Strictly speaking, there is nothing actually *stopping* scholars interested in a given topic from working on it, congregating together whether in person or online, or even publishing their own journals – and to go on doing so indefinitely even if their specific focus receives either little recognition, or perhaps even specific disdain ('not a real subject', 'not very rigorous', 'essentially just a bunch of fans talking to themselves'), from outsiders within their

own academic circles. However, if this activity is not valued by others wielding ‘academic capital’ within their wider disciplines, there are very strong disincentives to expending one’s resources in this way (Bourdieu [1984] 1988: 84-110; see also Parsons and Platt 1973: 112-14; Merton 1968). No matter how excellent and interesting *other* ‘X Studies’ compatriots may find one’s work, if major academic presses, high-quality journals, prestigious conferences, funding bodies, REF panels, or tenure committees (and the peer-reviewers engaged by them) do not agree, then one’s career will inevitably suffer. Indeed, if ‘X Studies’ does not carry sufficient credibility, then it will be much harder even to have a career in the first place. Not only will there be no ‘perfect’ posts (e.g., ‘Lecturer in X Studies’) to apply for, but in applying for generic posts (e.g., ‘Lecturer in Sociology’, ‘Research Fellow in Religious Studies’) one will need to play down one’s primary research area in favour of secondary or tertiary interests. Furthermore, one will be up against a large pool of other applicants whose own primary work is in more accepted specialisms (and for which there may already be existing courses to teach, and/or potential future colleagues with whom one has mutual interests or connections). Accordingly, there is no shortage of examples of failed (sub)fields.⁸

In practice, of course, the internal and external aspects of institutionalization are not neatly separable, either causally or chronologically. One does not set up a full-blown subfield from scratch, with a full complement of conferences, journals, and other professional paraphernalia, and then make a formal application for recognition from the ‘institutionalized status-judges of the intellect’ (Merton [1961] 1973: 51). In point of fact, the initial impetus and encouragement towards the new area often comes from sympathetic *outsiders*, such as a potential doctoral supervisor encouraging the exploration of a new, interesting-looking topic.

⁸ The field of ‘memetics’, applying neo-Darwinian principles to the social sciences, is arguably one such. Despite prominent proponents, and a flurry of initial interest, this Darwinian approach to culture struggled to achieve genuine scholarly credibility (e.g., Atran 2001; McGrath 2004: chap. 4). Accordingly, its flagship online *Journal of Memetics* ceased publication in 2005 after eight years ‘due to a lack of quality submissions’ (Edmonds 2005). Its archived homepage now carries the forlorn sentence, ‘There was to be a relaunch but after several years nothing has happened’ (JoM-EMIT 2018).

Insiders and outsiders (or in these cases, perhaps better ‘fellow travellers’) can work together to produce a kind of virtuous circle, whereby the value of a nascent subfield is recognized early on, and its development is actively supported by those not directly involved; those (often comparatively junior) researchers in the subfield start to justify this initial faith by producing research of wider interest (and, critically, citability), which in turn attracts further encouragement, support, and engagement.⁹ If successful, people, data, ideas, and methodologies nurtured in ‘X Studies’ may start to make an appreciable contribution to the wider host field or discipline, for example through being taken up by those not intensely involved in the subfield: several examples of this from the sociology of (non)religion are given below. In time, moreover, they may come to be more-or-less fully institutionalized, that is, regarded as a permanent and integral component of the wider field. New Religious Movements Studies is, again, a clear example of a subfield that has gone onto to have such ‘a transformative impact’ (Robbins 1988) on the sociology of religion.

The rapid growth of the sociology of nonreligion owes much to this dual process of institutionalization. One obvious ‘internal’ landmark was the foundation of the *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network* in late 2008 by Lois Lee (a Cambridge PhD student in Sociology), along with three co-directors: Stacey Gutkowski (a Cambridge PhD student in International Relations), and Nicholas Gibson (a Cambridge postdoc in Psychology), and me (an Oxford DPhil student in Theology, but with the beginnings of a Sociology sideline). As noted earlier, a steady stream of nonreligion-related publications was already beginning to appear by this time. As would soon become clear, a slowly growing supply of other scholars (mostly postgraduate students or junior faculty) were starting to become interested in the topic. The purpose of the NSRN, which in its early days consisted of a simple website with a directory

⁹ Nonreligion studies’ debts to several such established ‘outsiders’ and ‘fellow travellers’ are many and various. The special role of just one of these – the late Prof. Peter Clarke, to whom this PhD submission is dedicated – is given below.

of members and a semi-regularly updated bibliography, and two email lists (‘Announcements’ and ‘Discussion’), was primarily to be a means of helping scholars to find and connect with other scholars. Naturally enough, this led to our hosting a one-day conference at Wolfson College, Oxford, the following year (December 2009) on a shoestring budget: ‘Non-religion and Secularity: New Empirical Perspectives’. So far as we were aware, this was the first social sciences conference to be held on this topic since the Vatican’s 1969 ‘Culture of Unbelief’ event (see above). Forty-seven people attended, including all organizers and keynotes.

In the ten years since then, nonreligion’s ‘professional architecture’ has grown fairly rapidly. The NSRN, from which I stepped down as a co-director in 2014, has continued to expand. Its website is, for example, a much grander affair, overseen by an ‘Online Team’ consisting of a Managing Editor, two Deputy Editors, and a further sixteen Assistant Editors. International conferences, now consisting of several days of papers, occur at least every two years: London (2012); Claremont, CA (2014); Zurich (2016); London (2018); Rome (2019). A peer-reviewed journal, *Secularism & Nonreligion*, launched in partnership with the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at the University of Hartford, CT, is now in its eighth year. An NSRN book series, ‘Religion and Its Others: Studies in Religion, Nonreligion, and Secularity’, was launched by De Gruyter in 2015, with eight volumes now published or forthcoming.

Nor is the NSRN the only ‘institutional carrier’ (cf. Scott 2003) of multidisciplinary nonreligion studies. Brill launched another journal, *Secular Studies*, in 2019. Several other academic presses have their own nonreligion – or *explicitly* nonreligion-inclusive – book series, such as New York University Press’s ‘Secular Studies’ (unrelated to Brill’s journal), and Palgrave Macmillan’s ‘Histories of the Sacred and Secular: 1700-2000’. Given the weight that ‘grant capture’ carries as an item of academic capital, both directly in terms of funding posts and indirectly as a measure of status and prestige, the willingness of funding bodies to allocate

scarce and severely competed-over resources to nonreligion projects is of critical significance. The past few years have seen several six- or seven-figure grants, including from the Leverhulme Trust, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and the John Templeton Foundation.

Perhaps the single most telling indicator of nonreligion studies' nascent institutionalization is the extent to which its particular topics and terminology have been incorporated into mainstream sociology of religion. For example, Estonian religious historian Atko Remmel and colleagues argue for there having been a recent “non-religious turn” (2019) within the wider study of religion. While this is both difficult to quantify, and indeed easy to overstate, the programmes and themes of leading ‘generic’ sociology of religion conferences are one indicator. The 2016 joint ISORECEA and ESA Sociology of Religion convention, for example, focused squarely on ‘Religion and Non-Religion in Contemporary Societies’. The 2018 annual meeting of SSSR/RRA, furthermore, included five sessions explicitly dedicated to aspects of nonreligion, plus a number of nonreligion-specific papers in other sessions.¹⁰ It is also now fairly routine for Calls for Papers to include explicit mention of nonreligion or nonreligion-related areas. Another telling indicator is the number of leading scholars who have, in the past few years, starting writing *directly* on atheism, secularity, and nonreligiosity.¹¹ This is often, to a certain extent, simply a shift of emphasis and focus. The difference, one might say, between conducting the inquest into ‘the death of Christian Britain’ (Brown 2001) and charting ‘the growth and maturing of noreligionism’ (ibid. 2012: 28) or ‘becoming atheist’ (ibid. 2017), over the same period. Or alternatively, between narrating ‘how the Church of England lost the English people’ (Brown and Woodhead 2016) and exploring ‘the rise of “No Religion” [...] the emergence of a new cultural majority’ (Woodhead 2016). These ‘twinned’

¹⁰ I.e., ‘Civic Engagement and Social Attitudes Among the Non-Religious’, ‘Nonreligious Identity’, ‘Religious Disaffiliation’, ‘Leaving Mormonism: Patterns of Disaffiliation among Latter-day Saints in the United States’, and ‘Secularization and Desecularization’.

¹¹ In addition to Callum Brown and Linda Woodhead, see: Jerome Baggett (2019), Lori Beaman (2017), Jacques Berlinerblau (2012), Grace Davie (2013; 2015: 177-96), Christian Smith (2019), Jörg Stolz (Stolz et al. 2016), Ann Taves (2018), and George Yancey (Williamson and Yancey 2011).

topics, though obviously and necessarily related, are not simply interchangeable. In both cases, the change of analytic focus from ‘religious decline’ (a long-time staple of the sociology of religion) to ‘nonreligious increase’ is not purely semantic; the one is not merely the other’s mirror image of the other. In short, as Christian Smith has rightly observed:

Secularity and secularism are areas in which sociologists of religion have increasingly focused in recent years, ‘the secular’ becoming more properly understood as not a neutral, default human position or category, but instead a contingently situated, particular stance and type, the exigencies of which are worth empirical investigation. (2014: x n. 4)

The Present Portfolio: Genesis, Coherence, and Significance

In 2006-7, I was a first-year DPhil student in systematic theology at the University of Oxford, studying the nuances of Vatican II’s treatment of atheism. Having decided, for background research, to read up on the sociology of contemporary nonreligiosity, I soon discovered that there was not a great deal to read up on. I then chanced to meet, at a garden party, the late Peter Clarke – then Professor Emeritus of the History and Sociology of Religion at King’s College London, and a professorial member of the Oxford Theology Faculty. This led to many further conversations and, ultimately, he encouraged me to research and write something on the topic myself. The result was the research note ‘Sociology and the Study of Atheism’ [1], published in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (which Peter co-edited).

This short piece, modest in both ambition and execution, is nonetheless noteworthy here for several reasons. It sets out, in embryonic form, a number of areas of interest which I have explored in more depth and with greater methodological sophistication in later work. These include:

- i. **Curiosity regarding the history of the (lack of) study of atheism and related topics.** In addition to the foregoing two sections of this ‘Introduction’ – my

longest treatment by far – this is a topic I have broached in several publications (e.g., Bullivant 2009; Bullivant and Lee 2012; Bullivant and Ruse 2013).

- ii. **A concern for the definition of key terms, both in scholarly usage, and how they are concretely used and understood by normal people (including those filling in surveys).** This has been a major preoccupation of mine, not least for the very practical reasons of co-editing/authoring three reference works (i.e., *The Oxford Handbook*, *Oxford Dictionary*, and forthcoming *Cambridge History of Atheism*). My recent work with various largescale social surveys has also brought issues surrounding how religion-related questions are asked and understood to the fore (e.g., Bullivant 2017).
- iii. **A willingness to conduct my own primary data collection and analysis.** While the use of the websurvey in [1] is admittedly unsophisticated, it at least evinces a desire not to rely solely on other people’s empirical work. The development of my own methodological capacities is outlined more fully below.
- iv. **A desire to connect and collaborate with other interested scholars.** The final sentences of the research note read: ‘My research in this area is ongoing [...] I would naturally be very interested to find out about other researchers undertaking, or planning to undertake, projects in this area.’ As I am about to relate, this has had a particularly large influence over my continuing to do sociological work in this area, and indeed now in other areas of the sociology of religion.

The research note was published in autumn 2008, just at the moment when other people were becoming interested in the area, while also thinking that they were more-or-less alone. This meant that any publication on the topic would be noticed – *even* something short and

unsophisticated by a moonlighting theology postgrad. Several people got in touch, the most important of whom was Lois Lee, who then invited me to become a co-director of a network she was planning to start: the NSRN. We also set about planning the inaugural NSRN conference for the following year (mentioned above). This conference, in turn, led to a number of further sociological opportunities, including invitations to co-edit a special issue of *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (later reissued as a book; Arweck et al. 2013), and to co-write a feature in *New Scientist*, which then ultimately led to my being asked to put together a proposal for the *Oxford Handbook*. During this period, and again as one of the relatively few people known to be ‘active’ in the area, I was also asked to contribute to various edited volumes and conferences reflecting on the New Atheism. As an early-career academic, and thus not exactly being inundated with such offers in my chosen field, these opportunities – and others that followed – provided regular incentives to ‘keep my hand in’ as (as I once introduced myself at an NSRN conference) the Gentleman Amateur of the sociology of nonreligion. The direct fruits of two of these are included in this portfolio: a book chapter on the socio-cultural origins and appeal of the New Atheism in Britain and America [3], and an article adapted from a paper I gave at a small conference Turku, Finland, on ‘the new visibility of atheism in Europe’ [4]. I also include a much more recent piece, expanding on some of the theoretical ideas in [3] and [4], which I was asked to contribute as a Foreword to a recent collection on the wider contexts of the New Atheism [5].

The serendipitous nature of my becoming a sociologist should be self-evident, even apart from that fateful meeting with Peter Clarke in Oxford. Had I begun my doctoral studies in theology, say, five years earlier, then any sociological forays I might have made would have passed unnoticed. Alternatively, had I come to the topic even two or three years later, then the subfield would already have been up and running, with plenty of other, vastly better-qualified options to invite to co-direct a network, speak at a conference, or contribute to – much less edit

– a collection of essays. Even more critically, there would have been little motivation to my doing my own thinking and writing as a sociologist: I could simply have drawn on the excellent studies already starting to appear.

Even in the most propitious of circumstances, a certain gauche amateurism will only take one so far. From my earliest sociological stirrings, I have sought to make the most of various opportunities to develop my knowledge and skills in the area. For example, while a doctoral student in theology, I attended various lecture series on the sociology and anthropology of religion within the Oxford Theology Faculty, as well as auditing the core ‘Sociological Analysis’ lectures intended for the MSc Sociology. Further skills acquisition has been done in a piecemeal way, during the same period in which I have been establishing myself within my primary field of theology.¹² A genuine watershed in my social-scientific development was, therefore, my receipt of a British Academy Quantitative Skills Acquisition Award in 2013. This funded a semester as a Visiting Researcher at the Institute for Social Change at the University of Manchester. Under the mentorship of Dr Siobhan McAndrew, I worked on gaining the requisite skills to produce my first piece of serious quantitative sociology. This was a study of Catholic disaffiliation using British Social Attitudes data, subsequently published in *Journal of Contemporary Religion* [7]. This project has had a transformative effect on my work. While I have always appealed to evidence from quantitative sources to inform my sociologizing (and indeed theologizing), I had hitherto been dependent either on the analyses of others, or (as cursorily in [3]) on basic cross-tabs using online explorer interfaces. With the quantitative skills acquired via the BA grant – and to which I am continuing

¹² I have been fortunate in this respect, since I have been able to put my developing sociological expertise to good use in both informing aspects of my theological work, and in doing empirical work on various areas of church life. I have also, very usefully, been able to use it in teaching on the latter side of our BA in Theology and Religious Studies. My work in either discipline, moreover, fits comfortably within the remit of the single Theology and Religious Studies REF unit of assessment. In this way, pursuing sociology has proven a valuable complement to my main role. This would not have been the case if, say, I had been attempting to developing a second-string interest in ornithology.

to add¹³ – I have now produced original research on a variety of topics using (inter)national social surveys including British Social Attitudes, South African Social Attitudes Survey, General Social Survey (USA), European Social Survey, World Values Study, and the International Social Survey Programme. Lest I be suspected here of ‘methodological monotheism’ (cf. Bourdieu [1987] 1982: 226), it is worth adding that other aspects of my research have had a much more qualitative dimension (e.g., Bullivant 2008, 2019b; and the c. 50 interviews I have recently been conducting with American unbelievers as part of the ‘Understanding Unbelief’ project). While fully agreeing that ‘social research is something much too serious and too difficult for us to mistake scientific *rigidity* [...] for scientific *rigor*, and thus to deprive ourselves of this or that resource available in the full panoply of intellectual traditions of our discipline and of [its] sister disciplines’ (Bourdieu [1987] 1982: 227), elements of my personal ‘panoply’ have had to be sacrificed to present a coherent set of theoretically and/or quantitatively focused publications for examination.

Having ‘explain[ed] the inter-relationship between the material presented’, it remains finally to detail ‘the significance of the published works as a contribution to original knowledge within the relevant fields’ (University of Warwick 2017: 3.4). As is amply evident from the foregoing sections, the materials presented have mostly been written during a period of flux, as nonreligion was finally emerging as a topic deemed worthy of serious sociological interrogation, both in its own right, and as shedding light upon the place of religion within contemporary societies. For indeed, ‘Any wide-ranging theory of religion needs to be tested with evidence not only about religion itself, but also about its absence. [...] By learning more about the lack of faith, we can understand better the role of faith in modern society’ (Bainbridge 2005: 22).

¹³ Since the end of my BA award, I have attended one-day short courses on ‘Presenting Data’ at the Cathie Marsh Institute for Social Research (University of Manchester) and ‘Social Network Analysis’ at Warwick Q-Step.

As with the emergence and establishment of other subfields, there has been a significant amount of both ‘ground-clearing’ and ‘foundation-laying’ to be accomplished. Early NRM scholars had to clarify and contend with a number of existing terms – ‘cults’, ‘sects’ – and, over time, developed their own working vocabulary around ‘New Religious Movements’ (though the debates go on: how new is ‘New’? Where does ‘Religious Movement’ end and religion begin?; see Robbins and Lucas 2007). So too nonreligion researchers inherited a complex of existing terms, very few of which had a single agreed-upon definition, and a good number of which carried prejudicial connotations, whether positive (‘Bright’, ‘freethinker’, ‘rationalist’) and negative (‘godless’, ‘apostate’, ‘infidel’). In my several interventions in this area, I have i) consistently highlighted the polyvalence of various terms (e.g., ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’) in different contexts [**1, 2, Appendix**], ii) argued for the *scholarly utility* (i.e., not necessarily ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’) in a greater uniformity of usage [**2**]; and iii) through overseeing the production of several standard reference works, made a substantial contribution to doing precisely that. To give the most obvious example: my championing of an inclusive definition of atheism as ‘an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’, which may then be further subdivided into ‘positive and ‘negative’ types, has been widely taken up by others. While by no means universally accepted, even those who don’t use it typically feel the need to give detailed explanations *why* they don’t (e.g., Quillen 2015).

The second main area where I might claim an original contribution is in treating the New Atheism as a ‘symptom’ for diagnosing what wider socio-religious currents may be afoot. In my early piece on ‘The New Atheism and Sociology’, for example, I asked the question: ‘what has contributed to the “social nerve” that the new atheists have so evidently “touched”?’ [**3**]. Having there used wider socio-cultural trends to explain the rise and reception of the New Atheism, I later turned the tables on this approach: using the New Atheist phenomenon, along with a number of other ‘suggestive’ aspects of recent British religiosity, to speculate on the

extent and nature of (alleged) religious indifference in Britain [4, 5]. Common to all three pieces is the contention that the sudden appearance of the New Atheism, and its remarkable popular and media reception, pose two prima-facie puzzles: *why* (in Britain and several other western European countries) should the dangers of religion suddenly become a burningly urgent issue, at a time when traditional measures of religious belief, identity, and practice were at then-record lows; and *why* (in the USA) should they only now become a burning issue when levels of religiosity have been sustainedly robust for very many decades? My essential approach has been to consider New Atheism alongside other expectation-confounding phenomena relating to religion, as intimating a more complex socio-religious situation – British religion’s ‘persistent paradox’ (Davie 2015) – existing ‘underneath’ the statistical trends. When [3] and [4] were written, at least, these were novel approaches to thinking sociologically about the New Atheism and its wider significances. Several subsequent studies have since gone far beyond my initial efforts (e.g., Nixon 2017; Cotter et al. 2017; McAnnalla et al. 2019), testifying to the value of my original instinct.

Thirdly, I believe that I have made an original contribution, both to the subfield and the wider discipline, in providing a much more detailed quantitative understanding of contemporary nonreligion, utilising high-quality national social surveys. This is evident, for example, in my ‘Pew-style’ report *The “No Religion” Population of Britain* [6], which offers break downs of this half of the British population in terms of several key demographic (age, gender, ethnicity, region, education) and religious (denomination of upbringing, belief in God, frequency of prayer, self-assessed religiosity). The latter, especially, is significant in supporting several elements of complexity often lost in media reporting around nonreligion: e.g., that those self-identifying with ‘no religion’ are not all atheists and agnostics, that a significant minority of ‘nones’ pray and/or regard themselves as being religious people, and so on. In a much more detailed manner, this is also true of my ongoing work on religious disaffiliation (and, relatedly,

nonversion – that is, the process of becoming a ‘none’). To date, most of my work has been on Catholic disaffiliation in Britain and America. Included in this portfolio are the abovementioned *JCR* article [7], and four chapters from my latest book, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* [8].¹⁴

The first of these (i.e., chapter one) introduces disaffiliation, framed as an extreme case of lapsation, as a major phenomenon within contemporary Catholicism, and explores some tricky interpretive around twentieth-century Catholic historiography, as well as wider issues concerning religious identify. The second (chapter two) significantly updates and expands the statistical analyses produced for [7], and offers a demographic profile of Catholic disaffiliates in Britain and America based on original analyses of BSA and GSS data. The final two (chapters six and seven) present a narrative account of Catholic lapsation, disaffiliation from the early 1970s up to the present, in light of wider socio-cultural trends during this time. Important among these are the rapid normalization of ‘no religion’ in Britain over the seventies, eighties, and nineties (drawing largely on the work of Brown 2012, and Woodhead 2016, 2017), and its much later rise in the United States over the past two decades.

I believe a strong case can be made for the originality of the evidence and arguments presented in these chapters, as contributions both to the swiftly growing literature on disaffiliation and deconversion (itself a good example of the field’s ‘non-religious turn’, with conversion *to* religious groups having been a staple of both the sociology and psychology of religion – another ‘transformative impact’ of NRM studies – since the sixties and seventies), and as a particular case study of how the wider secularizing trends of the past fifty-or-more

¹⁴ The decision to include only these four chapters, out of seven, is due to both space constraints and the explicit focus of this portfolio on ‘contemporary nonreligion’. Chapters four and five of *Mass Exodus*, for example, cover roughly the period of time from 1945 until the mid-1970s. One corrolary of this is that several key theoretical ideas adduced in chapters six and seven – CREDs, plausibility structures, and social network theory – are only fully explained in sections of the book not included here.

years have been refracted through the prism of a specific denomination. In the conclusion to [7], I argue

Hitherto much of the research into the waning of religious belief, practice, and affiliation has focused either on the very large macro level (e.g. broad societal trends, typically collapsing ‘mainline denominations’ into a single graph line) or on the very small micro level (e.g. individual deconversion narratives or the psychological characteristics of religious deconverts). While both are important and necessary, largely missing has been sustained sociological attention on how both play out, concretely, within the specific histories of individual religious denominations and communities. (Bullivant 2016: 194-5)

There have been other valuable denominational studies, focusing on particular countries (e.g., Brown and Woodhead 2016 on the Church of England; Carlin 2003 and Cuchet 2018 on the Catholic Church in America and France, respectively). *Mass Exodus* adds to these, while offering a useful cross-national perspective: among other benefits, this helps in disentangling denomination-specific from ‘wider national socio-religious context’-specific causes and effects. It also makes a number of theoretical contributions to the field, not least in its application of an emerging idea from the cognitive anthropology of religion – Credibility Enhancing and/or Undermining Displays; a notable example of the discipline’s enrichment of nonreligion studies (e.g., Lanman 2012; Turpin 2018) – to comprehend Catholic changes over the past half-century.

For these reasons, I submit that the enclosed materials fulfil the University of Warwick’s general requirement of ‘constitut[ing] a substantial original contribution to knowledge which is, in principle, worthy of peer-reviewed publication’ (2017: 3.3) for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, as well as the specific rubrics for the award ‘by Publication’, as quoted above (ibid.: 3.4).

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Full list of publications

In addition, the covering document must include, as an appendix, a full bibliography of all the work published by the candidate. (University of Warwick 2017: 3.4)

[** indicates publications of particular sociological relevance]

MONOGRAPHS

- ***Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2019)
- ***Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return*, co-authored with Catherine Knowles, Hannah Vaughan-Spruce, and Bernadette Durcan (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2019)
- O My Jesus: The Meaning of the Fátima Prayer*, co-authored with Luke Arredondo (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2017) [Korean translation, 2018]
- ***The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*, co-authored with Lois Lee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016)
- The Trinity: How Not to Be a Heretic* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015)
- Faith and Unbelief* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014)
- The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

EDITED VOLUMES

- ***The Cambridge History of Atheism*, co-edited with Michael Ruse, two volumes (New York: Cambridge University Press; 2020, *forthcoming*)
- Theology and Power: International Perspectives*, co-edited with Agnes M. Brazal, Daniel Franklin Pilario, and Eric Marcelo O. Genilo (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016)
- ***The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, co-edited with Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013)
- ***Secularity and Non-Religion*, co-edited with Elisabeth Arweck and Lois Lee (London: Routledge, 2013)

REPORTS AND OFFICIAL SUBMISSIONS

- ***'Being There': How Catholic Chaplains Support Seafarers in the UK*, co-authored with Francesca Montemaggi and Maureen Glackin (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2018), available online at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-jun-being-there-report.pdf>
- ***Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops* (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society; Institut Catholique de Paris, 2018), available online at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/europes-young-adults-and-religion.aspx> [Translated into French and Polish]

- ***The Question(s) of Religion in the Irish Census: Submission to the Central Statistics Office's Census 2021 Consultation* (2017), official submission on behalf of the Iona Institute for Religion and Society, available online at: <https://ionainstitute.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Question-of-Religion-in-the-Irish-Census.docx>
- ***The "No Religion" Population of Britain: Recent Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2015) and the European Social Survey (2014)* (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2017), available online at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/no-religion-population.aspx>
- ***The Take-up of Free School Meals in Catholic Schools in England and Wales*, co-authored with Francesca Montemaggi and Maureen Glackin (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2017), available online at: <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/free-school-meals.aspx>
- ***Contemporary Catholicism in England and Wales: A Statistical Summary Based on Recent British Social Attitudes Data* (Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, 2016), available online at: <http://www.stmarys.ac.uk/benedict-xvi/contemporary-catholicism.htm>

SPECIAL JOURNAL ISSUES

- ‘Redeeming Power: Overcoming Abuse in Church and Society’, special issue, *ET-Studies: Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* 4/2 (2013), co-edited with Gerhard Kruip
- **‘Non-Religion and Secularity: New Empirical Perspectives’, special issue, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27/1 (2012), co-edited with Elisabeth Arweck and Lois Lee

BOOK CHAPTERS

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I have written in print/online for, among others, *The Guardian*, *The Spectator*, *New Scientist*, *First Things*, *America*, *The Age*, and *The Tablet*. I have been Consulting Editor for *The Catholic Herald* since March 2015, writing over sixty articles or blogs in this time. Television and radio credits include BBC Radio 4, BBC Radio 5 Live, LBC, Vatican Radio, EWTN, and Premier Christian Radio.

Part I: Terminological and conceptual issues

1. 'Research Note: Sociology and the Study of Atheism', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23/3 (October 2008), 363-8
2. 'Defining "Atheism"', in Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11-21