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Non-religious political activism: patterns of conflict and mobilisation in the United States and Britain

1. Introduction¹

Recent years have seen an upsurge of scholarly interest in the category of ‘non-religion’. Driven by the popularity of the so-called ‘new atheism’ promoted by a number of high-profile authors,² as well as by the growing political activism of non-religious groups seeking to challenge religious influence in the public sphere, this nascent field of research has examined a range of aspects relating to non-religion from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Amongst these include the historical development of non-belief,³ the sociological and psychological qualities of non-believers,⁴ the philosophical dimensions of non-belief,⁵ and issues of secular ethics and morality.⁶

One area in which scholarly research has thus far been lacking, however, concerns the political dimension of non-religious activity. This omission represents something of a paradox given the political salience of both religious and ‘non-religious’ issues in contemporary national and global affairs. The purpose of this article is to add to formative research in this area through a comparative analysis of non-religious political activism in Britain and the United States.⁷ Drawing on insights from Social Movement Theory, the

¹ I would like to extend my thanks to Olga Michel for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

² The most notable authors from the new atheist perspective include Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2004); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, First Mariner Books, 2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York, Viking, 2006); and Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (New York, Twelve Books, 2007).

³ For example see Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2010); James Thrower, *Western Atheism: A Short History* (New York, Prometheus, 2000).

⁴ For instance, Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secular Humanism and Atheism Beyond Progressive Secularism”, *Sociology of Religion*, 68/4 (2007); Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altmeyer, *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America’s Nonbelievers* (New York, Prometheus, 2006); Phil Zuckerman, “Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns”, in Michael Martin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ John D. Caputo, ‘Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition’, in Michael Martin (ed). *Companion*.

⁶ Ronald Aronson, *Living Without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided*, (Berkeley, Counterpoint, 2008); Paul Bloom, “Religion, Morality, Evolution”, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 63: 179-99 (2012).

⁷ Some examples include Steven Kettell, “Divided we Stand: The Politics of the Atheist Movement in the United States”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 29/3, 2014; Stuart McAnulla, “Secular Fundamentalists?”

article argues that specific forms of mobilisation are linked significantly to varying patterns of conflict, both between religious and non-religious actors, as well as within and between non-religious groups themselves.

In the United States, where religion maintains a position of sociocultural predominance, and where people identifying as non-religious face significant levels of discrimination and exclusion, the political mobilisation of non-religion has, in recent years, increased at a substantial pace. At the same time, the internal dynamics of non-religious activism have also led to a number of conflicts and tensions, both within and between non-religious groups, based around issues of strategy as well as the equal representation of gender, racial and ethnic minorities. In contrast, levels of conflict and antagonism between religious and non-religious actors in Britain have been relatively contained. Secularisation is well-advanced, being non-religious is un-contentious, and the political mobilisation of non-religion has been comparatively subdued.

The rest of this article proceeds as follows: First, theoretical and conceptual issues relating to ‘non-religion’ and Social Movement Theory are discussed. Second, the influence of key causal factors and dynamics are traced through an analysis of the emergence of non-religious activism, its organisational structure, the principal campaigns and strategies pursued by non-religious groups, and the main internal conflicts and challenges they face. The article concludes by drawing these various analytical strands together.

2. Non-religion and Social Movement Theory

The category of ‘non-religion’ (like its religious counterpart) is a difficult one to define with any degree of precision. Use of the term, despite the growth of academic interest in the subject matter, remains contentious, not least given the conceptual imprecision and ambiguity

Characterising the New Atheist Approach to Secularism, Religion and Politics”, *British Politics*, 9/1, 2014.

surrounding its meaning.⁸ Denoting a broad range of intellectual positions and a wide spectrum of (non-) beliefs, ‘non-religion’ encompasses a variety of identity markers, including ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’, ‘freethinker’, ‘humanist’ and the religiously unaffiliated (who may or may not consider themselves to be ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ in some non-formal, non-institutional way). In this general sense, non-religion embraces a significant proportion of the human population. Estimates of its global reach (though also difficult to determine with accuracy) have put the number of non-religious people in the world at anything up to a billion, a figure that would make non-religion the third ‘religious’ category in the world behind Christianity and Islam.⁹

The global distribution of non-religion is strongly linked to national-level circumstances (economic, political, social and cultural), with a significant correlation to key measures of human development such as levels of poverty, infant mortality rates, access to education and gender equality. As such, non-religion tends to be concentrated in advanced (post)-industrial societies, notably in Western Europe as well as the ‘global north’ more broadly, and is virtually non-existent in the poorest and least developed parts of the world.¹⁰ In a similar fashion, self-identification with non-religion is also linked to certain demographic characteristics. Research conducted in the United States has found that people describing themselves as non-religious are more likely to be young, male and white, to have above

⁸ One practical issue here, along with a lack of definitional clarity, for instance, is that surveys of the ‘non-religious’ often rely on self-identification, leading to problems of conceptual blurring. The situation is not helped by the indeterminacy of the term ‘religion’ itself, against which ‘non-religion’ is definitionally counter-posed. On these issues, see: Lois Lee, “Talking about A revolution: Terminology for the new field of non-religious studies”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27/1 (2012), 129-139.

⁹ See Pew Research Center, ‘The global religious landscape: A report on the size and distribution of the world’s major religious groups as of 2010’, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012).
<http://www.pewforum.org/files/2014/01/global-religion-full.pdf>

¹⁰ For example, see Zuckerman, *Atheism*.

average levels of income, to be independent of any political party and to align themselves more closely to progressive, liberal forms of politics.¹¹

But while our knowledge of non-religion has grown in recent years, little is known about the way in which the category might function in a political sense. In one respect this lacuna has much to do with the indeterminate nature of ‘non-religion’ itself. The simple fact of being non-religious does not comport to any particular political viewpoint (non-religion is compatible with a multitude of worldviews and perspectives from across the political spectrum), and the idea of considering ‘non-religion’ as a consciously-held identity, certainly in comparison to religious traditions, is still an emergent phenomenon, even within non-religious groups themselves.¹²

A useful conceptual framework for analysing the political mobilisation of non-religion is provided by Social Movement Theory. Traditionally applied to post-modern dynamics of political protest, such as those involving the peace, environment, gay rights and feminist movements, Social Movement Theory seeks to examine and explain the ways in which networks formed on the basis of shared beliefs and collective identity can mobilise in order to achieve their social, political and cultural objectives. In this sense, a social movement can be defined as a organised collective operating outside of formal institutional channels “for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part”.¹³ Alternatively, given their oppositional and disruptive nature, they can be seen as “organized conflicts” for the achievement of social, cultural or political goals.¹⁴

¹¹ For instance, see Ryan T. Cragun, Barry Kosmin, Ariela Keysar, Joseph H. Hammer & Michael Nielsen, “On the Receiving End: Discrimination toward the Non-Religious in the United States”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 27(1): 105-127 (2012); Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altmeyer, *Atheists*.

¹² Stephen LeDrew, “Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism”, *Sociology of Religion*, 74(4): 431-453 (2013).

¹³ David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements, Blackwell Companions to Sociology* (Malden, Mass., Blackwell, 2004).

¹⁴ Alain Touraine, “The Importance of Social Movements”, *Social Movement Studies*, 1/1, 2002. It is also worth noting that groups with differing value sets may occasionally work together for shared political aims. See for

The operation of a social movement in terms of the form and effectiveness of the goals, strategies and tactics that are adopted, is shaped by a range of factors and resources. These include the ability to mobilise assets (such as money, manpower and positive media coverage), its relations to political opportunity structures (including the state, political parties, relevant policy networks and influential agencies or actors), as well as the impact of wider socio-cultural variables (perceptions of legitimacy and public attitudes, for instance) and issues around identity formation that are deemed necessary for group motivation and cohesion (such as mobilising grievances and the fostering of in- and out-group sensibilities).¹⁵

Deploying a conceptual framework based on the tenets of Social Movement Theory enables the promotion of common group objectives and strategies to be explored in a theoretically cogent and robust manner. But while such an approach would seem well suited to the analysis of non-religious mobilisation, the application of Social Movement Theory to the study of non-religion has to date remained limited. Scholars working in this area have either tended to treat non-religion as a particular sub-culture rather than a fully-fledged social movement in its own right, or have focused on the general conditions underpinning non-

instance Bron Taylor, "Diggers, Wolves, Ents, Elves and Expanding Universes: Global Bricolage and the Question of Violence within the Subcultures of Radical Environmentalism", in Jeffrey Kaplan and Heléne Lööw (eds), *The Cultic Milieu: Oppositional Subcultures in an Age of Globalization* (Walnut Creek, AltaMira Press, 2002); Lucas Johnston, "The Religious Dimensions of Sustainability: Institutional Religions, Civil Society, and International Politics since the Turn of the Twentieth Century", *Religion Compass*, 4(3): 176–189 (2010).

¹⁵ For useful overviews see Jacquelin van Stekelenburg and Bert Klandermans, "Social Movement Theory: Past, Present and Prospects", in Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel (eds), *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa* (Boston, Brill, 2009); Nick Crossley, *Making Sense of Social Movements* (Buckingham, Open University Press, 2002); Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*. 2nd Issue (London, Blackwell, 1999); Donatella Della Porta, Hanspeter Kriesi and Dieter Rucht (eds), *Social Movements in a Globalizing World* (London, Palgrave, 2009); Francesca Polletta and James Jasper, "Collective Identity and Social Movements", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27, 2001. The exact relationship between political opportunity structures and forms of mobilisation remains subject to debate. See David S. Meyer, "Protest and Political Opportunities", *Annual Review of Sociology*, 30: 125-45 (2004); David S. Meyer and Debra C. Minkoff, "Conceptualizing Political Opportunity", *Social Forces*, 82(4): 1457-1492 (2004); Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon, "Movement-relevant Theory: Rethinking Social Movement Scholarship and Activism", *Social Movement Studies*, 4(3): 185–208 (2005).

religious activism.¹⁶ One view here is that mobilisation is most prominent in circumstances where religious groups and actors possess significant social and political power, and where this works to the detriment of, or impinges negatively upon, non-religious values and interests. But this general observation leaves a number of outstanding issues to be addressed. Amongst these include the particular dynamics of non-religious mobilisation in terms of the organisational forms that are adopted, as well as the objectives and strategies that are chosen. The value of using Social Movement Theory to study these issues can be further strengthened through a comparative analysis of non-religion in differing national contexts as a way of unpacking some of the key factors underpinning the form and development of non-religious activism. A useful comparison in this instance is between the United States and Britain. This is instructive for a number of reasons. Both countries are advanced, Western, (post)-industrial and liberal democratic states, with close historical links, broadly similar cultures as well as broadly commensurate (free market, capitalist) economic and social systems, and both countries also have politically active groups that seek to advance the cause of non-religion in various ways. Clear and interesting differences also exist between them. Large and obvious differences here involve sociocultural resources as well as the political opportunity structure facing non-religious mobilisation. While the U.S has a formally secular constitution but remains highly religious, Britain remains largely and increasingly secular, but retains close and formal ties between church and state via the established Church of England. These similarities and differences make the U.S and Britain well suited test-cases from which to begin to draw generalisations about the key features that underpin, drive and structure non-religious political mobilisation.

¹⁶ For instance see Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secular Humanism”; Stephen LeDrew, “Discovering”; Phil Zuckerman, “Contrasting Irreligious Orientation: Atheism and Secularity in the USA and Scandinavia”, *Approaching Religion*, 2(1): 8-20 (2012).

3. Non-religious political mobilisation

Social Movement Theory facilitates an analysis of non-religious political mobilisation by directing attention to a number of core variables, in particular: resource management, political opportunity structures, socio-cultural factors and issues of identity. Focusing the lines of investigative study on these areas helps to identify the critical dilemmas and nodal points that drive and shape political action. The empirical analysis developed below explores these issues by examining the way in which these causal factors and dynamics have shaped the emergence of non-religious activism, the organisational structure of non-religion, its principal campaigns and strategies, and the main internal conflicts and tensions that activists currently face.

3.1 Driving forces

In recent years the political mobilisation of non-religious organisations in the United States and Britain has been driven by a growing sense of tension and conflict with religious actors over their attempts to influence developments in the public sphere. This has been increasingly visible since the turn of the century across a range of public policy areas, from the substantial political influence of the Christian Right and the faith-based initiatives promoted by the administrations of George W. Bush in the U.S, to concerns around multiculturalism, faith schools, the religiously infused 'Big Society' agenda of the coalition government, and the continuing political privileges enjoyed by an established church in Britain. Developments in the external environment, particularly those relating to the threat posed by Islamic terrorism (witnessed most dramatically in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and their various aftershocks, such as the Madrid and London bombings) have also provided an impetus for political activism as well as heightening public receptivity to ideas about the dangers of religion. Taken together, these conflicts around the ostensible 'return of religion' to the public domain,

which has challenged widely-held assumptions and expectations around the decline of religion and the linear, inevitable progression of secularising forces, have provided a common impetus for non-religious groups in seeking to resist such advances.¹⁷

Beyond this shared experience of a conflict with more politically active religious organisations (in terms of a perceived threat to their commonly-held aims, interests and values), the political configurations of non-religion in Britain and the United States are shaped by substantially different socio-cultural and political contexts. A central distinction here is the ease with which it is possible for people to identify themselves as being non-religious. In Britain, where secularisation is significantly advanced, being non-religious is (for the most part) a socially acceptable and relatively un-contentious affair. Recent survey figures from British Social Attitudes suggest that the number of people considering themselves to have ‘no-religion’ has now reached record levels, becoming a simple majority of the population, at 50.1%.¹⁸ As a result, with conflict between religious and non-religious worldviews remaining comparatively low (usually being limited to periodic flashpoints around specific public policy issues), the motivation for those identifying as non-religious to mobilise in a political sense has been relatively muted.

The situation in the United States is markedly different. Here, processes of secularisation are far less advanced, and indeed the U.S remains an outlier among developed liberal democratic nations for sustaining high levels of religiosity. According to research conducted by Pew, while the proportion of adults professing to have ‘no religion’ (the so-called ‘nones’) has risen considerably during the past decade and a half (and while the younger generation, in particular, are now far less religious than their older counterparts), the figure still only stands

¹⁷ For example see Aronson, *Living Without God*; Richard A. Shweder “Atheists Agonistes”, *New York Times*, 27/11/06. On the ‘return of religion’ see Jon Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back* (London, Penguin, 2009); Titus Hjelm (ed), *Is God Back?* (London, Bloomsbury, 2015).

¹⁸ See Alison Park, Caroline Bryson and John Curtice, *British Social Attitudes*, 31st Report, NatCen Social Research (2014): Table A.2.

at around a fifth (19.6%) of the population.¹⁹ Combined with this, non-religion is also typically held in low social regard, and is consistently linked to high levels of prejudice, marginalisation and mistrust.²⁰ According to one study, almost a fifth (19%) of people self-identifying as ‘non-religious’ had experienced some form of discrimination over the last five years, with the figure more than doubling to 41% for people expressly self-identifying as atheists.²¹ Another survey found that 53% of members of atheist clubs in the U.S had experienced problems in their personal relationships with family and friends as a direct result of their non-religious worldview.²² Opinion polls and surveys regularly showing that non-religious people are mistrusted, and that Americans would not vote for an atheist president, continue to highlight the low levels of public standing in which non-religion is held.²³

3.2 Organisational structure

The organisational structure of non-religion in the United States and Britain is characterised by a high degree of diversity, plurality and eclecticism. Taken collectively, non-religious groups possess no formally defined or hierarchical order, have no overarching leadership structure, and are held to no centralised form of control. Beyond this, however, one obvious difference between the two countries concerns the overall number of groups that are involved. The key (though not surprising) feature in this respect is that the United States has a far greater number of non-religious groups overall than Britain. Some of the principal national level organisations currently operating in the U.S include: American Atheists (founded in 1963), the Center for Inquiry (1991), the United Coalition of Reason (2009), the

¹⁹ Pew Research Center, “‘Nones’ on the rise”, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012)

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

²⁰ Phil Zuckerman, “Contrasting Irreligious Orientation”.

²¹ Ryan Cragun *et al.*, “On the receiving end”.

²² Bruce Hunsberger and Bob Altmeyer, *Atheists*, Ch.3.

²³ For example see Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann, “Atheists As “Other”: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society”, *American Sociological Review*, 71: 211-234 (2006).

Atheist Alliance of America (1991), the Freedom From Religion Foundation (1978), the Secular Coalition for America (2002), the American Humanist Association (1941), the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (1998), and the Council for Secular Humanism (1980). A National Atheist Party (initially called the Freethought Party) was also established in March 2011. By way of contrast, Britain has just two main (although much older) national level organisations for the advancement of specifically ‘non-religious’ issues: the British Humanist Association (established in 1896) and the National Secular Society (set up in 1866).

Belying the overall difference in the total number of non-religious groups, however, the general size of non-religious organisations in the U.S and Britain are broadly comparable. The central organisation for the promotion of explicitly atheist causes in the United States, American Atheists, has an estimated paid membership of around 2,000 people (figures are estimated from the level of annual income), while the largest non-religious organisation, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, has an estimated membership of around 18,000 people. In Britain, although exact figures are not available, the National Secular Society is estimated to have a membership of somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000 people, while the British Humanist Association claims to have over 28,000 members and supporters (figures for paid members are not stated).²⁴

The size of non-religious groups, and with this the available resources that they can draw on in terms of manpower and finance, stands in marked disparity to religious organisations. This relative differential substantially inhibits their ability to influence public opinion and policy developments in the way that religious groups might be able to do. Research conducted in the U.S indicates there are more than 200 religious organisations devoted to lobbying at the national level, with a grand total of \$350 million a year being spent on achieving this end.

²⁴ NSS figures come from information given to the author. Figures for U.S organisations are calculated from

Figures for the British case are far more opaque, but by way of a potential indicator Britain's largest religious institution, the Church of England, claims to have around a million people attending its services every week.²⁵

Alongside these formal, institutionalised and 'traditional style' organisations, many of the most important activities, groups, leaders and opinion formers involved in the promotion of non-religious ideas and causes operate in an even more decentralised capacity via the use of online networks, engaging their audiences through a variety of forums, blogs and other forms of social media. This online character is especially noticeable in respect of the so-called 'new atheism' – arguably the most high-profile element of the non-religious landscape – which has risen to prominence since the mid-point of the previous decade largely as a result of its advocacy by best-selling authors and media-friendly advocates such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. The de-territorialised nature of the Internet makes national comparisons problematic in this respect, although it is worth noting that most of the leading non-religious figures operating online remain based in, and predominantly speak to developments in and about, the United States.

4. Campaigns and objectives

Although not all non-religious groups and activists will subscribe to the same goals or hold the same kind of values or political beliefs, a number of common features can nonetheless be identified in the principal campaign areas that have been pursued. In broad terms these can be divided into four main categories: reducing the influence of religion in the public sphere; promoting non-religious causes; improving the civil rights and social status of non-religion; and establishing a greater sense of non-religious identity *qua* a genuine social movement.

annual financial returns.

4.1 Reducing religious influence

The first of these aims – reducing the influence of religion in the public sphere – is based around efforts to ensure or maintain a secular public sphere, and to challenge and reduce the role of religious beliefs and organisations (all the more so where they are taxpayer funded) in areas of public policy. Key issues in this respect have included healthcare (challenging religious opposition to elective abortion, assisted dying and stem cell research); education (based largely on efforts to keep creationism out of the classroom in the U.S and opposing faith schools and compulsory collective worship in Britain),²⁶ and issues of civil rights (for example, campaigning against religious opposition to the legalisation of same-sex marriage, as well as religious exemptions from equalities legislation).

A central aspect of these campaign efforts in the United States has also involved utilising the court system (often with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union) to uphold and maintain the separation between church and state. Notable campaigns here have been driven by a desire to keep state buildings, land and offices free from religious symbols and ceremonies. Examples here include opposition to the displaying of a cross-shaped section of steel found in the wreckage of 9/11 in the partially state-funded National September 11 Memorial and Museum (the case was lost in 2013), opposition to the displaying of nativity scenes in public parks and the exhibition and distribution of religious material in public schools (a high-profile case in 2012 saw a teenage atheist, Jessica Ahsquist, successfully file a lawsuit for the removal of a religious prayer banner), and opposition to displays of the Ten Commandments around courthouses (in 2011 an Ohio appeals court ordered Judge James DeWeese to remove a poster of the Ten Commandments from his courtroom, following a similar case involving the same judge in 2000). Longstanding (and as-yet unsuccessful) campaigns for removing the phrase 'Under God' from the pledge of allegiance and 'In God

²⁵ Archbishops' Council, "Statistics for Mission 2013", Research and Statistics Department (2013).

we Trust' from the American currency are illustrative of these campaign measures too, as are constant and on-going efforts to refute claims (typically emanating from the religious right) that the United States was founded as a 'Christian country'.

In Britain the main (and long-standing) campaigns in this respect have centred on achieving, rather than upholding, a secular state. Core efforts here have been focused on the removal of religious legal and political privileges, the most far-reaching of which call for the disestablishment of the Church of England, and particularly for the removal of its Bishops' automatic right to seats in the upper legislature (the House of Lords). Non-religious groups have also been engaged in challenging repeated efforts by high-profile political figures to promote religious ideals, usually justified by claims that Britain is also a 'Christian country'.²⁷ In contrast to the situation in the U.S, however, the use of the courts to affect change has been largely absent as a campaign strategy (a recent case involving the National Secular Society, opposing the inclusion of prayers as a formal part of local council meetings, is suggestive of possible changes in this regard, although such instances remain exceptional). A key explanatory factor in the contrasting use of legal methods to promote non-religious objectives in the United States and Britain is the differing political opportunity structures in the two countries. While the U.S political system has, for a number of years, been characterised by a strong association between the Christian Right and the Republican Party, its relatively open nature provides greater opportunities for influencing policy developments (particularly at the federal level), and its formally secular constitution, with a first amendment prohibiting the establishment of religion, provides non-religious organisations with a valuable access point and a clear legal route through which to pursue their goals. Such an opportunity is one that is not open to non-religious groups in Britain, whose centralised, unitary, top-

²⁶ A recent decision to exclude the teaching of humanism from the Religious Education syllabus in Britain is another example here.

²⁷ See for instance David Cameron, "Prime Minister's King James Bible Speech", 16 December 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/king-james-bible/>

down and substantially closed political structures, combined with the privileges and influence of an established church, have limited the access of non-religious groups to elite-level decision-making processes.²⁸ In this context, groups campaigning on non-religious causes in Britain have generally engaged in alternative forms of tactics and methods.

4.2 Promoting non-religion

The second common campaign area is to promote the benefits of non-religious worldviews and to try and undermine religion in the private as well as the public sphere. Although this is not a universal goal among non-religious activists, the typical aim in this respect is not merely to limit religious influence over issues of public policy, but to try and marginalise religious beliefs and practices as much as possible throughout society as whole. This is often accompanied by assertions about the irrational nature and the dangers of religious belief. As the humanist philosopher and Vice-President of the British Humanist Association, AC Grayling, puts it:

No doubt the conflict will be long and bloody ... But eventually, one hopes, those who persist in wanting to have an invisible friend, who continue believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden, will do so in private, where such proclivities belong along with wearing the opposite sex's underwear.²⁹

Amongst the principal methods that have typically been deployed towards achieving this end in both the United States and Britain include promotional, educational and outreach work; the publication of books, articles and magazines about non-religious worldviews and the problems of religious belief; participation in public talks, debates and documentaries (many of which are freely available through online channels such as YouTube); the production of

²⁸ Steve Bruce, "Motive and Opportunity: British Christian Parties 1997–2011", *Politics and Religion*, 6(1): 3–24 (2013).

²⁹ Anthony C. Grayling, "The 'New Atheists' are responding to provocation, not mounting an arbitrary attack", *Rationalist Association*, December 12, 2007, <http://rationalist.org.uk/articles/1667/the-new-atheists-are->

media programmes (mostly limited in this instance to the U.S, which has a more diverse media structure) such as Freethought radio or ‘The Atheist Experience’; and the promotion of resources and events designed to highlight relevant non-religious issues, such as International Blasphemy Rights Day, the National Day of Reason, and Darwin Day. Much of the work in this area has sought to counter the resource asymmetry that exists between religious and non-religious groups by utilising the distributional potential of the Internet. This provides a means of reaching wider audiences, disseminating information and co-ordinating campaign activities at a comparatively low cost in terms of both manpower and finance.

One offline tactic that has proven to be particularly popular amongst non-religious groups in both countries has been the use of advertisements on billboards and public transport systems as a means of promoting the benefits of non-religion and openly challenging religious ideas. One of the most well-known of these was a high profile bus campaign launched in 2009 in London bearing the slogan: *“There’s Probably No God, Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life”*, which subsequently led to similar campaigns being launched in a range of other countries, such as Spain, Brazil, Germany, Canada, Italy and the United States. Other slogans that have been used in this way have included: *“This is what Humanism Looks Like”*, *“Millions are Good Without God”*, *“Reason Over Faith, Always”*, *“Don’t Believe in God? Join the Club”*, and *“Bias Against Atheists is Naughty, Not Nice”*. A recent *“Thought for the Commute”*, organised by the British Humanist Association on the London Underground with a view to promoting humanist ideas and values is one of the latest variations on this theme. Such campaigns have been a useful means of attracting attention and of getting the non-religious message across to a wider audience, but have also proven to be controversial. In parts of the United States, for example, their use has led to vandalism against non-religious signs, to legal wrangles with transport companies that have refused to carry the

advertisements, and to a swathe of counter advertisements promoted by religious organisations that have been designed to undermine the non-religious message and to promote the cause and values of religion.

4.3 Legal and civil rights

A third campaign objective of non-religious groups, and one that is substantially more relevant to the situation in the United States than Britain given the low regard with which non-religion is typically held, is to ensure legal and civic equality for people of no religion. One of the central aims here has been to normalise non-religion and to undermine the array of negative stereotypes that continue to surround it. The effort to achieve this utilises a variety of methods. Key examples here, in addition to the aforementioned promotional campaigns (which have also sought to normalise non-religion by raising the visibility of non-religious worldviews and by presenting them in a positive light) include the “We Are Atheism” and “Out” campaigns. Drawing directly on the experience of the gay movement, these campaigns have encouraged atheists to publicly identify themselves as-such in order to promote greater public acceptance of non-religion by demonstrating that unbelievers are more numerous than is often thought to be the case, and that they are no different to, or any less moral and worthy than, anybody else. Other campaigns in this area, such as the work of community help and social action groups such as Non-Believers Giving Aid and Atheists Helping the Homeless, have also sought to counter negative public perceptions of non-religious people being hedonistic, self-absorbed and immoral. Community gatherings, such as the Atheist Film Festival and Rock Beyond Belief, as well as organisations such as Camp Quest, which provides residential summer camps for children of non-religious parents, are further illustrations of this kind of activity.

The issue of civil equality is far less pressing, and is much less of a concern in Britain than it is in the United States. Despite historic examples of discrimination against non-believers (such as blasphemy laws and legal requirements pertaining to the saying of oaths), and despite on-going tensions around equal treatment in areas such as access to education (where disputes around faith schools continue to provide regular flashpoints), questions of civil rights do not tend to feature highly on the agenda. All the same, similar campaigns to highlight the positive nature of non-religion, as well as the scale of the non-religious population, have been evident here too. In addition to the use of billboard and transport advertisements, a campaign calling on non-religious people to select 'no religion' in the last (2011) census, as a way of highlighting the true proportion of people without religion, and to thereby counter religious claims of Britain being a 'Christian country' as justification for religious influence in the public sphere, provides a good example of this.

4.4 Identity issues

A final objective of non-religious groups, and again one that is far more salient in the U.S than in Britain, has been to try and strengthen the political power of non-religious groups by forging a greater sense of non-religious identity and community. A principal goal in this regard, drawing on the experiences of the women's, gay and civil rights movements, is to mobilise non-religion as a fully-fledged social movement, and to increase recognition (both within and outside non-religion) that this is in fact the case. One objective here has been to try and establish a co-operative support network of resources and assistance to fellow non-religion people as well as those that are looking (if only potentially) to leave religion behind. Notable examples in this endeavour, beyond regular community gatherings, include groups and websites designed to help people to explore alternative worldviews to those provided by

religion such as the (now discontinued) Converts Corner of the Richard Dawkins Foundation, the Clergy Project, Recovering from Religion, and the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain.

This desire to establish a greater and more cohesive sense of community and collective identity amongst the non-religious in many ways represents an attempt to foster in-group sensibilities, mobilise grievances, and to anchor a sense of belonging and meaning in a world in which religious identities are clearly predominant. These factors go a long way to explaining why attempts to promote these goals have been far more prevalent in the United States,³⁰ although similar efforts, even if modest in scope and scale, have also been seen in Britain. The growth of humanist weddings and funerals as well as more recent attempts to promote the idea of an ‘atheist church’ are good examples of this,³¹ although attempts to transplant more overtly religious notions of ritualistically organising time and space into an explicitly secular context have met with limited success.

5. Internal conflicts

The political mobilisation of non-religious groups in the United States and Britain is driven by a desire to combat the influence of religion in both public and private spheres, and to promote the virtues and benefits of a non-religious worldview. The specific strategic forms taken by non-religious actors are shaped by differentials in terms of resources, political opportunity structures and the extent to which religion poses a threat to non-religious rights and values. At the same time, the political mobilisation of non-religion is also characterised by internal splits and conflicts. These divisions are particularly evident in the United States, where attempts to create a sense of collective identity and community have helped to generate divisions over issues of strategy, as well as tensions around the diversity of non-religious groups on issues of gender and race or ethnicity.

³⁰ On which see Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secular Humanism”.

5.1 Branding

One of the key strategic fault-lines within non-religion has centred on the issue of ‘branding’. This refers to the question of whether the use of particular non-religious labels or descriptors, such as ‘secular humanist’, ‘atheist’ or ‘new atheist’, is beneficial or detrimental for achieving the objectives of non-religious groups, especially given their negative connotations in much of American society. In Britain, where issues of marginalisation are far less pressing, debates around labelling have been peripheral to non-religious activities.

The U.S debate has centred around a number of competing positions. These have included calls for the abandonment of labels altogether,³² or for the adoption of alternative labels, such as the ill-fated term ‘Brights’ – which was promoted for a time by prominent atheists such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, but which has now fallen into disuse.³³ One alternative descriptor that has proven to be somewhat more popular (although no less controversial in its own way) is the recently established ‘Atheism+’ (or ‘Atheism Plus’), which was created largely as a way of circumventing the prevailing negative cultural associations attached to ‘atheism’. Other activists, however, have sought to reclaim traditional non-religious labels for more positive purposes, arguing that this needs to be an essential part of any effective political strategy since any new labels will also soon fall into the same patterns of stigmatisation. As the prominent atheist blogger, PZ Myers, points out, while labels can be used to marginalise “they can also be used to unify a group”, and the use of non-religious labels and symbols can provide “useful rallying cries for the tiny, scattered bubbles of rationality drifting in the sea of superstition and ignorance”.³⁴

³¹ BBC News, “Scores assemble at atheist ‘church’”, 4 February 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-21325805>

³² For instance see Sam Harris, “The problem with atheism”, *Washington Post*, October 2, 2007.

³³ For more information see <http://www.the-brights.net>

³⁴ PZ Myers, “Letter to a non-atheist new atheist”, *Pharyngula*, October 5, 2007, http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2007/10/letter_to_a_nonatheist_new_ath.php

While internal conflicts over identity labels have proved to be an on-going site of contestation between actors seeking to promote the cause of non-religion, others have criticised such discussions as an excessively insular preoccupation that has only served to divert valuable time and energy away from more important, practical objectives. According to the executive director of Secular Coalition for America, Edwina Rogers, for instance, the issue of labels is one that merely “creates unnecessary division within the movement”.³⁵ In this respect, many activists have argued that in order for non-religious groups to achieve their political objectives, more sophisticated strategies need to be adopted, going beyond narrow and parochial concerns that speak only to those that are already involved in non-religious concerns, to find productive ways of broadening the non-religious appeal. Some of the key themes in this respect include: the need to establish a greater and more professional lobbying presence, to produce a stronger media message, to build a broader support and financial base, to improve grassroots activism and state level organisation, to encourage non-religious candidates to run for public office, and to move away from technical, arcane concerns (such as debates over which labels should or should not be used) in favour of narratives that resonate more directly with the everyday lives and experiences of ordinary people.³⁶

5.2 Conflict or co-operation?

At the same time, the attempt to create a collective non-religious identity in the United States has highlighted another strategic fault-line within and between politically active non-religious groups, centring on the methods that they use to engage with religious beliefs and organisations. One of the principal conflicts here centres on a dispute between activists who support the use of more aggressive methods to attack religion (an approach known as

³⁵ Interview with Hemant Mehta, 3 May, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2012/05/03/the-atheist-lobbys-new-executive-director-is-a-female-republican-strategist-who-used-to-work-for-george-w-bush/>

³⁶ See Sean Faircloth, *Attack of the Theocrats! How the Religious Right Harms us all – and What we can do*

‘agonism’), and those who prefer the use of more conciliatory and inclusive tactics (an approach known as ‘accommodationism’). Much of this dispute has been driven by the emergence of the so-called ‘new atheism’ since the mid-point of the previous decade, which has been characterised by its forceful, combative and confrontational approach to religion, and which has subsequently tended to polarise opinions between these two camps.

Advocates of an accommodationist position (such as Paul Mooney and Christopher Stedman) contend that while the use of hostile methods (such as being strongly critical or openly ridiculing religious beliefs) may be an effective means of attracting attention (especially from a media that increasingly thrives on conflict and sensationalism), this approach is one that is ultimately divisive, alienating, antithetical to public engagement and likely to prove counterproductive, particularly given the highly religious nature of much of American society. As such, accommodationists argue in favour of promoting greater inclusivity and for fostering alliances with progressive and moderate religious groups on issues that stand out as being of common concern, such as tackling fundamentalism, promoting secular government, defending religious liberty and supporting science education.³⁷

Supporters of a more confrontational approach (including PZ Myers, Jerry Coyne and Greta Christina) claim, however, that no real compromise is possible with religion and that such tactics are essential in order to promote debate and to challenge religious ideas and privilege. Proponents of agonism also contend that while many people may well be put off by the use of such tactics, the cause of non-religion overall is strengthened by having a multiplicity of approaches and a variety of arguments, styles and access points with which people can engage with non-religious groups and viewpoints. Moreover, it is sometimes also asserted that an uncompromising and hostile approach can even help strengthen accommodationism

About it (Virginia, Pitchstone, 2012).

³⁷ For example see Chris Mooney, “Civility and the new atheist”, *Discover Magazine*, 31 May 2009, <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/intersection/2009/05/31/civility-and-the-new-atheists/>; Chris Stedman, “The problem with ‘atheist activism’”, *Huffington Post*, December 22, 2011.

by making it appear even more moderate in comparison (an effect known as the Overton window).³⁸

Although the strategic conflict between agonism and accommodationism has been most pronounced in the United States, where new atheism has had greater purchase, similar issues (albeit on a far smaller scale) have also surfaced in Britain. On one level the divide is reflected in the approaches taken by the two main national level organisations, the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society, the latter of which has garnered a reputation for adopting a more abrasive and overtly anti-religious position. But even here the distinction is not clear-cut. Two of the highest-profile new atheist campaigners, Richard Dawkins and AC Grayling, are both Vice-Presidents of the BHA, and are hardly known for their genteel approach towards religious issues. Periodic remonstrations against the effectiveness of a confrontational approach by commentators and public intellectuals such as the philosopher Julian Baggini, who has claimed that new atheism “may well have been needed, but does not appear capable of taking us much further”,³⁹ or Alain de Botton, whose attempt to promote his own version of ‘Atheism 2.0’ (replete with an ostentatious atheist temple) was met with widespread ridicule from non-religious campaigners, have had seemingly little impact on the face of non-religion in Britain.⁴⁰

5.3 Internal diversity

Another area of conflict within the field of non-religion concerns the issue of its internal diversity, and particularly the balance of its gender and ethnic/racial composition. Again,

³⁸ See Adam Lee, “Atheism’s growing pains”, Salon.com, October 6, 2012 http://www.salon.com/2012/10/06/atheisms_growing_pains/; PZ Myers, “Atheism ≠ fascism”, *Pharyngula*, June 12, 2011 <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2011/06/12/atheism-fascism>; Amanda Marcotte, “Atheism and the art of persuasion”, 8 September, 2011, http://pandagon.net/index.php/site/comments/atheism_and_the_art_of_persuasion

³⁹ Julian Baggini, “Heathens progress, part one: stalemate”, *the Guardian*, 30 September 2011, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/sep/30/heathens-progress-part-one-stalemate>

⁴⁰ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (London: Penguin), 2012.

concerns here are limited in the British case (this is not to say that imbalances do not exist, merely that they are not considered to be particularly important or noteworthy), but for activists operating in the United States, questions about the internal diversity of non-religion have become an increasingly pressing concern, reflecting the importance that many attach to the need to construct a specifically non-religious movement and a shared sense of community and identity.

Debates about a gender imbalance within non-religious activism have been particularly noteworthy and disputatious. An on-going series of controversial issues and incidents, including the use of sexist and misogynistic language on websites and social media, allegations of sexual harassment at non-religious gatherings, and concerns about a lack of female representation at conferences and in representations of leading non-religious figures (such as lists of prominent atheist authors), have foregrounded the issue of gender equality and put them firmly at the centre of internal debates. As Victoria Bekiempis pithily notes, the popular perception of atheism in the U.S. is that of “a contentious, showboating boys’ club”.⁴¹

The issue is also a divisive one. While feminists claim that much more needs to be done in order to address these issues and to make the non-religious movement a more welcoming and inclusive place, critics maintain that assertions of misogyny are exaggerated and accuse feminist activists of trying to conflate the issues of gender and non-religion for their own particular ends. Recent debates around the so-called ‘Shirtstorm’ affair, prompted by the choice of clothing worn by one of the leading scientists involved in the Philae comet-landing mission at its celebratory press conference, provide a clear case in point. While many were critical of the shirt for its objectification of women, others, including Richard Dawkins, took

⁴¹ Victoria Bekiempis, “The unbelievers: new atheism and the old boy’s club”, *BitchMagazine.org*, May 18 2011, <http://bitchmagazine.org/article/the-unbelievers>

issue with the subsequent apology issued by the scientist involved, arguing that it was evidence of excessive feminist pressure.⁴²

Far less contentious, however, is the issue of ethnic and racial diversity. Non-religious activists remain highly concentrated amongst members of the white population, and there is a broad and general agreement on the need to address the substantial under-representation of ethnic minorities within non-religious groups. Figures show that African Americans are the least likely racial group to self-identify as atheists in the United States (at less than 0.5%), and while non-religion amongst the Latin American community has increased in recent years (rising from 4% to 12% between 1990 and 2008), the numbers actively engaging with non-religious groups remains small.⁴³ Campaigns and activities conducted by organisations dedicated to engaging with under-represented groups and promoting their greater involvement, such as Black Atheists of America and African Americans for Humanism, have thus far been limited in terms of their overall impact.

These issues of diversity, and concerns that non-religion remains the preserve of white, middle class men, have led to the emergence of a new identity marker, known as ‘Atheism Plus’. Arguing that religion stands as a barrier to social justice, and that the pursuit of these ends is a central part of godlessness, supporters of Atheism+ aim to explicitly link atheism to progressive politics and campaigns, with aspirations for establishing this as an inclusive umbrella term for broader non-religious identities (such as atheism, humanism and scepticism) in general.⁴⁴ However, reaction to Atheism+ has been mixed. While the idea has

⁴² See for instance Ophelia Benson, “Dawkins on the ‘pompous idiots whining about a Rosetta scientist’s shirt’”, *Butterflies and Wheels*, November 15 2014, <http://freethoughtblogs.com/butterfliesandwheels/2014/11/dawkins-on-the-pompous-idiots-whining-about-a-rosetta-scientists-shirt/>

⁴³ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “U.S Religious Landscape Survey”, Pew Research Center, February 2008; Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar (eds.), *Secularism and Secularity: Contemporary International Perspectives*, Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (2009).

⁴⁴ For example: Jen McCreight, “How I unwittingly infiltrated the boy’s club and why it’s time for a new wave of atheism”, August 18, 2012, <http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag/2012/08/how-i-unwittingly-infiltrated-the-boys-club-why-its-time-for-a-new-wave-of-atheism/> 012; Greta Christina, *Why are you Atheists so Angry? 99 Things that Piss off the Godless*. Greta Christina/Dirty Heathen Publishing (2012).

attracted many supporters the establishment of another non-religious identity marker has also been subject to a great deal of criticism, with opponents attacking it for being unnecessarily divisive, elitist, ambiguous and essentially undifferentiated from other non-religious positions. As Ron Lindsay, President of the Center for Inquiry, put it, Atheism Plus was redundant since secular humanist groups were already focusing on progressive issues, and that its creation risked diluting resources and having a “potentially divisive impact” within the non-religious movement.⁴⁵

6. Conclusion

Non-religion is an expanding area of academic inquiry but its political dimension remains substantially under-researched. This paper has sought to build on nascent work in this area by drawing on key insights from Social Movement Theory combined with a comparative analysis of non-religion in the United States and Britain to explore some of the ways in which political mobilisation is shaped by dynamics of conflict and co-operation, both between non-religious and religious actors as well as between non-religious groups themselves.

The clear differences between the patterns of non-religious political mobilisation in the United States and Britain illustrate the impact that divergent patterns of conflict can have alongside traditional conceptual factors such as resource mobilisation and political opportunity structures. In the U.S, high levels of religious political influence, significant antagonisms between religious and non-religious actors (involving large resource differentials and low levels of social status for the non-religious), and a political opportunity structure rooted in the legal parameters of a formally secular constitution, have produced increasing levels of non-religious mobilisation. In Britain, where levels of religious political influence are more limited, where antagonisms between religious and non-religious actors are

⁴⁵ Ron Lindsay, “Divisiveness within the secular movement”, September 12, 2012

less pronounced, and where the political opportunity structure is less open, non-religious mobilisation has been comparatively more subdued.

These findings support claims that non-religious political mobilisation thrives in conditions where the exertion of religious social and political power is detrimental to non-religious aims, interests and values, but also point towards some of the factors underpinning the selection of specific movement goals and strategies. The particular form taken by these activities has also been conditioned by divergent political and socio-cultural factors. In the United States, where many non-religious activists have come to see religion as a direct threat, non-religious mobilisation has frequently taken a more combative (if polarising) form, typically centred on the emergence of ‘new atheism’, and has put a premium on efforts to establish a greater sense of collective solidarity and identity. At the same time, these dynamics – compounded by a fragmented and decentralised organisational structure (not to mention the indeterminate and non-prescriptive character of ‘non-religion’ itself) – have also led to a number of internal conflicts and tensions based around issues of strategy (particularly centred on the terms of co-operation with religious groups), as well as the equal representation of gender, racial and ethnic minorities. Conversely, in Britain, where being non-religious is far less contentious and where religion is considered to be less of an overt threat, the driving impetus behind the formation of a collective ‘non-religious’ identity and sense of connection to a broader movement, has been notably absent.

The success of non-religious political activism in both countries, however, has thus far been mixed. In the United States the social status of non-religion remains generally low, and in Britain campaigns to arrest the expansion of faith schools and to challenge the privileges enjoyed by the established church have yet to make any significant headway. Moreover, the disorganised and fragmented nature of non-religious political mobilisation, combined with

http://www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/divisiveness_within_the_secular_movement/

internal conflicts and divisions over core strategic issues (especially in the U.S), may impede the ability of non-religious actors to act in a cohesive and co-ordinated way.⁴⁶ This highlights the fact that, beyond their common association as being ‘non-religious’, there is much that divides and separates those involved in non-religious forms of activism (indeed it may, in some respects, be more useful to think in terms of ‘non-religious’ *movements* as opposed to a single community).

Yet positive signs can also be discerned. Processes of secularisation are continuing in both countries, although the U.S remains far behind other parts of the Western world, and there are encouraging signs that social attitudes towards non-religion here are at last starting to improve. Ironically, one of the implications of this analysis, given that conditions for non-religious political activism are likely to be strongest in circumstances where religion predominates and where non-religion is at a significant disadvantage, is that the prospects for the development of a politically strong and self-conscious form of non-religion would seem to be far greater in the U.S, where non-religion is relatively weak compared to Britain. More research exploring the connections between non-religious mobilisation and patterns of conflict, particularly research involving non-religious mobilisation in different national contexts to the cases presented here, would help greatly to clarify and expand our understanding of these issues.

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⁴⁶ Dennis J. Downey and Deana A. Rohlinger, “Linking Strategic Choice with Macro-Organizational Dynamics: Strategy and Social Movement Articulation”, in Patrick G. Coy (ed.), *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 28: 3-38 (2008).

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