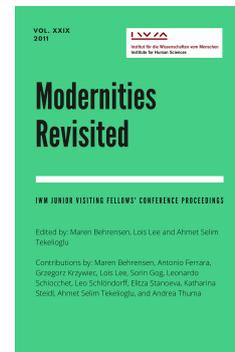


From “neutrality” to dialogue: Constructing the religious other in British non-religious discourses

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Abstract: *Traditionally, the “secular mindset” has been thought of as a nonentity, the absence of a substance (religion) rather than a substance itself. If it has been seen to exist at all, this existence has involved the sole characteristic of being “neutral” towards all religion. In recent years, however, many have argued that the secular perspective is normative rather than neutral – and the idea of secularism as a substantial social phenomenon is becoming increasingly popular. With little empirical research to refer to, however, this work has so far delivered only a simplistic, sometimes caricatured picture of the so-called “secular consciousness,” and one which emphasizes how the religious “other” is perceived. As well as a central role for the characteristic of rationalism, the secular consciousness is seen to be anti-religious, an advocate of the privatization of religion and a supporter also of the continued, arrogant dominance of secular views. This paper uses findings from the first ethnographic investigation of everyday European nonreligion, which, I argue, is a closely related concept to secularism – at least as it has been conceptualized in the literature in question. These data – from a study of individuals and communities from London and Cambridge in the UK – enrich and complicate existing understandings of the “secular consciousness” in a number of ways, suggesting that these conceptions are over-simplifications and cannot be assumed. These findings further the critique of “neutrality” as a description of what it means to be other than religious or spiritual, but suggests, more constructively, the possibility of treating both nonreligion and secularity as more positive and variegated social phenomena – and ones that might have roles to play as invested partners in the inter- and multicultural dialogue that many European Modernity are looking towards and relying upon.*

Introduction

Traditionally, the secular mindset has been thought of as a nonentity, the absence of a substance (religion) rather than a substance itself. If it has been seen to exist at all, this existence has involved the sole characteristic of being “neutral” towards all religion. In

recent years, however, certain key developments – both social and analytical – have demonstrated reasons why the secular perspective should be conceived of as a substantive phenomenon and important social actor. Such critiques have given rise to a certain conception of the secular outlook: it is viewed as (i) rationalist, (ii) anti-religious, (iii) an advocate of the privatization of religion, and (iv) a supporter of the continued, arrogant dominance of secular views. I refer to this contribution as the “post-neutrality” view of secularism, in recognition of the fact that this work is in its youth and its criticism of empty secularism is far more robust than its attempts to describe secularism’s substance. Thus, on the one hand, the post-neutrality literature has been helpful in upsetting long-held notions of the secular as a simple and neutral concept, and it has been important in laying the foundations for subsequent empirical work. On the other hand (and despite the presence of often confidently made claims concerning the secular perspective and the implicit belief that that perspective is easily identifiable[1]), its understandings of this perspective cannot be considered empirically substantiated. In fact, what little empirical work there is – which comes from a handful of poststructural and “postsecular” scholars who focus on examples of secularism in elite public discourses[2]– is not sufficiently wide-ranging to support the broad claims being made. Particularly significant is the absence of any empirical treatment of everyday secularism.

This paper hopes to contribute to the advance of scholarship from this post-neutrality moment, using an empirical study of European *nonreligion* to scrutinize the “secular” population that post-neutrality scholars attempt to describe. This is possible because, whilst post-neutrality arguments do use the term “secularism” to describe support for the separation of “church and state” – or religion and politics – they also describe this outlook as anti-religious and, implicitly, other than religious. That is, in this view, it is not possible to be secular and religious at the same time. There is, for example, a strong concern with how secularism *acts upon* religion, making it conceptually impossible for secularism to be an aspect of religiosity (as, of course, it was, historically and etymologically). What is more, such discussions place the “secular” and the “religious” in a binary, meaning that people and things are theoretically one or the other. Thus, not only is the secular given as a position towards religion, but it is given as the *only* position that can be taken other than a religious one. As such, this notion of “secularism” must encapsulate all nonreligious perspectives; nonreligious perspectives cannot, after all, be religious. Thus, what we are talking about here would be, I would argue, better termed “secular-nonreligion”. The secular is conflated with, or attached to, nonreligion.[3]

The common conflation of political secularism with personal nonreligion has been commented on[4] and conceptual clarification will itself contribute much to research in this area[5]. Meanwhile, the jumping off point for this paper is that these notions, though they may be problematic and not yet empirically substantiated, are not plucked out of thin air. Whilst they should be viewed with skepticism, therefore, they are empirically informed and already useful as *hypotheses* for more sustained analysis. Thus, the research question here is how accurate and useful extant, post-neutrality conceptions of the “secular” – the secular-nonreligious – are for understanding the nonreligious people they encapsulate? To what extent do they provide helpful tools for society to understand its nonreligious populations and their activity? Thus, these notions of the secular-

nonreligious, which will be presented in the first section of the paper, provide a hypothetical means of describing a nonreligious population; data from one nonreligious population are used to “test” it.

The data used for this analysis come from the first qualitative investigation of everyday European nonreligion. The study was situated in London and Cambridge in the UK and explored nonreligion as a micro-level perspective and practice – and as a cultural framework for both. This project was exploratory and involved an inductive analysis; for this paper, a secondary analysis was conducted, using a deductive method – to “test” post-neutrality arguments against this data. The overarching findings of the analysis are that existing views of the secular-nonreligious are overly confident, and may be presenting a falsely homogenous and severe picture of such outlooks. In fact, these data show a variety of perspectives and practices, upsetting the apparent assumption that the secular-nonreligious can be intuitively understood without empirical investigation. They enrich and complicate existing understandings of the nonreligious in a number of ways. On the one hand, the detailed investigation of everyday nonreligiosity allows us to unpack general concepts like pro-privatization (of religion) into more specific perspectives and practices – and to substantiate existing conceptions of the secular accordingly. On the other hand, it also reveals ways in which nonreligious thought and practice can deviate from the commonplace understanding of what the secular consciousness “should” entail. The central aim of this paper is therefore to problematize simple post-neutrality conceptions of the “secular” and to suggest ways in which these conceptions might be advanced.

There is not room here to present this analysis in full. In this paper, I take up post-neutrality scholars’ interest in normative and political aspects of “secularism” and focus on those aspects of their definition that relate to social action: the construction of the religious other and views concerning how that religious other ought to behave. The characteristic of rationalism which post-neutrality accounts attribute to the secular-nonreligious will be taken up in subsequently. This focus allows me to nod, in this paper, to the possibility that, instead of focusing purely on how secularism disempowers religiosity, the qualitative study of everyday nonreligion and secularism might instead empower the nonreligious in their interactions with the religious and thus improve dialogue between both groups.

From neutrality...

The first section of the paper details the post-neutrality conception of the “secular consciousness” that the analysis here is seeking to “test”. The development of a substantive idea of the “secular mindset” has been a two-step process, the first of which involved the most academic labour and achievement. This first step involved the dismantling of the idea of the secular as an almost non-entity, existing only insofar as it stated neutrality towards religion. This process has had various and fairly autonomous strands. Most significant, perhaps, has been the contribution from critics of the orthodox secularization thesis. The notion of nonreligion as non-entity is closely bound to that thesis, thus challenges to the thesis have involved – wittingly and unwittingly – a

challenge to that notion. Whether emphasizing the waning of religious belief or the compartmentalization of religion into particular social spheres, the classic secularization thesis was a thesis of decline. Its interest was in the disappearance of a substance (religion) in a process that was notionally moving towards the zero point. In fact, this concept of the “secular” might be more accurately termed “post-religious”. As the critique of this thesis has been consolidated – buoyed by the unexpected emergence of new religions and forms of religiosity as well as the increasing significance of particular religious cultures in the public sphere – so the easy explaining away of nonreligious or secular perspectives involved in that thesis has likewise come into question.

Another contribution to the idea of secular-as-substantive arises from the work of scholars involved in the so-called “postsecular turn”[6]. This is a more political project, in which the idea of the secular as a neutral position has been countered by arguments arising out of postcolonial[7], feminist[8] and other critiques of Modernity. These are Foucauldian perspectives, which notice the absence of power relations in neutrality-centered conceptions of the secular. From these standpoints, it is neither theoretically possible nor empirically likely that secularism could be anything other than ideological and normative.

Finally, a third influential factor has been the emergence of popular nonreligious discourses – with New Atheism chief among them. Although its impact on everyday personal and social lives remains to be seen (amidst much speculative comment on this topic, no reception studies have yet been published), it is nevertheless clear that New Atheism is a popular phenomenon and is likely to be socially significant in some way. It therefore provides social scientists with a tangible example of nonreligion as a real existing entity and social actor, and has clearly been important inspiration for nonreligion and secularity research in general.[9]

From these three strands of discussion and thought, the idea of the secular or nonreligious perspective as a substantial social phenomenon has begun to take form and gather momentum. The second step in the process of understanding post-neutrality secularism has been to address what this substantive stuff is made up of. The arguments here are much less convincing – and are, in fact, often hardly arguments at all, but rather taken-for-granted notions of the secular that have been generalized from very specific cases. Given the scale of the phenomenon – 43 percent describe themselves as nonreligious in the UK[10], and the number of unbelievers and religiously indifferent is the majority in many European countries and accounts for many millions of Europeans overall[11] – it should be clear that the simple conceptions of the secular-nonreligious mindset are likely to be overly simplistic if not caricatured. Given the large numbers involved and their distribution across political, cultural (including religio-cultural) and historical settings, it is implausible that a “one size fits all” approach is viable. Nevertheless, these conceptions have been derived from empirical observations – from key themes in European Enlightenment thinking, for example, or from the analysis of institutional discourses – and this is no doubt the basis of their perceived salience. It is because of these arguments in their favour that this paper uses them as hypotheses for

analysis, and the following section therefore describes the commonplace view of the “secular” – or secular-nonreligious – in more detail before showing the hypothesis derived from it for this study.

Towards...?

Although different authors emphasize one or other characteristic, there is remarkable uniformity in descriptions of and allusions to the secular mindset. It is typically presented as (i) rationalist (with Enlightenment thinking an important, if not the sole, forebear of modern secular thought) and (ii) viewing religion in a fairly negative light. Related to this, it is perceived (iii) to consider the privatization of religion to be in the public interest; and, in asking religion to constrain its public behavior in accordance with this principle, (iv) to be making demands on religion that it does not equal in its own efforts. Religion is seen to be deviant and/or badly behaved; therefore all emphasis is on prescribing the behavior of the religious rather than critiquing the behavior of its own clan of secular moderns.

Various implicit and explicit statements of this view are available, but one example should suffice to illustrate the approach. The example comes from *Religious America, Secular Europe?* by Peter Berger, Grace Davie and Effie Fokas[12] and profiles the “secularist” with reference to the work of José Casanova and Jürgen Habermas. As a result, this summary neatly echoes the development of the post-neutrality literature, beginning with Casanova, whose Foucauldian perspective on religion and secularism has been central to the poststructural critique, and moving onto Habermas, whose emergence as a “postsecularist” marks the mainstreaming of this critique and the coming of a “postsecular turn” in social theory[13]. So, they summarize: “There are signs that [European] “secular neutrality” [...] is increasingly being called into question. José Casanova [articulates] the following (secularist) paradox: “In the name of freedom, individual autonomy, tolerance, and cultural pluralism, religious people – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – are being asked to keep their religious beliefs, identities and norms “private” so that they do not disturb the project of a modern, secular, enlightened Europe .” (2006: 66-7)

[He argues that] Europe should become, as rapidly as possible, post-secular. Only then will it be possible to counter the secularist assumptions of *many (if not all) social and political commentators*, who necessarily “turn religion into a problem”. [14]

In Habermas’s view, they continue, “[S]ecular citizens ... must learn, sooner rather than later, to live in a post-secular society. In so doing, they will be following the example of religious citizens, who have already come to terms with the ethical expectations of democratic citizenship, in the sense that they have adopted appropriate epistemic attitudes toward their secular environment. So far *secular citizens have not been expected to make a similar effort* – a situation which leads to the current “*asymmetric distribution of cognitive burdens*,” an imbalance which needs to be rectified sooner rather than later (Habermas 2005). [It is] the duty of the more secular citizen to overcome his or her *narrowly secularist consciousness* in order to engage with religion in terms of “reasonably expected disagreement” (2006: 15). [15]

The picture is, then, of a “narrowly secularist consciousness”, one which has elite status, dominating many – and in a rather absurd suggestion, maybe *all* – social and political commentary. The secular consciousness views religion as a problem and as something that should therefore be restricted to the private sphere; related to this, it refuses to take on its share of the “burden of translation” (in Tariq Modood’s paraphrase) that is necessary for a post-Enlightenment, post-secular multicultural communicative space.[16] This conception of the secular viewpoint – a viewpoint which, by the authors’ own admission, may be broad at least in terms of numbers, even as they exclude the idea that it might be broad in terms of content – has been the dominant one, and has been used to generate the following hypotheses:

The secular-nonreligious perspective:

H1: Involves a negative view of religion/views religion as a problem [Variable type: Normative conceptions of religion]

H2: Advocates the privatization of religion [Variable type: Social space for religion]

H3: Is dominant and makes no effort with or compromise to religion (though it demands this of the religious) [Variable type: religion-nonreligion cooperation]

H4: Involves rationalist value judgements/views religion as irrational [Variable type: Belief content]

As I have mentioned, the issue of rationalism – hypothesis four – will not be pursued in this paper; hypotheses 1, 2 and 3 will be discussed in turn, following a brief summary of the research design of this study.

Research design

This study involves a secondary analysis of data collected for my doctoral research into the concept of nonreligiosity – referred to hereafter as The Nonreligion Project.[17] In this section, I will therefore give an overview of the relevant aspects of the research design from that project, as well as information about the analysis conducted for this study.

The Nonreligion Project, an exploration of the potential substance and variety of nonreligious forms, began in 2006 and is ongoing. At that time (and this is hardly less true today)[18], no research had been conducted into everyday nonreligiosity – a product of some of the theoretical assumptions and empirical conditions mentioned above[19]. As a result, this research design involved an exploratory qualitative and inductive methodology and simple research questions. An interest in nonreligion as a potential “field” of social activity gave rise to a maximum variation sampling strategy, used to investigate the potential parameters of this field. In practice, this means that whilst the research is tied to particular regions of the UK, within those regions I have looked for cases of nonreligiosity that might be expected to be as different as possible as previous cases.

The British setting was chosen for pragmatic reasons (relating to research costs and to my familiarity with this setting, as a British citizen and resident) and as a case study of secular Europe and multicultural society in general. Ethnographic work is being done in two locations: a pilot study was conducted in Cambridge[20], one of the top four cities in the UK in which the not religious make up over a quarter of the population;[21] and the main study is taking place in London, chosen as a particularly diverse city where some notable variety of outlook and experience might be encountered. I am the sole researcher on this project and have lived in both cities for the research, observing the locales in which I have been resident and considering the visibility (or not) of nonreligion and religion. I have also attended a number of non-religious commercial events. I have participated in three different non-religious meet-up groups in London and one in Cambridge, chosen because they advertized themselves as (and were) quite different from one another.

The main method of the research, and the source of data analysed for this study, is, however, in-depth semi-structured interviews, for which I again used a maximum variation sampling strategy. I therefore recruited some participants from the meetings and events I intended; these different degrees of participation in nonreligious activity were contrasted with a bulk of participants recruited from unrelated fields, using “gatekeepers” to achieve access. To achieve variety, I recruited only two or three interview participants from each “gatekeeper”. Gatekeepers included friends and acquaintances who used employment-related networks to find participants: one, for example, is a freelance editor and poet and circulated an advert about my work by email to other freelance workers in her fields; another gatekeeper advertized my research in a corporate setting, a public organization working in the field of sustainable development.[22] To be eligible to participate in the study, participants had to answer “nonreligious” when asked if this term or “religious” better described them in general.[23] 12 interviews were held in Cambridge; to date, 32 interviews have been conducted in London, of an anticipated 45. The analysis for this paper uses interviews from both locations.

The interview itself was semi-structured, involving an open discussion, but typically touching on understandings of non-religion, religion, the non-religiosity and religiosity of acquaintances and public figures, as well as themes commonly associated with religion, such as afterlife, origins and morality. Interviews also included a social network exercise, in which I elicited the interviewees “personal network” – their close friends and family – and discussed their knowledge of the religious or non-religious positions of these people and how they have obtained this knowledge. This method was also important in exploring the potential social aspects of what can appear to be a “purely privatized and individualistic retreat” from religion[24]. Interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 4 hours.

Data include ad verbatim interview transcripts, interview notes, other fieldwork notes, photographs and ephemera related to the organized nonreligious events and to the material culture I have observed in the field environment. The research design for the Nonreligion Project is largely inductive; the research design for the study presented in this paper, however, is deductive: the hypotheses generated from recent discussions of the

secular imaginary have been used to create a coding scheme against which the data collected from the Nonreligion Project could be read. For this study, only interview data (transcripts and notes) have been analyzed.

Limits of the methodology

It is important to emphasize that the methods used here – in particular, the non-random, qualitative approach and the maximum variation sampling strategy – mean that generalizable statements cannot be derived from the resulting data. These data do not show how prevalent different ways of experiencing nonreligion and being nonreligious are. Likewise, they do not show the extent of the variety of nonreligion, not least because data are drawn from only two regions of the UK (both urban regions) and the UK is known to have huge regional variation in terms of its levels of nonreligiosity[25]. It is also important to note that, if I have found more variety of nonreligious perspective than many scholars predict (for the secular-nonreligious), this is in part the result of a sampling strategy which actively *seeks* out variety. It is important to emphasize, therefore, that the research design is intended only to scrutinize how well existing *conceptions* of the “secular” fit the population they attempt to describe, and to suggest precise ways in which these conceptions might need to be developed.

Findings

H1: Religion as a problem

One overarching finding of this research is that there is a plurality of nonreligious perspectives, some of which confirm the hypotheses, others of which detracted from them. Taking first the hypothesis that the secular-nonreligious perspective necessarily considers religion to be a problem, many interviewees did have some criticism or negative comment to make about religion, but these were often targeted at a specific perceived aspect of religion with interviewees varying in which aspects concerned them. It is important to note that these criticisms were interspersed with more positive as well as ambivalent perspectives, both of which also tended to focus on specificities of religion rather than religion in general; given the space constraints here, I will focus only on the variety of ways in which religion was *problematized* – and compare two cases to illustrate the point. These cases are both young women with, in fact, strikingly similar religious, cultural, educational and professional backgrounds – making their different outlooks all the more striking. In these sections of discussion, both women are discussing the same aspect of their relations with religion: how they view the religiosity of close friends.

The first account gives something close to the rationalist Enlightenment view of religion that is expected of the secular-nonreligious: for this woman, encountering religiosity in her personal interactions is unacceptable if the religious person attempts a rational explanation for that position – an explanation which, for her, is bound to fail. Talking about her ability to enjoy a friendship with a strongly religious friend, she says:

“I think the difference is that I don’t know, for example, any Born-Again Christians: I’d find that alarming. Whereas someone who’s been born into that, it’s like the way your mum used to cook a Sunday roast, it’s kind of who you are, ... therefore you’d be doing something fairly major to say, ‘I don’t believe in it’. Especially because [my friend’s father] was a ‘man of the cloth’. That’s very different to not having [a religion in your background] and then choosing it. Because, if you *choose* it, you really have to have a real reason to choose all these mad things.”

In this account, religion is inexplicable as a rational choice, and – what is potentially more significant for social research – religion is therefore more problematic and confusing when it is conceptualized as such. If religiosity is presented as cultural heritage, the problem becomes much less acute and social relationships possible to maintain.

Recognizing that there are particular aspects of religiosity that present more or less difficulty for the nonreligious is an interesting prospect for social scientific and policy-oriented researchers. On the other hand, the second woman’s account complicates this possibility. This participant is also talking about the religiosity of her friends, but she applies a totally different logic to understand that religiosity:

LL: And how does their religion impact upon your relationship with them? Is it something that’s a source of interest? Tension?

Participant: Of interest much more than tension. I think... all of my friends who have any kind of religious bent, I think do so from a really sort of open-minded, intellectual, spiritual, searching kind of a standpoint. So they’re thinking about god and the world from within the context of, say, the Catholic Church, but ... they’re not sitting there and accepting, repeating dogma or doctrine. So, as a result, I can sort of respect that, to an extent.

This is a much more qualified position on how understandable and tolerable the religiosity of others is – but the significant point here is that an entirely different rationale is being used to think about and negotiate the religiosity this woman confronts in her day to day life. In this case, it is an unquestioning upholding of one’s cultural heritage that is problematic, whereas a considered religious position is something she can relate to and respect (“to an extent”). Thus, whilst both women see religiosity as problematic in some way (and, conversely, see certain aspects of religiosity they can relate to in other ways), the nature of the problem and the methods for negotiating it are quite different: where the one finds cultural practice salient and intellectual commitment problematic, the other finds unthinking cultural reproduction problematic and intellectual engagement salient.

H2: Privatization of religion

Turning now to the issue of religion in the public sphere, the hypothesis is that the typical secular-nonreligious viewpoint demands the exclusion of religion from the public sphere and its containment in the private sphere. The examples presented here are drawn from one type of discussion: those dealing with the legitimacy of religion in personal public spaces, that is, in the immediate interactional space between the interviewee and friends and family; this is contrasted with the private space of the self – a distinction that will become clearer in the examples. Other relevant discussions included those relating to

religion in political and civil society and in the workplace (not presented here for space constraints). The more intimate data presented here are particularly interesting, however, in that they show some of the more subtle inflections to the practice of general concepts such as privatization – inflections that are probably, I would argue, relevant to the conduct of public space more broadly defined.[26]

Again, some subtle but significant variety was found, and here three examples will be used to illustrate one notable type of difference. This is the difference between views concerning the different areas of personal and communicative space in which religion is considered to be legitimate or illegitimate – i.e. the more strictly *secular* aspect of the secular-nonreligious perspective.

The first example shows the anticipated pro-privatization perspective: attempting to tell me the religious or non-religious positions of some of his close acquaintances, this young man – in his 20s – told me:

“Again, [indicating some names on the list] these are all friends. Well, those two aren’t. *Those* two are friends: [so] I wouldn’t know.”

That is, this man explained the fact that he did not know some (non)religious orientations because his relationship with these people was one of friendship. Thus, not only are such issues excluded from the most intimate personal relationships, but it is implied that that exclusion is a condition of that friendship – a norm that his friends must abide by. This case, of excluding religion even from friendships, shows how extensive the privatization of religion can be as well as the potential function of this privatization as the normative basis for social cohesion. In a second case, however, the line between private and public are broken down in a different way: here, certain *kinds* of discussion of religion and non-religion are valued, whilst others are excluded. This participant was a woman, also in her 20s, who identified herself as a nominal Catholic (i.e. a Catholic “in name” only – an ambiguous class that we explored in the interview). Throughout the interview, she repeatedly referenced lengthy discussions that she had had, with friends and family, about religious and spiritual “theories” (as she viewed them) and she presented these discussions in a positive light. However, when trying to tell me how the religious or nonreligious positions of her friends and family might be classified, she said she didn’t know, explaining that it was just “not something you talk about”. In this way, this participant’s discussion drew a distinction between the role of abstract religious issues and personal religious beliefs in her social interactions: the former was considered to be legitimate, the latter illegitimate.

One final case is different still. For this participant, another woman in her mid-20s, the discussion of such issues, both in personal and general terms, with friends and family was introduced as a major source of fulfillment in her life. Because of these “discussions or intellectual debates”, she said, “I don’t feel like I have a void which religion would fill.” Here, religion and nonreligion in the interactional sphere was an essential and positive resource. Taken alongside the other two examples, this case shows that, rather than preferring some generic principle of the privatization of religion and religious issues,

nonreligious or secular perspective can involve more particular and alternative ideas of when and in what capacity it is legitimate to bring such issues and topics into the public sphere.

H3: Social dominance

The final set of findings relate to the claims – voiced in this paper by Habermas but echoing views held by many other critical perspectives – that nonreligion is a dominant and dominating perspective, one which makes demands on the conduct of religiosity whilst declining to make any demands of its own practice and expression. The hypothesis is that the nonreligious do not take on their share of the “cognitive burden” involved in living in multicultural societies, composed of both religious and nonreligious perspectives. Of course, these data are not capable of demonstrating or falsifying Habermas’s general claim; what does emerge from an analysis of my data against this claim is the insufficiency of such broad statements in the face of a variety of ways in which the nonreligious seem to be putting effort into their relations with religious people. I would argue that these practices must be accounted for before claims like Habermas’s can be established.

One aspect of interview data that is particularly pertinent to the task of demonstrating this relate to comments made about classifying one’s “religious or nonreligious position” – the opening question in most interviews.[27] In fact, most participants had extreme reservations about the available terminology, and most of these were in consideration of the explicitly public work such classifications are doing. One participant, for example, told me that she would classify herself (i) as a member of the Church of England on a census survey as she (incorrectly) believed that funds are allocated to the Church on that basis; as an atheist on any other survey; (ii) as a natural pantheist to open more meaningful discussions; (iii) as an atheist in order to irritate her mother; and (iv) as a member of some particular religion in order to close down conversations with proselytizing or missionary religious people. This simple discussion illustrates the enormous variety of social work that nonreligious classification are doing, and the consideration that nonreligious people might be giving to these representations in their day-to-day lives.

This first interviewee did not discuss any conscious experience of making these efforts, but other participants did and were more explicit about their concern for other people’s reactions and feelings. In this second example, the interviewee told me she would describe herself as an “atheist” usually but would refrain from doing so “in company”:

“Yeah, I am [happy to call myself an ‘atheist’]. The only, my only concern with it is it often comes across as being quite aggressive. Calling yourself an ‘atheist’ in *company* can occasionally seem like holding up a big sign saying, ‘if any of you are anything other than atheists, I think you’re all fucking morons’. Um, which...[pause] is disrespectful in the extreme. Obviously.”

This concern is despite the fact that she considers the term “atheist”, in its essential meaning, to be a satisfactory description of her position:

“I think there’s this idea that if you’re an atheist then you wonder around saying that everything is permitted and, you know, it’s regarded as being analogous with ‘out for yourself and yourself alone’ [...] And, then, so people kind of edge away from that term and use other ones – like ‘humanist’, or “secularist” or ‘atheist plus’ or ‘superstitious atheist’ or so on, and they’re really just [...] reactions to other people’s hate figures rather than anything fundamentally wrong with the term ‘atheist’.”

This example suggests, very clearly, that, in practice, religiosity and “secularity” are really in constant and complex processes of negotiation, involved in a relationship in which power may not be equally distributed perhaps, but which certainly does not involve one side merely controlling the other.

Conclusion: Towards dialogue

This study confirms the idea that “neutrality” is not a helpful or appropriate concept for understanding nonreligious perspectives and positions. In fact, the nonreligious – or secular-nonreligious – can be highly engaged with their identities as such, and the secular-nonreligious aspects of their characters can be seen in various aspects of their social behavior. Just as post-neutrality scholars have argued, position-taking towards religion is a meaningful and influential type of social action. Where these findings depart from their work is in how this position-taking can be understood, with these data showing some of the various forms that these position-takings can take. The resulting argument is a simple one: we cannot take our current notions of the “secular” outlook as givens. They rather involve a series of hypotheses, and it is possible that secular populations do not always conform to these hypotheses. On the other hand, this study suggests that these hypotheses are useful for unpacking secular-nonreligious perspectives for their different aspects – and may be useful in developing more precise typologies of different secular and nonreligious perspectives.

By way of a closing remark, I want to suggest that these typologies – and other kinds of substantive knowledge of nonreligious and secular orientations – are necessary for the normative project that post-neutrality scholars are involved with. Those discussions situate these issues in debates concerning multicultural and pluralist society – debates which stand and fall on recognizing all cultural partners in the dialogical relationships to which multiculturalists and pluralists aspire. For dialogue to take place, it is not sufficient to merely explore and recognize minority cultures; it is necessary to understand how dominant cultures are being constructed and understood, and for the rights of these cultures to be recognized. The fact that majority cultures do not tend to struggle to have their rights protected is (or should be) superfluous to the idea of “dialogue” and multiculturalism: the success of these dialogues and other interactions depends upon the recognition of all parties.

Notes

1. See McLennan, G., “The Postsecular Turn”, in: *Theory Culture Society* 27: 3 (2010): 3-20, on the ‘anti-secularist’ nature of some of this work.

2. See McLennan, “Postsecular Turn” for an overview of this movement.
3. Nonreligion is *that which is primarily defined by its relationship of difference from religion* – such as atheism, agnosticism, religious indifference and, certainly, some forms of secularism, such as classical Enlightenment secularism.
4. For example, Taylor, C., *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007.
5. On the problem, see Lee, L. and S. Bullivant, “The Big Idea: Where do atheists come from?”, *New Scientist*, March 3, 2010; on the solution, see Lee, L. and S. Bullivant (eds), “The Study of Nonreligion and Secularity: New Empirical Perspectives”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (special edition), *forthcoming*.
6. See McLennan, “Towards Postsecular Sociology?”, in: *Sociology* 41 (2007): 857-870; and McLennan, “Postsecular Turn.”
7. Talal Asad is probably the most important example (see Asad T., *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2003) but other examples are discussed in McLennan, “Postsecular Turn.”
8. Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler both published relevant feminist readings of secularism in 2008: in

McLennan, “The Postsecular Turn.”
9. For more information on nonreligion and secularity research, the website of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (www.nsrn.co.uk) can provide more information.
10. British Social Attitudes survey, 2008; Lee, L. and S. Bullivant, “The Big Idea”.
11. Seigers, P., “A multiple group latent class analysis of religious orientations in Europe”, in: *Cross-Cultural Analysis: Methods and Applications*, edited by E. Davidov, P. Schmidt and J. Billet, New York, NY: Routledge *forthcoming*: 387-413.
12. Berger, P, G. Davie and E. Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations*, Aldershot: Ashgate 2008.
13. McLennan, “Towards Postsecular Sociology?”; and McLennan, “Postsecular Turn”.
14. Berger *et al*, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*: 61-3; emphasis added.
15. Berger *et al*, *Religious America, Secular Europe?*: 62-3; emphasis added.
16. Modood, T., “Multicultural Equality, Liberal Citizenship and Secularism”, in: *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* 16: 2 (2009): 147-149. Modood is, himself, suspicious of the concept of post-secularism, preferring to look to an improved – and moderate – secularism, but maintaining the strengths and contributions that secularism has and continues to offer (*ibid.*).

17. This project is being prepared for the doctoral thesis, provisionally titled, *How religious are the nonreligious? Secularism and other cultures of modernity*. For more information, please email me at LL317@CAM.AC.UK.

18. Phil Zuckerman has conducted a similar study: Zuckerman, P., *Society Without God*, New York, NY and London: New York University Press 2008. Although there are some similarities in our methodology, and his findings and analysis have been useful in my own analysis, Zuckerman's study succeeded the beginning of the data-gathering phase of my project and his approach differs from mine in some important respects. There are also a number of studies dealing with participatory nonreligion and secularity – that is, research into atheist and secular meet-up groups. The study of these groups is significant for a number of reasons, but, given that such nonreligious practice is extremely marginal, involving a tiny fraction of the nonreligious population, such research can only inform a study of everyday, and non-institutional nonreligion to some limited degree.

19. Lee, L. and S. Bullivant, “The Big Idea: Where do atheists come from?”, *New Scientist*, March 3, 2010.

20. Lee, L., *The “secular” Individual in Britain: Toward a Sociology of (Ir)religion*, MPhil. diss., University of Cambridge, UK, 2006.

21. Voas, D., December, “Who are the non-religious in Britain and where do they come from?” paper presented at the inaugural conference of the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network, Oxford, 2009.

22. The recruitment method was different from the pilot study. Here, I used people known to me or introduced to me. I also sampled according to self-classifications: four called themselves ‘atheists’, four were non-nominal (they did not want to classify their religious or nonreligious position), four were what David Voas has called the ‘fuzzy faithful’ (Voas, D., “The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe”, in: *European Sociological Review*, 25: 2 (2009): 155-168), in this case people who classified as religious but who did not believe and/or follow the teachings of that religion. The unreliability of self-classification as an indicator led me to move away that as a sampling method in the larger study.

23. The ambiguity of this criterion reflects the lack of empirical data to inform it. It is not expected that this method will have successfully sampled all or only potentially nonreligious people. The appropriateness of this criteria is one of many methodological questions of the Nonreligion Project.

24. Demerath, N. J., “Review: Toward A Sociology of Irreligion.”, in: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 15: 4 (1976): 374-376.

25. Voas, D. “Who are the non-religious?”

26. My operationalisation of the concepts of public and private space might be contested here – as most concepts of public and private are. My use is heavily influenced by feminist conceptions, but I would argue that these data hint at issues that might be transposed to

older, more simplistic notions of the public/private divide.

27. Other interviews were participant led from the outset or began with an opportunistic discussion related to some intervening but relevant issue, object or experience.

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