

Non-Religion, Secularism and Atheism: a Social Scientific and Psychological Discussion

A Roundtable Discussion:

Tuesday
15 October, 2013
1:30 – 3:30 PM

Building 20
First Floor
Room 3
Bankstown Campus

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Speakers

'Non-Religion' among Indigenous Societies: A Preliminary Analysis James L. Cox, Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, University of Edinburgh

In the most recent Australian national census (2011), 24 per cent of those identifying as Aboriginals indicated 'no religion' under the section relating to religious preference. Although much more research is required to understand why such a high percentage responded in this way, this seemingly surprising result appears to contradict the common assumption in much scholarly writing that small-scale, kinship-orientated societies make no distinction between the 'sacred' and 'secular', but instead regard every aspect of life as 'religious'. This paper challenges this assumption on one level by arguing that indigenous peoples clearly demarcate times, spaces and objects that are filled with extraordinary power from ordinary times, spaces and objects. On a second, analytical level, this paper suggests that the widespread notion that indigenous peoples are thoroughly religious is based not on empirical evidence but represents the projection of Western, Christian influenced, notions of religion onto indigenous customary practices.

The Question and Dimension Of Politics and Social Justice In Irreligious Organisations Alan Nixon, University of Western Sydney

Sociologists and historians have noted that throughout the history of irreligious organisations there has been a struggle to mix irreligion with politics and social justice issues (in this discussion, 'irreligion' refers to those non-religious groups that are publicly critical of religion rather than neutral/covert/positive groups). From Holyoake's Secularists and the Rationalists to the New Atheism and Atheism Plus, specific political stances have played a role in structuring, dividing and destroying irreligious organisations. The irreligious have often been interested in social justice issues. However, the breadth and depth of involvement that specifically irreligious groups should have in such activities has been and remains a matter of dispute. This dispute is added to by the presence of right wing and conservative irreligious individuals and groups that do not share these ideologies. The emergence of Atheism Plus out of the Feminist scandal that became known as 'Elevatorgate' is the latest and most dramatic event in this history. Due to its placement on the internet and the fact that contemporary atheism has a large presence online, it provides a poignant case study in the micro dynamics of a structural shift in motion. This shift will be explored using a brief and specified history of irreligion, the results of interviews conducted with Australian Atheists in October-December 2011, and an internet ethnography conducted from 2011-2013. The presentation of data from the internet ethnography will focus on Google Trends, Richarddawkins.net, the FreeThoughtBlogs network and 'The Sylve pit'.

The downsides of being a young atheist: Linking religious belief to well-being in adolescents. Lee Huuskes, University of Wollongong

There has been an explosion of books which argue that religion is harmful, parasitic, and useless.. This study sought to assess the role of religious belief in the development of adolescent well-being. We administered an anonymous survey to Grade 8 students (N = 1800) enrolled in Catholic schools in NSW and QLD. The survey included 13 measures of psychological functioning, broadly divided into three categories (self-concept, emotional well-being, and social well-being). Results indicate distinct profiles in psychological adjustment for the three groups, with atheists showing the most "dysfunctional" profile, followed by agnostics. We discuss the implications of these findings for the place of religion in young people's lives.

Discussant: Joseph Ciarrochi, Foundational Processes of Behaviour Research Laboratories, University of Western Sydney

Introductory Comments: Adam Possamai, The Religion and Society Research Centre, University of Western Sydney

Biographies

James L. Cox is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Edinburgh. In 1999, he was appointed Reader in Religious Studies in the University of Edinburgh and was awarded a Personal Chair in 2006. He has held prior academic posts at the University of Zimbabwe, Westminster College, Oxford and Alaska Pacific University. In 2009, he was Visiting Professor of Religion in the University of Sydney and in 2012 was the de Carle Distinguished Lecturer in the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. His most recent monographs include: *The Invention of God in Indigenous Societies* (forthcoming Acumen, 2014); *An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Continuum, 2010), *From Primitive to Indigenous: The Academic Study of Indigenous Religions* (Ashgate, 2007) and *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion* (Continuum, 2006).

Lee Huuskes is a doctoral candidate in social psychology at the University of Wollongong. He received a BMus and a BA before developing an interest in the relationship between religious sentiment and psychological functioning. Upon graduation he is hoping to have maintained a sliver of the zeal and optimism which characterised his life pre-PhD.

Alan Nixon is a PhD candidate at the Religion and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. His thesis is an investigating of the emergence and evolution of the "new atheism". Alan's latest publications are "Contemporary atheism as hyper-real irreligion: The enchantment of science and atheism in this cosmos" in the *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions* (2011) and "Techno-Shamanism and the Economy of Ecstasy as a Religious Experience" in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music* (2013). Both chapters contain discussions of the non-religious. His research interests are Sociology of Religion/Irreligion, Complexity Theory, popular culture and internet research methods.

Adam Possamai is Associate Professor in Sociology. He is the (co)author and (co)editor of 12 books, 5 special issues, and more than 50 articles and book chapters. He is the current President of the International Sociological Association's Committee 22 on the Sociology of Religion and the co-Director of the Religion and Society Research Centre.

Joseph Ciarrochi is Professor of Psychology at the University of Western Sydney and an active researcher with numerous national competitive grants. His research and workshops focuses on understanding and developing resilience, the individual characteristics that help people to deal flexibly with setbacks and lead a healthy, productive, and fulfilling life. Joseph has published over 90 scientific papers and many books, and book chapters and is regularly invited to speak at conferences and leading universities around the world. He has been honoured with over a million dollars in research funding and a prestigious Future Fellowship. His work has been discussed in magazines, newspaper articles, and radio. His books and papers on emotional intelligence (EI) are among the most highly cited works in the EI area. He is also a leader in the area of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. With Todd Kashdan, Joe has just published the widely celebrated book, *Mindfulness, Acceptance, and Positive Psychology: the Seven Foundations of Well-Being*. His books have been published in six languages and include *A CBT practitioner's Guide to ACT: How to Bridge the Gap Between Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*; *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life for Teens—A Guide to Living an Extraordinary Life*; *Applying Emotional Intelligence: A Practitioner's Guide*; *Emotional intelligence in Everyday life: A Scientific Inquiry*.