

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 23 February 2018



From Non-Religion to Unbelief? A Developing Field

Podcast with **Lois Lee** (26 February 2018).

Interviewed by **Christopher Cotter**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/from-non-religion-to-unbelief-a-developing-field/>

Christopher Cotter (CC): *Greetings, Religious Studies Project listeners! I am speaking to you from London, in the abode of [Dr Lois Lee](#), who's returning to the Religious Studies Project. Hi, Lois.*

Lois Lee (LL): Hi. Lovely to be here again.

CC: *Lois was one of our first interviewees back in 2012. I can't remember the specific date, or why it was happening. I can remember sitting in a seminar room in New College – along with my then colleague, and still good friend [Ethan Quillen](#) – talking about the concept of non-religion with Lois. And now, five, well possibly six years on – depending how we calculate that – we're checking in again to talk about non-religion, unbelief, the development of the field, how we go about studying this, other major developments that are happening in the field at the moment, and anything else that we can fit into the next 25 minutes! So, when we last spoke to you I remember you saying, "If we're still having this conversation in 10 years about non-religion, something's gone wrong."*

LL: Yes.

CC: *We're not quite having the same conversation - but maybe I'll just throw that at you as a way to kick things off.*

LL: And we're not quite ten years on – so I don't have to falsify the thesis, or prove or disprove it at this stage! But no, it's very interesting to reflect on that. I remember saying that, and I've referred to that quite often since then. A bold claim from someone who's argued that we need to look at non-religion and that there's practical, methodological and analytic utility in using that concept to research

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religion, and something we might think about as religion, religious-like, or religion-related. But I was saying at the time, “Look, it's a means to an end. And ten years on, hopefully, we won't need that means to an end anymore.” I would revise that view now, which is good: we need to be moving forward and so on. Because I think that the discursive study of non-religion is much, much more important than I was engaging with in my work at the time. Not that it wasn't recognised, because work of critical secular scholars and critical religion scholars were showing that quite clearly. So [Tim Fitzgerald](#), [Talal Asad](#), and so forth were talking about the construction of things as non-religious as being something that defines the whole modern period. So, funnily enough, non-religious – as in things that are identified in contradistinction to religion, so this very particular relational notion of non-religion that I worked on, and [Johannes Quack](#) worked on and so on – these non-religious discourses are very widespread. They are, as all these scholars show and would argue, definitional of a whole epoch, perhaps, and vast swathes of the world. So I think there's actually a lot of water in looking at – and [Jim Beckford](#) has made this point very clearly – that we really need a strong discursive study of non-religion. And I don't see that disappearing any time soon. So we're going to need non-religion in the longer term and be engaging with it. But I'm going to stand by the spirit of the claim, if not the letter of the claim, in that what I was getting at was that – and probably this points to my own research interests – is that many people and things that are identified as non-religious are identified because of attachments that are not purely discursive. They're not just about relationality to religion, they're a way of describing lots of different things. And I've been particularly interested in what I've called in my book “existential cultures”, what [Baker and Smith](#) call “cosmic meaning systems”, what other scholars refer to as “worldviews”. And what we see now – and this is very timely to address this question now, because all of the work I've just mentioned has been published in the last three years at the longest – is a lot of play around working with how we're going to describe this stuff that is underlying what's expressed as “non-religious identities”, “non-religious practices” and “positionalities” and so on. Or analytic language: so, identifying as scholars identifying people as non-religious. And really, what we have in mind are, for example, naturalist worldviews and so on. So I feel totally vindicated in fact, in that claim, in that I think in five years, a lot of the work that's fallen within the language on non-religion – that we use the language of non-religion to identify – we won't be using that language any more. (5:00) And it's precisely because there's so much dynamism at the moment around developing better analytic categories – to get at what a lot of us have been getting at. And learning from our research and so on, that's important to the people we're talking with. So a lot of the work that we talk about in terms of non-religion is going to fall within – well, I'm not going to say what, just now! But maybe it's the study of worldviews, maybe it's existentiality, maybe it's cosmic meaning systems, who knows?

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CC: *Excellent. I've just realised that I completely omitted to properly introduce you at this beginning of this interview!*

LL: (Laughs) But surely I need no introduction, Chris?

CC: *Exactly! But you've already touched on it, just there. So, Lois is a research fellow at the University of Kent, where she's currently principal investigator on the [Understanding Unbelief](#) programme, which is something that we'll get to very shortly. She's also a founding director of the [Non-Religion and Secularity Research Network](#), which you'll have heard plenty about on this podcast thus far. And her 2015 book with OUP was called [Recognising the Non-Religious: Re-Imagining the Secular](#). So you've heard about the book, just there. And we'll get on to some of this just now. Maybe the book's actually something to springboard from, since again we didn't speak about that last time.*

LL: Yes

CC: *Maybe just tell us about your own trajectory, and how you got to this stage of being PI in a project looking at unbelief.*

LL: That's right. Well, I suppose when we last talked it was a twinkle in the eye! But the book is a culmination of what we were talking about in that [earlier podcast](#), which I'm sure is available to listeners, if they're interested, to return to it. And as you say, I've already sort of alluded to some of the work in that book, which was about identifying and engaging with populations. In particular, I was most interested in populations we identify as non-religious, and saying we need to understand them in their capacity of identifying as non-religious or being identified as others, by others as non-religious. And that many of the claims that are made about the religious would be partial if we didn't work much more closely with that population. That book arose from work that began in 2006, when sociology – my area – but the human sciences more broadly had not really engaged with this non-religious population, in any detail. They'd had sporadic forays – significant, but sporadic forays – into that area. So the book was very much a kind-of “call to arms” in way. But the title sort-of summarises, I guess, recognising the non-religious: that as researchers we need to recognise the non-religious, as societies we need to recognise the non-religious. I talk a bit about the commitments, investments, social attachments and so on, of non-religious people that lead them to feel a sense of grievance if societies only recognise the analogous needs of religious people. So there's a political argument there in the end. So where have we got to? How does that lead to the Understanding Unbelief programme?

CC: *Yes.*

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LL: Well, I think we've touched on that trajectory slightly already, which is that my kind-of emerging interest was particularly in the kinds of what I shall call “existential beliefs and cultures”. The “worldviews” is a more commonplace word we might think about. I think it's slightly problematic, and we probably don't have time to get into that. But I think it's going to lead to some really interesting conversations with people really engaging closely with that concept, and critically, which hasn't happened around worldview in the same way it's happened with religion. So it will be really interesting to see that work. But what I'm interested in is the way in which humans conceptualise their own existence and the nature of reality. That conceptualisation is intrinsically transcendent – so it's stepping back to take to a perspective on reality and existence – and, in that way, is something that is very much shared between, well, cuts across religious and non-religious divides. Whether all humans are as interested in this conceptualisation is a very open question. And that's very much where the book ends up, is saying there are lots of things going on when people self-identify or are identified as others, by others as non-religious. There are lots of political things going on. There are lots of socio-cultural things, some of which we might feel very sympathetic to and some of which we might be very, very concerned about (10:00). There's a lot going on. But one important thing that's going on is that non-religious people have worldviews and they aren't recognised clearly enough in the conceptual language we have, or in the academy, for example, or other places in public life. So we have the Sociology of Religion, and it's not clear how well that makes space for the sociology of non-traditional, nonreligious worldviews, and I'm very much arguing we should do that. The Unbelief programme builds on that in that So, the focus on belief – there's a couple of different reasons we're using the term “unbelief”. And we always use it in scare quotes. I think it's important to say that one of the reasons that we have turned to that term is that we think it's very obviously a folk category that emerged from Christian traditions. It can't be confused with a viable analytic concept. And we had some concerns about atheism, secularism – and non-religion, actually – that they had acquired a kind of veneer of analytic coherence that wasn't always borne out. And so we wanted to And this arises from conversations with others in the field about where the field was at. We wanted to slightly step back from that and invite people to be a bit critical about what they're doing and not close off questions, as well. For example, I've spoken recently about the disproportionate focus on positive atheists over and above strong agnostics in research. We now have an emerging scholarship around Atheism, with a capital A, and very little about agnostics. But there are lots of people who make the strong agnostic claim that humans can't know about the nature of human reality and existence, or God, or whoever. We didn't want to foreclose on that by having a programme on atheism, for example. So, partly, one of the strengths of unbelief is that it's very, very broad. It allows people to focus on different things that are going on within that rubric, to not imagine they've got a specific or coherent

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analytic category to start off with, but to think about what they're doing. But it is a word that includes belief. That's partly because one stage that I think the field is at is that there's been a lot of energy in the last ten years The Non-Religion and Secularity Research Network: I founded that in 2008, so we're ten years on now. And in that period there's been a kind of intense period of field-building in lots of different human science disciplines. A group who discussed the formation of this programme said that one of the issues in the field was that there was no longer strong communication between different human science disciplines within the field. At the beginning there was, because there was so little scholarship we were absolutely thrilled to read anything that emerged. Now that it's a success story it's great. There's lots to read. And one of the kind-of unintended consequences of that is that some of that interdisciplinary engagement has faded. You know, it's enough to keep up with the Sociology of Non-Religion or Secularism – as it might be called in the US – as well as trying to keep up with the Psychology of Atheism which is probably the favoured term in Psychology. And that's fine, but also a shame, because we could learn from each other and from that material. And, partly, the language of belief just reflects different disciplinary conventions: a focus on the cognitive in Cognitive Anthropology, Cognitive Science; belief is very meaningful and significant within Psychology and Social Psychology. So, we're trying to kind-of bring those things together and find a language that makes sense to different researchers.

CC: *Yes. I mean, I can see perhaps some of our listeners bristling in that we've been trying – “we” in Religious Studies – to get way from a belief-centred model of religion, in a sense. You know, because it's so much more than that, potentially. So then, to take this other side of the coin, and then also say it's “unbelief”, it's potentially got the same problems as reifying belief. But it's under-theorised. It doesn't have that cachet – as you were saying – that it's potentially an analytic term. And it also And I've got to say that my current project is a comparative study of unbelief in Scotland and Northern Ireland, partly piggy-backing on the UU programme. But also, I found that was a much easier word to utilise with funders, and people who were assessing applications who were outside of these debates. Unbelief wasn't as problematic in a sense as religion, non-religion – a lot less baggage, but made a bit of intuitive sense (15:00). So that's part of it.*

LL: I think that's really important point, actually. And I think, sometimes, there are different modes of scholarship. My mode has been to work out what concepts are useful to me and what aren't and then run away with the ones that are useful to me. But that shuts off a lot of conversation with people who are using different concepts. And unbelief, I think, is really useful, because it's sort-of salient and intelligent to broader populations. They know where you're at. Some of the preparatory work for this programme was developed in a programme called the [Scientific Study of Non-Religious Belief](#). And if **Citation Info:** Lee, Lois, and Christopher Cotter. 2018. “From Non-Religion to Unbelief? A Developing Field”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 26 February 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 23 February 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/from-non-religion-to-unbelief-a-developing-field/>

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you've read work around relational theories of non-religion, non-religious belief is something that makes sense. But if you haven't, and this is something that in earlier iterations of the project we came up against, you are not clear what a non-religious belief is. "Is that just any belief, that isn't religious?" "Well, no. That's not what we meant." But that kind of confusion isn't always helpful to having kind-of knowledge exchange with different kinds of audiences and research partners in a way that unbelief *is* helpful. It draws out its controversies, too. But a lot of that discussion can be very helpful. I think we have a sense that one of the major goals of the project, which is very descriptive in its intention So, you can summarise its core research question as being: "To summarise the nature and diversity of – scare quotes – "unbelief". And I tend to think of one of the major outcomes of the programme being the ability to identify different profiles of unbelievers within national populations, and maybe breaking that down further still. We could think about them as denominations of unbelievers perhaps, but maybe that's not a helpful way of going about it.

CC: *Hmm.*

LL: But I think, in doing that, we should be able to identify much more concrete positive language that will hopefully replace, in many ways, the concept of unbelief. I think unbelief is I'd be interested to know what you think, with your project. But for me, I'm not sure there's going to be analytic validity usefulness. It's quite clearly a kind of folk category.

CC: *Mmm.*

LL: But it's a gateway to hopefully identifying a set of better, more interesting concepts – better and more interesting also than atheism and secularism and non-religion. And again, that's a bit of a concern with those concepts, because they're *slightly* helpful. They are all helpful in lots of different ways, but because they're helpful they sort-of close down options to push further in certain directions. Whereas, in a way, unbelief is so clearly a sort-of folk category, it sort of invites us to think: "Well, what am I talking about here?" So I might be inclined to say, again, that unbelief is another transitional concept, like non-religion. And, if I'm still using the concept in 10 years' time (Laughs)

CC: (Laughs) *Why not?*

LL: So we can meet again in a few years, and see what's come to pass.

CC: *Exactly, and what new . . .*

LL: I think it's a productive conversation. And in the programme we're also concerned to broaden out

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the conversation from academia and engage much more effectively with broader audiences. And again, a sort of language that makes sense to broader audiences will help us to do that and help us to learn from perspectives outside of academia.

CC: *Excellent. Now, there's a few directions we could go in here. And part of me is wanting to push that button again about: are we potentially reifying groups here, by talking about types of unbelievers and dichotomising the world? But, listen to our previous interview - listen to my [interview with Johannes Quack](#), back from 2015 and also read some of Lois's work, some of my work where we do engage with this, alright?*

LL: (Laughs)

CC: *To skip to a debate that hasn't been had before – well this will just be re-treading ground – but tell us about this Understanding Unbelief programme, then. So, there are four other You are the principal investigator, there's a core team and then there's a whole bunch of other different projects going on?*

LL: There's a lots of people- I won't mention everyone by name. I hope they're not offended. But there's a lot going on

CC: *So what is it? What is going on?*

LL: I think it does say something about where the field has got to. So, as I sort-of said earlier, I think there's been a phase of field-building which has been a lot of conceptual work, which has involved a lot of making the argument about why we need to study this group to our colleagues in academia (20:00). And that's something that you've been involved with, and several others have been involved with. And I think that argument has clearly been won, aided and abetted by broader social contexts in which there's a recognition of non-religious actors: people describing themselves as non-religious. So I think that's great. And we're moving into a new phase now, where we're concreting or pushing that more general work further. There are lots of different ways in which people are seeking to break down those populations and be more specific again. That's something you've done in your work, and I've done in my work. So, when we first started discussing this programme there was a sense that I mentioned some sort-of field-wide interests and concerns: about the usefulness of some inter-disciplinary work; about moving on from some of the conceptual debates we've been having; not encouraging a new round of work about concepts, but really getting involved in empirical settings. But, very chiefly, was a sense that, empirically, we needed to work outside of the West; that learning

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about atheists, people who identify as atheists and go to the atheist church, for example, or read new atheist material, was something that had been quite well-covered in the field by that point. And we needed to think beyond that, so: outside of Anglophone settings; outside of Northern European settings and the US and Canada; but also – within those settings and beyond – thinking about demographic groups that had not been well studied. Matt Sheard has a [paper](#) in *Secularism and Non-Religion* about non-elite, non-religious people within the UK and how little they've been researched. I agree. I agree: non-white, women, agnostics rather than atheist. So, there's a very big population. We've done the work of saying: "This is why we need to engage with them. Here are some ways of engaging with all these different groups." And now we really need to *do* it. And also, yes, get outside of the kind-of well-worn tracks. So, we wanted to consolidate some of the work that had been done. And from that basis, really, hopefully be part of ushering in this new phase. Which . . . I think there's lots of other work that's going on concurrently, which is a part of that. So the approach has been . . . I'm working with a multi-disciplinary team to lead the programme. So we have [Jonathan Lanman](#) who's a cognitive anthropologist, [Miguel Farias](#) who's a social psychologist, and [Stephen Bullivant](#) who's a theologian and also a sociologist with expertise in quantitative work. I'm a sociologist with a focus on qualitative work. So that team – we're doing research across five different countries, I can't think how many continents, a few continents – is kind-of the centre of that project. But we also now have 21 project teams working around the world to do work much, much more widely than a small team could ever do, given that, as I've already sort of alluded to, actually the empirical work was fairly narrow. And in order to answer questions about the nature and diversity of non-belief we really needed to be very broad. Our core project is working strategically with five countries that are revealing about broader global trends and so on. But actually, it's great to have work going on in lots of different places. So [one of the projects](#) which is grounded in Psychology is working with – I can't think in total how many countries it is – ten or so countries that have very high numbers of people who identify as non-religious. So that includes South Korea, Australia, Japan, Azerbaijan, Vietnam and so forth. So, a really diverse set of countries that they'll be going to and using psychological methods to engage with those populations. At the same time, we have close ethnographic research going on. A project based . . . I should say all of the information on these projects and all the other projects is available on our website.

CC: *Which is?*

LL: The easiest URL is understanding-unbelief.net. It also lives with the University of Kent system, but you can find it there. And no doubt it will be available on the podcast website. (25:00) I say that, because there are so many projects, and they're very exciting and so much worth looking at

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CC: *Yes, we could spend an hour talking about each one.*

LL: Yes. But, to just to give a sense of the kind of contrast, there's an ethnographic [project](#) that's looking at magical thinking in two different European settings and working very closely, very much exploring kind-of-unbelief: people who are cast as and cast themselves as unbelievers. And they're working with a very typical population of rationalist thinkers. But looking at things we might identify, and they, as anthropologists, are used to identifying as magical thinking within those populations. So between those very broad quantitative studies, and those very detailed and nuanced qualitative studies, we're hoping . . . we're not going to be able to map the world of unbelievers, but we're hoping to be able to join a lot of dots and get a much, much broader picture of How are they described? Is it the fourth-largest faith group in the world? The non-religious, or people who don't affiliate with a religion are the third-largest religion, and unbelievers are the fourth-largest faith group. To put it somewhat crudely.

CC: *Right.***LL:** So there's a lot to learn. And we hope to learn something about that group.**CC:** *Excellent. And listeners can keep an eye on that website over the coming couple of years. So when's the project wrapping up? It's 2019, isn't it?***LL:** Yes. I think it officially ends in late 2019, but there'll be activity ongoing I would think – with a sense of all these different projects and work coming through from that – for the longer term, I would think.**CC:** *Absolutely. We're already coming up to sort-of the end of our time. I'm going to ask you a question now that I didn't prep you with, so feel free if I have to rewind. But we were saying, before we started recording, that there's maybe a sort of dearth of female voices speaking in this area and researching in this area. So I just wondered if you have any comments on that. A final thought as a sort-of leading light in this area?***LL:** A topical theme in societies more broadly. No, that's a good thing to focus on. A good question, thank you. Yes, in the last project I was involved with – the Scientific Study of Non-Religious Belief- we had a [series of blogs](#) on methods, one of which focuses on gender and talks about a concern, in the study of non-religion and atheism, about the way in which both that field is gendered and the study of that area is gendered. Partly this comes down to kind of quite interesting feedback loops. So, for**Citation Info:** Lee, Lois, and Christopher Cotter. 2018. "From Non-Religion to Unbelief? A Developing Field", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 26 February 2018. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 23 February 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/from-non-religion-to-unbelief-a-developing-field/>

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example, we have studies that show that the language of atheism is slightly more popular with men than it is with women. And that's reflected in research. So I am a woman. And I quickly said, "I don't like atheism, that's not my main framework – I prefer non-religion." And that's typical, actually, of quite a lot of researchers, to slightly generalise. But there is a kind of way of engaging with very male dominated atheist cultures – like the New Atheism and so on – that interests men. And then other voices – really interesting work that prefers concepts like non-religion or secularity, or secularism, and so on – that's sort-of been lost a bit. I've noticed that happening. And there are several collections that are very male-dominated. And as much as this is not distinctive to our field, there is, as I say, a sort of relationship between what we're studying and how we study it that *is* specific to our field. And actually, that sort-of brings us back to the topic of agnosticism. So we, in my field, are very generally acquainted – and so are sociologists of religion – with the idea that religious people are more likely to be women, and non-religious people are more likely to be men. So wherever you're coming from, this gendered phenomenon is known. It shouldn't be overstated, but it is marked. And it's interesting, within the non-religious field, if you break that down between people who have strong atheistic beliefs and have sort-of strong agnostic beliefs, then the gender profile looks quite different. And the agnostics are more female overall and atheists are more male. So again, there's that concern that gender may be a factor in what we're researching, what we're choosing to research, and what's being neglected. In the UK the agnostics are a larger group than the atheists. Why haven't we looked at them? (30:00) Part of the answer to that question is about gender, and it's by no means the whole answer to that question, but I think it's an element – or something we should at least be exploring and concerned about. I'm really thrilled, actually, that we have so many research teams on the Understanding Unbelief programme and it is a very gender-balanced set of researchers. And because of the way in which our own perspective shapes the questions we ask and how we look at them, and so on, I think that's a very good sign for the work we'll . . . what we'll learn through the programme. But I do think it's an interesting topic for us to reflect upon. As I say, there's an NSRN blog that's been written on it and I think there's scope for a bit more work around reflecting on . . . It's sort of the other side of the coin of the focus on the study of elites – even within particular cultural settings – is thinking about who's researching them. And that very much relates to broader questions in academia at the moment about non-elite voices having space to be heard. And the perspectives we might be missing. You know, I think it's a question of good and bad science in those kinds of terms. Because we will find out new things if we include a broader range of perspectives. This we know. This we know. So yes, I think that would be a good thing for us to be reflecting on as field, going forward into the next phase. I can't remember if we're reflecting on the last 5 years or the last 10 years, but . . . looking

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forward anyway!

CC: *Well, reflecting on a lot, anyway! Good. And hopefully the Understanding Unbelief programme will contribute a lot to that as well. So, we're out of time, Lois. But it's been wonderful to speak to you.*

LL: And you.

CC: *And I'm sure the listeners will come back in another 5 years and we'll see where the conversation is next time. Alright.*

LL: (Laughs).

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