Podcast Transcript

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Unbelief as a Nuanced Phenomenon:

The Sociality of Nonreligion across Europe

Podcast with **David Herbert and Josh Bullock** (2 December 2019).

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Sidney Castillo (SC): *Hello! I'm here now with Josh Bullock and David Herbert. We are at the EASR Conference 2019 in Tartu, Estonia, and we are happy to be gathered here. We are going to talk about understanding unbelief and the way that they are working on it: Reaching for a New Sense of Connection: the sociality of nonrelgion in Europe. Welcome to both of you, professors.*

David Herbert (DH): Thank you.

SC: *I think if you could introduce yourselves, it would be great for our Listeners.*

Josh Bullock (JB): Sure. So I am doing a post-doctoral research on the Understanding Unbelief project at Kingston University. My background's in the Sociology of Religion but primarily nonreligion – so if it could just be "Sociology of Nonreligion" that would be fine with me. And my PhD was on looking at the Sunday Assembly, the secular congregation.

DH: Hi, I'm David Herbert. I'm Professor of Sociology at Kingston University, London. And I work on religion, and now nonreligion. And also on migration and integration issues across Europe.

SC: *Thank you, and welcome again to the Religious Studies Project. So let's just dive right into the questions. And since you're working on the Understanding Unbelief project I would like to ask, firstly, what makes unbelief an analytical category different from others such as nonreligion, horizontal*

DH: Yes, so the way the whole Understanding Unbelief project was set up, they gave us a lot of scope to define our own terms. So the term that we've used is nonreligion, because that's kind-of easy to define – in terms of people who say they have "no religion" when you ask them. And what we found interesting, looking at the survey data, was that people who say they have no religion – when you ask "what most closely fits with your point of view?" when you give them a choice of "personal God", "life force" or "spirit" – then many of them say, actually, life force or spirit rather than, "there is definitely no God". So there's kind-of an area of nonreligious which includes both people who believe in supernatural-type stuff and kind-of what we'd call "harder" atheists – so, a softer agnosticism and a harder atheism.

JB: I think that's summed it up perfectly for my way of using nonrelgion rather than unbelief. Also, when we were trying to find participants for the study, I think nonreligion is more of a category that people are likely to relate to – at least, saying that they have no religion rather than defining themselves as being an "unbeliever" or having "unbelief". So it was more of a relational category which people could . . . .

DH: We also found when we looked at our data that clearly many of the people who we interviewed who very definitely said that they had no religion, also said they had beliefs. So they believed in fate, luck, some of them even use horoscopes – even if a kind-of half-ironic way. So there was actually a lot of belief going on. So, again, we saw nonreligion as better. Because they're not identifying with religion, whatever they mean by that, but they do have some beliefs.

SC: *So that seems more nuanced than unbelief.*

DH: Yes.

SC: *Sure. Excellent. And the next question I think you place an emphasis on a particular age group. Why does the project focus on Generation Y or the Millennials? How does this group differentiate from other age groups?*

JB: Yes. So we know that Generation Y – so those born between around the 1980s to late '90s – they were around nineteen to thirty-seven, our participants were, when we interviewed them. And we know, based on ESS and EVS data, that they're going to be much less religious than their parents' generation and even more so than their grandparents' generation. And this indicates for pretty much all

of the countries, apart from Slovenia, across the European social studies data set.

DH: Yes, I think across twenty-six countries there's like one where there are fewer nonreligious in that age group than in older age groups. But everywhere else it's a growing phenomenon.

JB: So that was our primary reason – because we thought the pool would be bigger. And it also gives us some scope, then, for longitudinal studies: we can follow this generation as their beliefs perhaps change over time. And then also, part of our project was looking at the kind-of sense of connection they take and their sociality. So we were interested in the social media side of it, and how they connect with others – whether it be on forums or, yeah, social media, Twitter, Facebook.

DH: Yes. We thought, as the most intensive social media users, they would be a really good sample for getting a sense of what's happening at the cutting edge of . . . because within nonreligion there are some kind-of older institutions, like the Humanist Society and so on, but not so much. And so we thought "Ok, so do people fulfil a need to sort-of get together in being nonreligious in whatever way?" And we thought, "OK, social media is a good way in. These are high users. We should find something."

SC: *So even though they don't relate to religion in this way, they still want to gather and get together – find like-minded people?*

JB: Well, that was the kind-of question we set out with at the beginning of the project. Because it was off the back of my research on the Sunday Assembly, which is where nonreligious people are gathering to try to find community and belonging in the UK, Netherlands and US. And we were wondering if other kinds of institutions or organisations were happening elsewhere in Europe, and in what contexts? And what did they look like? Because we didn't expect to find the Sunday Assembly in places like Poland and Romania but we were interested in what kinds of other groups might exist.

DH: Yes. And particularly in the question of where religion is playing a more active – maybe intrusive – role in public life, if that produces a kind-of counter-reaction; a kind-of organisation against the encroachment of religion, by kind-of secular societies, but maybe by people organising in new ways.

JB: Yes. So like a "resistance identity" over just a "need for congregational belonging".

SC: *Yes excellent. Because indeed I can see that there can be a contrast between these countries where they have a more prominent religious life, like Romania which is highly Catholic and (another*

context) with all the religious denominations. And that's actually the next question: in contextualising nonbelief you focus on countries with post-Soviet populations, such as Poland, Romania and regions of former East Germany. How are percentages of religion and belief shaped by these experiences, compared to experiences of Northern Europe?

DH: Yes. So we had fifty/fifty samples – sort-of fifty Western European and fifty Eastern European – and half each, three in each. And we wanted to see what the differences were. And also there were big differences between those countries in terms of the number of nonreligious. So in Romania it was very low, maybe around the kind-of five percent mark. Maybe a little bit more in Poland.

JB: Yes about six or seven percent in Poland.

DH: And larger, much larger in East Germany. So what difference does being in a minority make to whether people feel the need to get together? And also, how politicised religion is – what difference does that make? When it comes to the post-Communist situation, of course, religion was treated in somewhat different ways in Communist countries. There were always political restrictions on it as a kind-of alternative source of loyalty to the Communist state. And so we expected that there may be effects in terms of the legacy on that. Whether it's in terms of, say, in Poland – where the Church was very strong, resisted Communism, strongly attached to national identity – but playing a different role maybe in Eastern Germany, where it was much less a kind-of force for national unity. So if religion has been a source of national identity, as it was in Poland for resistance to Communism, then maybe the people who were not religious . . . . And particularly if the communist regime . . . the Soviet Communist regime was associated with atheism, then there's likely to be more negative views to being nonreligious and especially atheist. So if that affected how people then felt similarly, in Romania? But we expected less of that in the German context, because religion was less politicised. So, yeah. And we saw some kind-of legacies of that in terms of how people relate now. There was much more, for example, political organisation of nonreligion in Poland than we found in the other contexts.

SC: *And even though a lot of the countries share a Soviet background, there is a big difference between each one of them?*

JB: Hugely so, yes.

DH: Yes, they have very different histories. And also history has taken a different turn. So in Poland, for example – where religion has become a force for populism, and used by various groups in society

and the law and justice and government to support various kinds of controversial policies – we found the nonreligious very active in terms of organising, for example, for women's right to choose.

JB: Yes, supporting LGBTQ rights as well, and also other kind-of causes for equality – within Poland, at least.

DH: Yes. So a strong voice for a kind-of resisting religion coming into public space, and a strong voice for kind-of pro-choice options on a range of levels.

SC: *Right. And how can you lift these national contexts, the age group, and also the intersectionality of, like, race, gender, class? Is there also any kind of correspondence for the same age group that share differences in some way?*

DH: Yes. We had some racial and religious background diversity in our sample. And actually one of the areas where that aspect of diversity came out was we found that amongst people from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds, in Western European contexts, that they were more inclined to express beliefs in the supernatural and have less reservations about doing so. So they'll talk about, for example, "karma", and "meaningful coincidences" in a way that was quite common in Eastern Europe, but much less so in Western Europe. So that was perhaps one source of diversity.

JB: Just following on from that. So we found these beliefs in about thirty-four percent of our participants. So just over a third. So I think it was twenty-three of them in total, and nine came out of Poland. Eight came out of Romania. The other six were from Western or Northern Europe. But their backgrounds were from Eastern Europe or Northern Africa. So really this was kind-of like an Eastern Europe phenomenon, having these karmic or cosmic beliefs.

DH: Beliefs in a range of kind-of meaningful connections and a sense that, as human beings, we're somehow connected to the broader universe – that kind-of spiritual belief I guess you could call it. I think many of them would own that term. They saw that as being compatible with being nonreligious. It was something different from religion. But it was much more common in Eastern European and people of Eastern European heritage – as well as North African heritage, in one case.

SC: *Also you are using this concept of yours of politicisation of religion. So how is this concept articulated in the data you've looked at so far?*

DH: Yeah. So we were interested in investigating how the public role of religion makes a difference to

how the nonreligious react. And religion is publicly prominent for different reasons in the different countries. So because of its politicisation in Poland, and in support of a kind-of folk nationalism and in relation to immigration issues, especially Muslim immigration, in Western Europe. So it's a more controversial . . . . It's controversial for different reasons.

SC: *Right.*

DH: And so, yeah, we wanted to look at the effects of that.

SC: *Also I was wondering . . . I think you've given a very good macro overview. Because you devised your study on three levels: macro, meso and micro. What else have you identified on the micro level and the meso level?*

JB: So, on the micro level I think one of our biggest findings is coming back to the diversity of the beliefs that the nonreligious hold. So this was coming back to these paranormal, supernatural, magical, superstitious beliefs. And despite them saying that they are nonreligious – in the sense that they don't identify with an institutional religion – they still share a wide range of diverse beliefs and often these are paranormal, supernatural, magical beliefs. So that was on the micro level.

DH: Yes and those supernatural beliefs often seemed to serve to connect people to other people, whether it's friends and family that they're close to, or to give some sense of moral orientation in the universe. So quite a few of the stories, the meaningful coincidences were about being rewarded for some kind-of good behaviour. So, you do someone a good turn and then something good happens. So that almost sort-of golden rule projected onto the cosmos. And the kind-of sense that there's some kind-of moral order. That was quite a strong theme that came through, as well as a connection to other people: a kind-of sense that there's human significance . . . .

JB: Yeah. But often these beliefs were a kind-of source of tension during the interviews, or at least when we were reading back over them. So they would try to kind-of explain what had happened – these kind-of meaningful coincidences – in a scientific way, even thought there was no – at least to them – logical explanation for what had happened. So for things like . . . we had an example from a young Romanian woman who was living in London, who had lived within two hundred metres of the same person all her life – and ended up being best friends with this person – but had moved six times across different countries and still lived within two hundred metres of this person. They'd just kind-of followed the same route! So, for her, this was more than just a coincidence. And she . . . to quote her

term, "It was meant to be." So there's kind-of this sense that there's an "order of things". But for others trying to explain these events, which seemingly are irrational – like books flying off shelves, or affinities with numbers, or knowing . . . or having a strange feeling when a family member is about to die – so trying to explain these rationally was often like a source of discomfort or tension. Maybe that was kind-of like an artefact of . . . because we were creating this tension by asking them to explain how they understand the event. It came out quite strongly, that sense of tension, when people were referring to superstitious beliefs that still affected them, but which at a rational level they challenge. So for example one guy talked about black cats and how he would avoid black cats. And he had a sense that it would give him bad luck even though he didn't believe, rationally, that there was any kind-of causal process involved. And he actually said he found it really annoying. He said he found it really stressful, as well. Really annoying and really stressful. Because he didn't believe it, but he would still actively avoid them.

SC: *Right.*

JB: I think his starting sentence was: "I'm not superstitious, but I don't like black cats." So there's often contradictory statements which can co-exist, I guess, between the analytic and the intuitive, right?

DH: Yes. So we theorised that in terms of a distinction that's made in the developmental psychology literature, between analytical modes of thinking – which develop from age kind-of four up to . . . well it keeps going through our lives I guess – and earlier intuitive beliefs, where agency – so, the ability to move and change things and to want things – is attributed to inanimate objects. And gradually, that kind-of moves out of daily use. But the theory is that we can code-switch between those two things. So that actually the intuitive stays alongside the analytic, and that maybe at moments of stress or something we don't know how to deal with . . .

JB: It's like we're gaining control over the situation, isn't it?

DH: It comes out to reinforce, like, a sense of control. So what we think may have been going on, and why people make . . . . Most of the people who reported the experiences didn't feel a tension about it all the time. They just kind-of did it. But then, when we asked them to reflect on it, then they felt the tension. Some of them felt it in their daily life as well.

SC: *I wanted to ask about, specifically . . . you mentioned that you have been studying self-reported*

individuals who they say that they are nonbelievers. But in which way did you carry out your interviews? I wondered if for some of them it was the first time that (they had been asked to consider these questions in a rational way). So, to build a growing narrative about their own non-belief. So did you have those cases where: "Oh. You didn't ask me. I wasn't warned about that."?

DH: Yes, I mean, for lots of cases this was probably the first time they'd had to articulate their beliefs or put them onto paper, I guess. Some of them were part of discussions on social media and had relationships with the Rationalist Society. So they may have been used to thinking about those kind of things. But many of them, not. So I think we had a kind-of mixture in terms of how reflective they were. But because it was quite a wide-ranging interview, probably – well, hopefully – there was something new for everybody.

SC: *Any concluding remarks you want to give about your results?*

JB: I mean, just returning back to the micro, meso, macro: so if we go back to the medium level stuff, there are some examples which we found in Europe. For example, in Frankfurt in Germany they have a meet up group called Drinking and Socialising with Atheists. So you can go for a pint down the pub and talk existential questions, and big life politics, and religion. But it's quite small. So we didn't really come across very many meso groups. We have a medium-level group. But in terms of macro there were a few. So the Norwegian Humanists played quite a big role in providing ritual instruction for nonreligious.

DH: And that's an unusual case, because it's state-funded like the churches. So it has much more resources to draw on. So there's a kind-of national structure with people working full-time for them. Whereas in other cases it's kind-of self-start up networks, mostly. But we also found quite a lot of innovation in terms of practices. So, for example, the Polish, big, Atheist of the Year awards ceremony, goes with that.

JB: The KLF, the Kazimierz Lyszczynski Foundation – apologies for the pronunciation! Every year they hold like an annual march and they have atheist picnics throughout the summer. So there's a kind-of sense of community and belonging building there – a bit similar to the Sunday Assembly. But primarily, it's more to do with campaigning, as we mentioned earlier, for equal rights and women's rights. But there's some innovation there, in terms of atheist ceremonies to reward the biggest atheist of the year in terms of their contribution. Yeah.

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DH: I guess our headline finding is that there *is* diversity: that the nonreligious category doesn't mean that there aren't some kind-of supernatural beliefs going on. Those might not be the most important things for those people but they definitely feature – at least for a sizeable minority. And also, I guess, that there did seem to be a kind-of an interaction with the broader society in terms of how active people are. So that where people are feeling that their nonreligious identity is under threat, then they kind-of get together to organise, particularly in the Polish case. Whereas, I guess, it's more a sort-of looser network-type affiliation which you can see from looking at the social media data, quite a lot of them. Because most of our cohort, I guess, were bilingual – not maybe completely bilingual, but certainly use English as a functional language. And that's pretty common amongst Millennials. And that enables them to follow people that they like in the UK or in other European countries, where there's also English as a working language being used. So there's a kind-of a nonreligious Eurosphere developing.

SC: *That's very interesting. I think we are going to wrap it up now. Thank you, again, for being on the Religious Studies Project, and we hope to have you again.*

JB: Thank you very much.

DH: Thank you.

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