

Atheism and Anthropology: Researching Atheism and Self-searching Belief and Experience

Workshop

University College London,

Daryll Forde seminar room, 2nd floor, Taviton Street 14

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Sponsored by the European Association of Social Anthropologists
and

EASA Anthropology of Religion Network

Convenors:

Ruy Llera Blanes (Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon)

Galina Oustanova-Stjepanovic (University College London)



University College London



EASA

Description:

Headline clashes between ‘new atheists’ such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins and various religious leaders have shown that strong convictions inform atheist and religious discourses, searching to convey their own propositional ‘truths’. Some people argue that atheism has turned militant; others suggest religious education is a menace. Yet, what is atheism? How are subjectivities, ideas, embodied practices and material environments inflected with atheism? These matters are often neglected in anthropology for the simple reason that the discipline itself is an offspring of methodological atheism caught in an awkward relationship with theology and religious performances.

This workshop adopts a two-pronged approach to the research of atheism. We have invited scholars who research *atheism* as historical, political, and cultural articulations of non-belief, atheistic critique, political and practical disinterestedness in matters of religions. Through our workshop, we will explore the definitions and manifestations of atheism through the comparison and analysis of a number of ethnographic case studies. Furthermore, we will address the questions of specifically religious reflexivity in anthropology by considering the ethical and methodological implications of conducting research as atheist anthropologists and representing religious traditions and ontologies in the secular language of anthropology. A few questions worth considering:

- Is an ‘anthropology of atheism’ possible, or necessary?
- Are atheism and religiosity competing, opposed ‘regimes of truth’? Can atheism be researched as a form of belief? What are the additional dimensions of ‘atheism’ that are not covered by the concept of ‘belief’?
- What does secularism tell us about atheism?
- Is atheism as awkward as theology for anthropology? Is anthropology an inevitably non-theistic discipline? Can you teach anthropological theories of religion to students of anthropology who take witchcraft seriously?

Keynote Lecture by Matthew Engelke (London School of Economics)

Programme:

9:45 Welcome words by convenors

10:00: *Keynote Lecture*

Matthew Engelke: The Anthropology of *After* Religion

11:15: Break

11:30: *Session 1: Researching Atheism*

Jacob Copeman: Death and Atheism in India

Lorna Mumford: Discourses of Atheist and Humanist Identity in Britain

12:30: Lunch

13:45 *Session 2: Atheism and Secularism*

Sindre Bangstad: Which Road to Enlightenment? On The Impasses of Secularist Absolutism In Relation to Anthropology in Contemporary Norway

Ashley Lebner: Marxism, Christian eschatology and the secular in Brazil

Vlad Naumescu: Secular missionaries or phonies? Old Believers' moral dilemmas in (post)socialist Romania

Chair/discussant: **Charles Stewart**

15:30 Break

16:00 *Session 3: Anthropological Atheism*

Sonja Luehrmann: Antagonistic Insights: Evolving Soviet atheist critiques of religion and why they might matter for anthropology

Tim Jenkins: The 'language ideologies' of a positivist sociological study and Evangelical Christianity compared

Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic: Confessional Anthropology

17:45 Final discussion and farewell

Dinner and drinks

Titles and Abstracts (alphabetical order):

Which Road to Enlightenment? On The Impasses of Secularist Absolutism In Relation to Anthropology in Contemporary Norway.

Sindre Bangstad (Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo)

Norway and other Scandinavian countries, we are often told, have populations that are among the least religious in the world (Zuckerman 2008). At the same time, the particular configuration of secularism in Norway bears a heavy imprint of Lutheranism (Smith 2010). Yet there have hitherto not been any systematic attempts by Norwegian anthropologists to explore what kind of social imaginaries (Taylor 2004) underpin modern and late modern 'indifference to religion' among Norwegians (Butler 2010). Muslims in Norway, who have been present in significant numbers only since the late 1960s, and now represent ca. 3.6 per cent of the population have under current circumstances come to embody the 'religious other' for many Norwegians. Their sheer presence and 'negative hypervisibility' in the mediated public spheres (Gullestad 2006) have generated ideological and absolutist conceptions of secularism which conflates secularism and atheism, and posits 'reason' and invocations of 'Enlightenment values' as quintessentially atheist preserves. Through an exploration of the so-called 'morality police'- debate in Norway in 2010, this paper analyzes how the categories of 'secular' and 'religious' (Asad 2003) are construed in opposition to one another in contemporary Norwegian media and public discourses. I argue that an anthropology committed to a legacy of exploring and understanding human ways of living in all their complexities through a secular discipline has no other choice but to avoid aligning itself with understandings premised on such binaries. Finally, and in line with Gullestad (2006), I argue in favor of anthropology 'turning the gaze upon the native self' in order to systematically explore what atheism, agnosticism and humanism means for the many religiously indifferent Norwegians.

Death and Atheism in India

Jacob Copeman (University of Edinburgh)

This paper explores case studies from India of attempts by atheist rationalist activists to donate their organs. I treat the public nature of these deathbed wishes as moral dramas, for at their heart is a contest over the donor's soul - or its this-worldly equivalent, his legacy - that serves equally as an opportunity to reignite projects of social reform and (re-)educate different social constituencies. I thus focus on the didactic functions of donation, where the principal issue at stake is the intention of the dying person to gift his or her organs. I argue that there is far more at stake than just the possibilities of saving lives when organs are bequeathed. Rather, these unfolding moral dramas become opportunities for, amongst other things, Brahminism to be rejected, humanism to be emphasized, superstition to be transcended, and a broad spectrum of civic virtues to be inculcated.

The ‘language ideologies’ of a positivist sociological study and Evangelical Christianity compared

Tim Jenkins (University of Cambridge)

Re-reading a classic of descriptive sociology/social psychology (*When Prophecy Fails*, 1956), it is striking how the ‘language ideology’ upholding the sociologists’ account resembles in every respect that described in recent anthropological descriptions of Evangelical Christianity. I offer a discussion of the proposition that methodological atheism in this case expresses salvific presuppositions; the boundary between objectivity and commitment is not easy to map.

Marxism, Christian eschatology and the secular in Brazil

Ashley Lebner (University of Toronto)

This paper begins from the premise that atheist and secular political forms are variously shaped with religiosities in mind, a process that should be more widely explored anthropologically to contribute to rethinking secular politics. I ground these arguments in ethnography of Brazil’s largest Marxist land-rights organisation, the Landless Worker’s Movement (MST). I begin by textually exploring the development of a certain secularism within the MST, which although appears to promote an atheist reality, is notably ‘dependent’ on Christianity. I show how the MST incorporates Christian forms in the training and inspiration of its activists while overtly removing their Christian meaning – from the mystical theatrics developed by the Liberationist Church to evoking the tenacity of famous millenarian leaders. This reproduction of Christian form is deployed to eventually overwrite Christian renderings of reality even while it allows it to resonate as a framework for understanding the unfolding of events. I illustrate this through the exegesis of a messianic vision written in trance and shared with me by a survivor of the massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás, a critical event for the MST and Brazil’s political history. The vision exemplifies not only how Christianity continues to inspire activists, but that local eschatology ultimately trumps the secular political transcendence sought by the MST. I present this ethnography as a cautionary tale for others who are now seeking to derive new secular and atheist universals from Christian forms while reviving communism without States (e.g. Badiou, Zizek). Given the local flows of allegorical interpretation, it is worth being more cautious about the invocations of transcendence and finding new, perhaps more stable ways of inspiring and legitimating secular political action.

Antagonistic Insights: Evolving Soviet atheist critiques of religion and why they might matter for anthropology

Sonja Luehrmann (University of British Columbia)

Contrary to common perceptions of Soviet atheism as completely predetermined by a fixed interpretation of Marxist ideology, atheist critiques of religion changed across the decades of Soviet rule, in response to varied local religious landscapes and to the puzzle of why religious attachments persisted in a socialist society. Based on archival research on atheist propaganda in the multi-religious Volga region from the 1950s to

the 1970s, this paper examines the possibilities and limits for sophisticated views of religion to emerge in an explicitly atheist framework, and asks what light this process may shed on contemporary anthropological debates on the role of affect in social research. Postwar Soviet scholars and propagandists shifted their critique from ideas of religious commitment as based on ignorance or evil intentions to a link between religiosity and social isolation. Tracing the ways in which a variety of research, educational, and political institutions studied religion under the mandate of restricting or destroying its conditions of possibility, I argue that their antagonistic stance toward their object of study certainly colored their findings, but also motivated them to pay much closer attention to the practices and words of religious believers than older versions of Marxist historical teleologies would have warranted. In trying to define the harm of religion more precisely, atheist scholars came to focus on tensions between religious practice and social life that some theories of religion overlook more easily, showing that hostility and antagonism can be as powerful (and as limiting) a driving force for insight as empathy and support.

Discourses of Atheist and Humanist Identity in Britain.

Lorna Mumford (University College London)

Recent research studies in the US have highlighted the existence of a politically motivated sub-cultural community comprised of atheists and humanists, who utilise strategies of identity politics and minority discourse in their campaigns for equal social and political rights. Despite internal divergence and disagreement among the varying groups and organisations promoting the need for an increased secularisation of American social and political order, the numerous secular publications and internet forums devoted to these issues suggest it is possible to talk in terms of an 'imagined secular community'. Employing the "lateral appropriation" of discourse terminology usually associated with the homosexual struggle for equal rights, such as 'coming out of the closet' and 'proud to be atheist', atheists and humanists are able to adopt an easily recognised identity expressive of an oppressed marginal status. Despite the official separation of church in state in US politics it is clear that members of atheist and humanist organisations regard themselves as occupying a minority position within society and currently engaged in the negotiation of a "project identity". Britain has no official requirement for the separation of religion and politics, and the Church of England continues to maintain a position of privilege within British political institutions. It would therefore seem reasonable to expect the existence of a similar sub-cultural community based on opposition to religious privilege in the UK. However, initial observations suggest that, while such a community can be identified, in both its 'imagined' form via publications and the internet, and in a more 'real' form through local meeting groups and national organisations, British atheists and humanists are less inclined to employ these "lateral appropriations" of minority identity terms within their discourses. Instead discourses among atheists and humanists are more often focused on issues related to science, reason and rationality. This paper will be the outcome of a short research study among atheists and humanists in London. Through attendance at events and meetings held by the British Humanist Association, participant observation at local atheist and humanist meeting groups, questionnaires and follow-up interviews, it attempts to identify the dominant themes of discourse among British atheists and humanists. From these discourses I hope to develop some understanding of the ways people describe and experience their

atheist and humanist identity in Britain, to discover their own conception of their status as non-religious individuals and their attitudes toward the role of religion in British social and political life.

Confessional Anthropology

Galina Oustanova-Stjepanovic

When an atheist anthropologist embarks on the research of a religious tradition, s/he is encouraged to follow one methodological tip. Suspension of disbelief is a method that should enable an anthropologist to take different religious ideas and practices seriously. However, I would like to question the taken-for-granted connection between atheism and belief. I suggest that the pairing of atheism and belief obscures the performative quality of people's religiosities and of participant observation. Drawing on my experiences of a jinn exorcism, I will try to explore if atheism (and secularism) might be a powerful acquired disposition that includes not only cognitive but also physical and emotive inhibitions to being religious. In this case, the task of an anthropologist might entail not only strategic 'believing' in a particular religious idea but also coping with the threatening encroachment of religion on one's self. In the end I would like to ask if, instead of being suspended, dispositional atheism of an anthropologist and the secular foundational principles of anthropology can be productively put into a comparative framework with the theological assumptions and theistic practices of our religiously-motivated interlocutors.

Secular missionaries or phonies? Old Believers' moral dilemmas in (post)socialist Romania

Vlad Naumescu (Central European University Budapest)

In spite of the prominence of the secular-religious debate in the world today, aligning historical, political, ethical and scientific arguments on both sides, there is hardly any consideration of its different development in the socialist context and its aftermath. The secularizing efforts of socialist states combined antireligious campaigns with scientific atheism to form rational subjects-citizens for whom religion was a superstition of the past. The success of this massive enterprise is highly debatable as witnessed by the religious revival that followed, with old and new ideologies proclaimed, refuted and constantly negotiated in everyday life, leaving both people and anthropologists confused by the sudden shifts in individual commitments. This paper navigates through such confusions looking at how Old Believers have dealt with the different 'regimes of truth' in socialist and postsocialist Romania. Their struggle to maintain an ascetic Orthodox culture in the midst of an intrusive atheist state was at odds with the sudden urge to join a modernizing project that aimed at collective good. The demise of socialism gave them the chance to start anew, most often through a return to the old. Looking at two exemplary biographies the paper reveals Old Believers' attempts to shape their lives through ethical action rather than strong convictions or belief.