

Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts
November 22 – 24 University of Ottawa
Report by Leo Van Arragon

The workshop, *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, a SSHRC funded event under the *Religion and Diversity Project*, was organized by Lori Beaman and Steven Tomlins and attracted scholars from the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada to share research on atheism.

Session One of the workshop opened with a lecture in the Critical Thinkers in Religion, Law and Social Theory lecture series (hosted by Beaman's Canada Research Chair) entitled "The Church on the Margins: Religion and Atheism in a Secular Age" by William Stahl of Luther College at the University of Regina. Drawing on the work of Charles Taylor, Stahl suggested that mainstream churches are institutional relics of the Age of Mobilization and that fundamentalism is a backlash against the Age of Authenticity. He went on to propose the New Atheists as both an expression of and a reaction against the Age of Authenticity. The New Atheism is an expression of post-modern authenticity in its emphasis on the individual as the ultimate source of moral authority while simultaneously reacting against the erosion of faith in science in a post-modern cultural climate. Stahl's remarks generated a lively discussion and set the stage for the two day workshop on Friday and Saturday.

The second session of the workshop was "The Socialization Processes of Religious 'Nones'" which included papers by Amarnath Amarasingam (Wilfrid Laurier University), Lorna Mumford (University College, London) and Christopher Cotter (New College, University of Edinburgh). Amarasingam's paper, "The Cultural, the Nominal and the Secular: the Social Reality of Religious Identity among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada" examined identity labels in the Sri Lankan diaspora. His research reveals the overlapping and sometimes conflicted religious, national, cultural and ethnic identities of Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Canada, made more complex by the pressures of war.

Mumford's research in London examines the motivations of people who leave religious traditions, sharing her data and conclusions in her paper, "Living Nonreligious Identity in London". Her research participants gave emotional and political reasons for rejecting religion, referring to a particular moment when they realized religion no longer fit into their lives and a growing perception that religion was serving political ends which they rejected.

Cotter's paper, "Without gods yet not without nuance", proposed an analytic typology for the study of atheism to address the concern that atheism is generally defined in terms of religion. His categories to account for the variety of experience within atheism included "naturalistic", "humanistic", "spiritual", "familial", and "philosophical" emerging out of his field work about atheist youth in Edinburgh.

The third session in the workshop, entitled "Living Atheism", included papers by Richard Cimino (Hofstra University) and Steven Tomlins (University of Ottawa). In his paper, "Secular and Atheist Solidarity", Cimino addressed the tendency among atheist movements to cultivate more coherent atheist rituals and to develop a "more friendly face" but he also identified the contest within atheism over identity and strategy of engagement with American society. The challenge has been to meld "free thinkers" into a coherent movement for political and social purposes.

Tomlins shared his research on the question, "why do atheists join groups?" in his paper entitled "Atheist Communities", finding that the need for a "safe place" to discuss important

issues with people of like mind was the most important reason cited by his participants. Unlike Cimino, he did not find his participants in Ottawa reporting a high level of hostility and asked if there are national or regional differences in the ways atheists experience and respond to their social worlds.

The fourth session, “Atheism and Youth”, included papers by Peter Beyer (University of Ottawa) and Spencer Bullivant (University of Ottawa), sharing their field research on issues relating to identity formation and identity categories among a variety of groups.

Beyer’s paper was entitled “From Atheist to Spiritual to Religious: Straddling Boundaries among the Second Generation of post-1970 Immigrants in Canada”. Beyer stated that, while categories used to describe religious experience suggest clear and often opposing differences, his research demonstrates that categories are “muddy” and overlapping. His research participants draw on different religious traditions so that they are not “either –or” but rather “both- and”. There is more interest in morality and spirituality which blurs the lines of religious difference with more critical distance from any one religious tradition.

Bullivant shared his finding among atheist youth based on his research at CampQuest in Montana in his paper, “Atheist Summer Camps: Transitioning Away from Conceptions of Dis-Belief to Belief”. His observation was that CampQuest demonstrates a trend within atheism away from the critique of religion as a defining characteristic to a more positive identity and community. This trend represents a challenge to the idea that religion is essential for morality and for happiness. It also raised the interesting issue of conceptualizing belief without reference to religion and to the social space for atheism in an environment where religion is a normative category.

The fifth session, “Atheist Identities” featured papers by Lori Beaman (University of Ottawa), Steve LeDrew (York University) and Ryan Cragun (University of Tampa) who examined theoretical and methodological issues relating to the study of atheism.

In her paper “Freedom of and Freedom from Religion: Atheist involvement in case law”, Beaman approached these issues in an examination of case law. She used *Lautsi v. Italy* to demonstrate that legal cases play an important role in exposing the pervasive role of religion in public spaces and the role of media in portraying atheists in negative ways. However, examination of legal cases calls for more comprehensive research into questions of the role of religion and the secular in society, as well as the nature of a secular society. She pointed to the shifting uses of religious and cultural categories for particular purposes, examples of which included the description of the crucifix as cultural and historical rather than religious to refute Ms. Lautsi’s claims of religious coercion and Jeffrey Miller’s description of the Bible as “innocent of intention” in the debates over the distribution of Bibles in Ontario public schools by Gideon International.

Steve LeDrew’s paper, “Atheism vs Humanism: Ideological Tension and Identity Dynamics in the Atheist movements”, positioned atheism as an historical and political phenomenon with inner tensions between “Scientific Atheism” and “Humanistic Atheism”. The former has its roots and draws its inspiration from Enlightenment Rationalism and Darwinism with science replacing religion as an engine of progress. Humanistic atheism, on the other hand, is rooted in the social sciences, seeing religion as an irrational social reaction to social conditions. Religion has a necessary, if unfortunate, role driven not by ignorance, but by concerns for justice and social change. The two forms of atheism are competing political projects divided over confrontation with or accommodation to a society dominated by religion.

LeDrew positioned the New Atheism as a development of Scientific Atheism with a more hostile reaction to religion.

Ryan Cragun shared his analysis of the Pew Foundation's USA Religious Landscape Survey driven by his research questions "how many new atheists are there in America?" and "who are they?". He relied on the answers to the survey questions about belief in an afterlife, view of evolution and view of the Bible to conclude that New Atheists comprise about 80% of the total number of atheists. He also concluded that white males are by far the dominant demographic in the category of New Atheists, leading to further questions of why that might be so.

The workshop concluded with a 2 hour plenary discussion of research results, theoretical models and research methods and suggestions for further research topics. The workshop demonstrated that these topics are of considerable research interest and future cooperation among scholars to refine both theory and method in the study of atheism and non-religion.