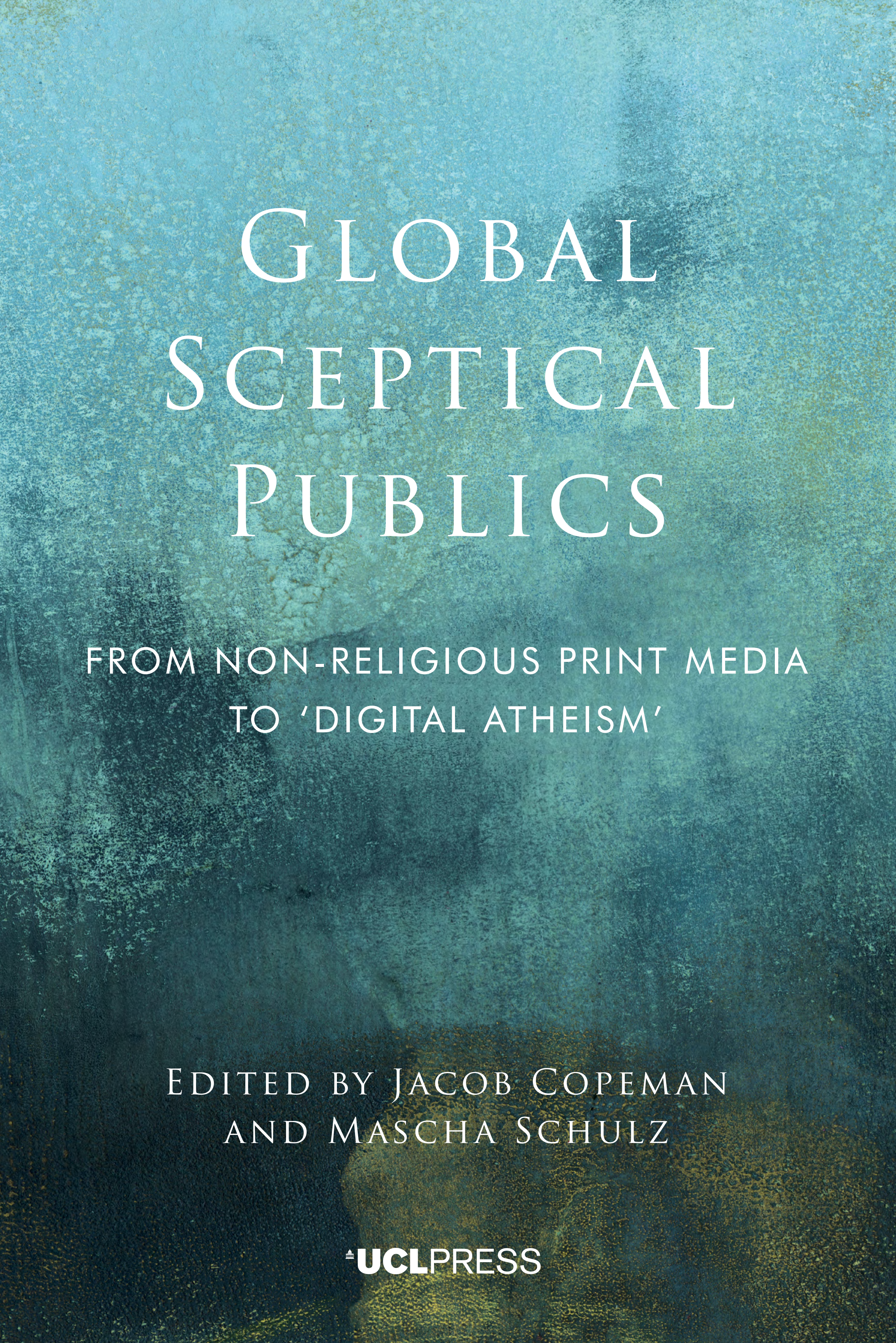

GLOBAL SCEPTICAL PUBLICS

FROM NON-RELIGIOUS PRINT MEDIA TO 'DIGITAL ATHEISM'

EDITED BY JACOB COPEMAN
AND MASCHA SCHULZ

UCLPRESS

Global Sceptical Publics

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Notes on contributors

Stefan Binder is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies (ISEK), University of Zurich. He has published on secular activism and lived atheism in South India and on the aesthetic production of multiple temporalities in the context of Shi'i mourning rituals and media practices in Hyderabad. He is currently developing a research project on ethics and generational change in queer and trans communities in South Asia and Europe.

Joseph Blankholm is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *The Secular Paradox: On the religiosity of the not religious* (New York University Press, 2022). His research focuses on secularism, atheism and religious change.

Frank Bosman is Senior Researcher at the Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Tilburg University. He is currently involved in multiple research projects concerning cultural theology and video games. He has published various articles on theology and gaming in journals such as *Games and Culture*, *Gamevironments* and *Online: Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, and the series Studies in Theology and Religion. Further key publications include *Gaming and the Divine: A new systematic theology of video games* (Routledge, 2019) and, as editor, *The Sacred & the Digital: Critical depictions of religions in video games* (Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, 2019).

James Bradbury completed his PhD in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester in 2019. His doctoral dissertation, entitled 'Hinduism and the Left: Searching for the secular in post-communist Kolkata', was based on fieldwork in parts of the city that were settled by Hindu refugees from what is now Bangladesh, and which became bastions of the regional communist movement. Through these neighbourhoods, the thesis explored the city's distinct formulations of secularism, as well as how they have begun to transform in the post-communist period. He is now the editor for Synaps, a research and training organisation based in Beirut, Lebanon. (ORCID: 0000-0002-7501-244X.)

Eric Chalfant is Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Film & Media at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. He received his PhD in Religion and Modernity from Duke University in 2016. He also has an MA in Religious Studies from Wake Forest University, NC (2011) and a BA in Religious Studies from Whitman College, WA (2008). He has previously taught at Portland Community College, OR and Elon University, NC. His current research unearths the affective elements underlying the history of atheist uses of media in the United States from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries.

Jacob Copeman is Research Professor, University of Santiago de Compostela, and Distinguished Researcher (Oportunius). His most recent monograph, co-authored with Dwaipayan Banerjee, is *Hematologies: The political life of blood in India* (Cornell University Press, 2019). His most recent edited collection, co-edited with Giovanni da Col, is *Fake: Anthropological keywords* (HAU Books, 2018). He is principal investigator of the ERC-funded project 'Religion and its others in South Asia and the world: Communities, debates, freedoms'.

Neelabh Gupta is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh. His work focuses on digital media and atheism in North India, exploring various ways in which the lives of non-religious individuals are joined together by digital media. His primary research interests are media, non-religion and visual cultures.

John Hagström is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh. His research is on apostate refugees – atheist, humanist, rationalist and other non-religious asylum seekers in England and Scotland – with a concomitant focus on the various organisations and networks that support them. More broadly, his research interests include secularisation, ethics and morality, wonder, and non-religious movements worldwide. He is co-author of 'The absence of the divine' (*HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2018). (ORCID: 0000-0002-6902-8197.)

Pierre Hecker is Senior Researcher and Lecturer at the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies at the Philipps University of Marburg. He holds a PhD from Leipzig University and is the author of the book *Turkish Metal: Music, meaning, and morality in a Muslim society* (Ashgate, 2012). Recent publications include 'Islam: The meaning of style' (*Sociology of*

Islam, 2018) and 'The "Arab Spring" and the end of Turkish democracy', in E. Mohamed and D. Fahmy (eds) *Arab Spring: Critical political theory and radical practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He heads the research group 'Atheism and the politics of culture in contemporary Turkey' funded by Stiftung Mercator, and co-edited the volume *The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Turkey* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

Natalie Khazaal (PhD, UCLA) is Associate Professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology and an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) fellow for her work on Arab atheists. She has contributed to the topic of atheism with publications on the use of pseudonyms by Arab atheists and the embedded atheism in Mohamed Choukri's literary oeuvre. Her latest books, *Pretty Liar: Television, language, and gender in wartime Lebanon* (Syracuse University Press, 2018), which studies how audiences affect media legitimacy during violent crises, and her co-edited volume on borders and the displacement of human refugees and non-human animals, *'Like an Animal': Critical animal studies approaches to borders, displacement, and othering* (Brill, 2020), explore different forms of disenfranchisement.

Evelina Lundmark holds a postdoctoral position at Agder University in Norway, where she studies the intersection of Christian nominalism, Scandinavian secularism and national identity in relation to public broadcasting and children's television. She holds a PhD from the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University, where she looked at how atheist women and gender-queer people speak about their unbelief in a US context on YouTube. Her research interests lie in the areas of non-religion and secular studies, digital religion, gender studies and critical theory. She has previously researched how religion is negotiated in discussions on reddit.com/r/atheism, worked within the Understanding Unbelief programme based at the University of Kent, and collaborated on projects that explored the modern graveyard in Sweden and examined how the Swedish Christian magazine *Vår Lösen* impacted on the daily press during Anne-Marie Thunberg's tenure as editor-in-chief.

David Nash is Professor of History at Oxford Brookes University. He has published monographs in the areas of blasphemy, secularism and secularisation and on British criminal history, and is an internationally renowned specialist in the history of blasphemy in Europe and the English-speaking world. He has also published *Cultures of Shame: Exploring crime and morality in Britain 1600–1900* (with Anne-Marie Kilday) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Johannes Quack is Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Zurich. He is the author of *Disenchanting India: Organized rationalism and criticism of religion in India* (Oxford University Pres, 2012). He co-authored the book *The Diversity of Nonreligion: Normativities and contested relations* (Routledge, 2020), and co-edited the volumes *The Problem of Ritual Efficacy* (OUP, 2010), *Religion und Kritik in der Moderne* (LIT, 2012), *Asymmetrical Conversations: Contestations, circumventions and the blurring of therapeutic boundaries* (Berghahn, 2014) and *Religious indifference* (Springer, 2017), and he co-edits the book series Religion and Its Others: Studies in religion, nonreligion, and secularity (De Gruyter).

Lena Richter is a PhD researcher at Radboud University, Nijmegen. She has a background in anthropology and migration studies, with a regional specialisation in the Maghreb. As part of the Mediating Islam in the Digital Age (MIDA) project, she conducts qualitative research about the experiences of non-believers in Morocco and the Moroccan diaspora. Her research explores how the less religious urban youth normalise this taboo topic, by using humour, embracing a 'liberal' lifestyle and narrating their experiences online.

Mascha Schulz is a postdoctoral research fellow on the ERC project 'Religion and its others in South Asia and the world (ROSA)' and is based in the Department of Anthropology of Politics and Governance, at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle. She is a political anthropologist currently working at the intersection of politics, economics and non-religion. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in urban Sylhet (Bangladesh), she is working on a book titled *Cultivating Secularity: Politics, embodiment and criticism of religion in Bangladesh*. She has also published on the state, political parties and student politics in South Asia. (ORCID: 0000-0002-9053-5134.)

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From campaign and dispute to 'public service broad/narrowcasting': secularist and atheist media strategies in Britain and America – a contextual history

David Nash

This chapter investigates the long and varied history of atheists and freethinkers in Britain and America and their attempts to communicate amongst themselves and to a wider world. This history is traced through the development of this phenomenon within the British and American contexts, stretching roughly from the French Revolution to the present. In doing so it focuses upon atheist and secularist forms of resistance to organised Christianity and uses exclusively English-language sources.

Commencing with the philosophies developed as a result of Enlightenment ideals – which cultivated freedom of speech and expression – the chapter investigates how these ideas were put into practice, from the first few generations of nineteenth-century campaigners right through to contemporary atheist/freethinking use of media. It analyses their adoption of new media technologies (from pamphlets and, subsequently, newspapers and books, to multiple and various online presences) and of changing styles and narratives. Many of these technologies have been related to specific tactics as well as to the confrontation of perceived evils and ills, whilst some have been replies to the specific 'provocation' of opponents and authority. These narratives have also been determined to showcase the exposure of error and 'gullibility', creating and disseminating alternative viewpoints. What emerges from this study is that the various analyses which see digital communication as a sea change in both approach and opportunity for atheist/freethinkers/secularists significantly overstate the case. In elaborating a long-term history of one particular context for atheism and communications strategies it is hoped to provide opportunities for comparison with different contexts, histories and possibilities.

The chapter assesses the relative successes and failures of different media strategies by emphasising the tensions that came with them for atheists and freethinkers. How did atheists resolve the tensions between the private quietism of some unbelievers and the urge to proselytise and create public controversy, alongside the personalities who inspired both approaches? When was it appropriate to convert and when was it appropriate to speak to the converted? How did media aid or hinder these objectives? How were media utilised in the different strategies of work on single issues and, alternatively, the broad front of undermining religion's control of state, cultural and social institutions? Lastly, how did the use of media alter around discussions about whether atheism would overturn religion, or widen its constituency to colonise a 'market share' of belief/unbelief? Fundamentally, resolving such tensions often came down to less than obvious choices about whether atheists should be broadcasting or narrowcasting. Whilst these strategies were always in debate, the wider assertion of rights and identities resembles the 'talking back to power' described by Richter in this volume.

Such a contextual history is necessary because too many writers on contemporary atheism and its strategies view the problems and possibilities created by new media as a novelty that possesses no prehistory. Too often they fail to look beyond the arrival of the modern cyber age and its technological breakthroughs and forms. This outlook has a tendency to cite the contemporary world as having foisted a sudden and unwilling engagement with communications technology for the first time upon atheist and secularist groups. Cimino and Smith, for example, described contemporary atheists in America as 'creating an alternative ethos and discourse, using social media to "talk back" to society whilst "speaking with" one another' (Cimino and Smith 2014, 2). The medium's tools and mechanisms have even, by these same analysts, been seen as moulding and shaping the nature of unbelief itself (Smith and Cimino 2012).

Tracing the very existence of what we would now call atheists, agnostics and freethinkers becomes more fraught with difficulty for historians the further back they go. Their visibility scarcely breaks the surface for a host of reasons. Such a gap and silence meant that Lucien Febvre was persuaded that religious culture was so all-encompassing and pervasive that medieval and early modern atheism was actually impossible (Febvre 1985).

Such a conclusion seems scarcely credible, and it is not the purpose of this chapter to probe this particular historical conundrum any further. However, the current existence of this absence of visibility is pertinent to our investigation of atheist communications strategies. Historians are still uncovering hidden religious congregations that function under the radar when the prevailing religious regime is unfavourable to their cause, such as the previously unknown continuation of the émigré 'Stranger' Church in Marian London (MacCulloch 1999, 182). Even religious congregations that surface when the situation is favourable are often found to have had an 'illegal' prehistory. With atheists and freethinkers such a situation is impossible to replicate. Congregations, groups, families and even perhaps the concept of 'like-minded individuals' do not exist for atheists until modernity. The evidence we have is of what we might call 'opinion'. This is portrayed as something at least semi-private, and conspicuous to the individual consciousness only of those who hold such opinions (Royle 1974, 12–16). We might here think about how this privacy is replicated elsewhere in this volume, where there are some very different examples of how dissident opinions are deliberately hidden from scrutiny as a protective measure. This can be simple self-defence, or the careful protection and possible nurturing of dissident opinion still at an early stage of development.

The solitariness of those individuals is reinforced partly by the history and historiography of unorthodox belief and unbelief. Carlo Ginzburg's investigation of an early modern Friulian miller emphasised his sustained learning and outlook, the creation of a strange heterodox universe deduced from the collision of reading, observation and sustained thinking (Ginzburg 2013). Yet this individual stepped out of the darkness into the historical record when made to speak through court records. Such appearances before the law are probably our most important evidence of religious dissent. For the medieval and early modern period this has been crucial for detecting such opinions, ranging from heresy to what later becomes nonconformity. It is also significant because it highlights the importance of blasphemy and blasphemy cases, demonstrating places where the orthodox objected to the behaviour and speech acts of others (Bradlaugh Bonner 1934). Although blasphemy was for much of the time unwitting, it sometimes emerges from these episodes, especially from the seventeenth century onwards, as a deliberate method of communication.

What, for obvious reasons, is left hanging is the question of how representative Ginzburg's miller and his desire to build his own intellectual universe may have been in practice. Were there others out there whose self-imposed sceptical quietism left no trace in the historical record? Similarly, the episodic appearance of a work of biblical criticism, or critique of organised religion, might break the surface much later, in the later seventeenth or early eighteenth century. But our history tells us of the author whose prosecution or pariah status further emphasised their isolation, both to contemporaries and to subsequent historians. Such individuals are plucked from their time, recorded and returned to it as individualistic milestones in the history of unbelief (Bradlaugh Bonner 1934, 33–8).

It is not the purpose of this chapter to investigate this lacuna/dark figure, but this prehistory of unbelief makes a fundamentally important point about the vitality of communications for unbelievers themselves, and for historians trying to uncover their history. Unbelievers only leave significant traces of themselves when they interact through communication that often bridges significant distances. Until the nineteenth century there was almost no interactive communal life that could remotely have resembled the congregations of their Christian counterparts. All communication between atheists was via the spoken word and through written communication, often constructed as material to reach an unknown or imagined audience, something Lundmark and Khazaal have both noted in this volume in relation to atheism's contemporary history. Thus communication has historically been central to the identity of unbelievers since 1800, and we must be aware of how, for historians, this creates a slightly lopsided story. Such a narrative probably tells us too readily about places where the vocal and articulate predominate at the expense of the silent and the silences. The latter emphatically may not represent assent to any belief system, religious or otherwise, and certainly do not represent an empty space. However, this visibility of 'speaking out' within unbelieving circles has itself influenced an ongoing desire to reach out to the 'imagined audience'. This 'imagined audience' for atheist, freethinking and humanist ideas has been a driving force behind many initiatives and activities. It has also been defined and redefined at significant moments in unbelief's past. This driving force has also, at times, created a tension between outward-looking proselytising, informing and campaigning and the desire to fortify existing unbelievers against a world often ranged against them.

Forging the imagined audience

The Deism- and Enlightenment-inspired critiques of religion were quite often shaped to appeal to an 'imagined audience'. Thomas Paine's own prose style was testament to his desire to popularise critiques of established religion, which became eminently quotable to his immediate contemporaries. His writings also became accessibly readable and memorable through the republication of his central text (*The Age of Reason*); subsequent editions made conversions to unbelief even after the Second World War. In the 1820s a generation led by Richard Carlile was prosecuted for blasphemy and sedition for republishing Paine's works, amongst other texts (Carlile 1821). The principle at stake for Carlile, and for other defendants such as Susannah Wright, was the power of free speech to transform society. In court they saw the attempts to censor and silence their opinions as an affront and an assault upon reason and the Enlightenment ideal of free and unfettered discussion (Carlile 1825). This combination fused the unbelievers' enduring link with arguments for free speech. Carlile and his acolytes believed that publishing their writings on monarchy, the clergy and biblical criticism was self-evidently a social good. Hence preventing the publication was harmfully repressive. In many courtroom defences they stated that if the government and its supporters could clearly demonstrate that their writings and opinions were causing widespread harm they would immediately desist from publishing them (Carlile 1822, 11–12). This was not a rhetorical question, since it was an appeal to their imagined audience, which would encounter such opinions, defendants believed, simply because they had been made available.

Such beliefs were also put into action in the behaviour of these defendants in the courtroom, with the elaborately stage-managed reading of defences that involved lengthy extracts, and attempts to read whole texts that were central to accusations against them. These disseminated such opinions to the court's public gallery, and those present were entertained by rebukes aimed at prosecuting counsel and the presiding judge. Such verbal 'republication' of these opinions and arguments from texts reached beyond the courtroom, since they fished for further 'republication' in court reports that found their way into some newspapers. This determination to communicate was further enhanced by Carlile's own publishing venture, which republished the reports of court cases in pamphlet form (Carlile 1821, 1822, 1825; Nash 1999, 84–8). These cases were sometimes published together, whilst others were singled out for individual publication when an especially important rhetorical point had to be made. Although these publications reached out to the 'imagined audience', the number of individuals prepared to face prosecution for publishing and selling Carlile's numerous works indicated that there was a significant community of the like-minded.

These like-minded, as we have discovered, initially appeared, in the eighteenth century, to be scattered and dispersed. Although the isolated atheist was an archetype that would continue into the early twentieth century, in the nineteenth century some different common characteristics began to emerge. Unbelievers, not surprisingly, consumed print culture avidly, and sometimes it is possible to believe that some unbelievers were drawn into this cultural world specifically through their consumption of texts. This perhaps explains why we encounter, in equal measure, sudden conversion from Christianity and a more long-term 'falling away'. Many working-class unbelievers were thus part of an autodidact world in which the possession and consumption of texts became a central aspect of unbelieving culture. Ensuring the ready availability and distribution of such texts became something of an enduring preoccupation within the wider movement (Royle 1980, 131–2).

By the third quarter of the nineteenth century unbelief had fused into more sophisticated ideological positions, notably the ideology of secularism, which offered degrees of protection to its adherents by creating an ideology which appeared to outside observers to be like modern agnosticism (Rectenwald 2018). This ideology was able to create a movement culture that craved lectures and expositions of new ideological developments. These could be in such areas as biblical criticism, biology, politics and the emerging social sciences. In counterpoint to this was a more metropolitan and visible campaigning culture centred on the person of Charles Bradlaugh and his various crusades to gain citizenship rights for unbelievers (Royle 1980, 12–18, 23–8, 263–71). For this branch of the movement communications focused upon the speeches and on their republication in various forms. Where the pamphlet form was used this genre owed a great deal to the lecturing format, with a plethora of rhetorical questions and assured assertiveness about the arguments and their presentation. Both sides of this divide would frequently come together in both the capital and provincial contexts to involve themselves in disputing the truth of the Bible with Christian debaters (Royle 1980, 150–5). These events were immensely popular; they could straddle several nights of speech and counter-speech, and attract considerable attention and surprisingly large crowds. Through the medium of questions from the floor, and audience engagement with the speeches, individuals were invited to 'use' the fruits of atheist culture communicated to them as a method of repelling attacks upon their identity. Such events could be contests of moral superiority in which speakers like Bradlaugh were forced to defend individuals like Carlile and Paine from accusations of immorality, and from accusations that their doctrines were the clear source of crime within society (Bradlaugh Bonner 1894, 158–60).

This period also saw the growth of a mature secularist press that had titles to reflect the philosophical and thoughtful end of the movement, such as *The Secular Review* and the *Agnostic*, as well as the more politically hard-edged campaigning periodicals such as the *National Reformer*. Each could be counted on to display a range of sensibilities in asking and seeking to answer religion's central questions. For example, discussions of the historical Jesus and his resurrection could range from outright denial of these events to a more moderate discussion of their precise importance. Beyond such philosophical discussions, a niche market in lampoon and scurrility would also, episodically, serve the individual purposes of the movement and the agenda of specific editors. This press presence was a further appeal to the 'imagined audience' through communication to the isolated, living, perhaps covertly, in an otherwise Christian and believing landscape. Such newspapers would contain news of the national movement as well as records of poorly behaved clergy, or instances where it detected that Christianity was found wanting in its stewardship of everyday life. Letters pages carried echoes back from that audience, often with similar stories. Many communications displayed isolated atheists reaching out to a national movement when sickness drove them to create final statements of their enduring unbelief. These statements were portrayed as courageous attempts to thwart spurious deathbed conversion stories (Nash 1995).

Occasionally, papers like the *Freethinker*, the *Jerusalem Star* and in the Edwardian period the *Truthseeker*, adopted genres of writing and illustration that were designed to push free speech onto a collision course with prosecution in the form of blasphemy (discussed below). These episodes saw communication as a means of creating offence in those believers who experienced a casual encounter with such material. There is evidence that comic lampoons of Christianity and its beliefs were fleetingly amusing to some unbelievers whilst creating discomfort in others. In genres like this the Freethought movement confronted the dilemma of whether communications media should be used to enrich the lives of adherents, or whether to submerge this aspect in favour of their potentially campaigning impact (Nash 1999, 107–17).

Publishing why and how? The world of the cheap edition

By the end of the nineteenth century the metropolitan secular organisations had become especially keen to promote published editions of important works. This keenness was a tacit admission that the days of the lecture platform were largely over, and that very cheap consumption of the printed word and its messages was a real alternative. By this time lecture audiences had fused into the committed unfaithful, meaning that casual engagement with others and the possibility of conversion had become less likely. Again, this development seems to reflect the passing of attractive and strident personalities with high-profile campaigns and visible agendas. This campaigning competed (again) with a more quietist agenda that sought dissent and criticism which was more considered, whilst providing content and comfort to the stable membership. To a large extent such publishing had to replace the aspirations of the lecture platform, which always entertained the idea of reaching a wider audience, whether in oral or printed form. The quest for sustained cheap publishing seemed a logical next step which might yet offer the desirable possibility of pleasing both constituencies.

In Britain one outcome of this quest was the Rationalist Press Association (RPA), which ambitiously hoped to be an important means of projecting secular and rational ideas into the wider community. Whilst this was an innovation, it sought to shape reading habits by focusing on the human sciences, echoing the message that Paine and Carlile had advanced in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In the latter part of the same century, a concentration on these subjects appeared valid. This was because they had seemingly been in the forefront of the erosion of Christianity's authority as an objective truth, alongside critiques of its authority over the governance of behaviour. The time also felt right because such a concentration could capitalise on the impact of Christianity's own 'fifth column', those who had produced English translations of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*, *Essays and Reviews* and *Lux Mundi.* The RPA's publishing initiatives actively wanted not just to inform but also to create a predisposition to distrust beliefs and embrace reason (Whyte 1949, vii). The human sciences offered the chance to benefit the whole of society, both on their own terms and as the most potent weapon against religion's claims. These strategic goals assisted the movement's desire to move from 'guerrilla warfare to a full scale campaign' (Whyte 1949, 2).

The RPA readily utilised the publishing experience and skills of those who remained from the heyday of secularist newspaper publishing, chiefly Charles A. Watts (1858–1946), the former editor of Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer.* Watts was also responsible for the creation of a highbrow newspaper, *Watts' Literary Guide*, which was designed to reach the opinion-forming classes, and eventually morphed into the modern magazine *New Humanist.* A changed emphasis on new subjects also vied with repolishing and republishing elements of the past, almost in an attempt to create an alternative history and canon. So human sciences competed for attention, to an extent, with biographies of past great thinkers in a secular and humanist tradition. These latter publications would be leavened with the occasional individual publishing success story, such as John Mackinnon Robertson's *Christianity and Mythology*, which (trading on his wider reputation) went through several editions.

The RPA, at least for a while, relied on word of mouth, unofficial forms of promotion, and casual encounter with its contents for its success. To all intents and purposes the organisation had become a 'book club', financed by modest sales and Association subscriptions. The aspiration to reach the wider world came when the RPA was able to publish jointly with Macmillan when they released a reprint of T. H. Huxley's *Essays and Lectures.* It quickly became a success story, selling out a first edition and a hasty second reprint (over 40,000 copies). To some extent this desire to publish popular works became a wider trend in 1928 when the RPA embarked upon the ambitious venture of producing the particularly eye-catching concept of the 'Thinker's Library'. It showcased what the RPA considered to be 'classics of rationalism' from such writers as J. S. Mill, Herbert Spencer, H. G. Wells, Charles Darwin and T. H. Huxley. These editions carefully trod the line between being distinctively stylish and being cheap, and were sold from an attractive, bespoke display cabinet which could be purchased by enterprising booksellers. The series offered a renewed opportunity to revisit the autodidact complete education of Secularism's forebears, and allowed for pick-and-mix reading habits or chance discovery. Eventually the effort put into these initiatives meant that Christianity itself, in the interwar period, often bemoaned the fact that, for the layperson seeking to educate themselves, the best introductions to many of the sciences were penned by atheists. This left the Church lagging behind in its potential explanatory power over the modern world. For this reason atheist publication strategies in the first third of the twentieth century had some degree of ideological success.

Nonetheless, as a business proposition the RPA was occasionally a liability and to many seemed stuck in a time warp, repeating the publication of Victorian and Edwardian material that was unable to speak to the modern generation in their twenties, an audience which the secular and later humanist movement sorely needed.

The Open Society unfolded

The interwar period saw humanism in Britain interact with the ideas of Karl Popper and his concept of the 'Open Society'. The BHA later expressed this fundamental principle in the following terms:

> The Open Society is the name given to a society which respects all viewpoints and traditions present in it and in which the ideas of democracy are extended to include a much expanded participation of individuals in decision making and the conduct of affairs. It is the antithesis of the authoritarian society.
>
> (British Humanist Association 1972)

This ideology was ostensibly formed in response to the episodic success of tyrannical regimes in the 1930 and 1940s, and appeared to be a tacit admission that societies 'closed' to debate and progressive ideas had fallen into totalitarianism. Popper's 'Open Society' was thus an attempt to enrich debate and actively encourage the spread of the participatory element within politics and other decision-making processes. Moral education was to be an important tool and would be shaped to create an expectation that institutions would be 'shared' by all, rather than dominated by specific interests. The secular humanist movement in Britain only fully adopted the 'Open Society' manifesto meaningfully in the 1960s. For those who embraced these ideas communications media seemed to have a crucial role in furthering this cause. Moreover, the 'Open Society's' belief in what had been surrendered to tyranny made communications media almost into a commodity, something to be possessed, or at least not surrendered so readily to malevolent forces.

The 'Open Society' concept did create a belief that access to the media would enable a sharing of this common good, whilst also safeguarding its appropriate use. This belief became a de facto commitment to a strategy of seeking the right to 'broadcast' alongside other denominations and religious positions. Judged on these terms the secular and humanist movements were always likely to come away disappointed. In the immediate post-war period humanists who did manage to enter the media (such as Jacob Bronowski, Bernard Williams and Bertrand Russell) did so largely on the strength of their reputations in other spheres. When in the media spotlight they were closely chaperoned and were refused the right to speak openly on secularist or humanist matters. The summing up in such programmes also had a supervised and invariably Christian bias. In 1959 a Humanist Broadcasting Council was formed to discuss permitting secular and humanist issues to be debated on public service broadcasting. Debate was all that ensued except for isolated programming victories. To this day humanist viewpoints are absent from BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*. Likewise, equality would not come from elbowing aside the practitioners of religious broadcasting in the hope of 'sharing' this important institution. Instead the collapse of enthusiasm for sabbatarian restrictions on Sunday broadcasting and the waning interest in religious broadcasting would turn it into a niche interest, one to be catered for alongside others as though it were a minority rather than a priority. Whilst the power and influence within public service broadcasting was narrowly held in a few hands, and the audience for its products was significantly captive, the quest for equality appeared to make clear and obvious sense. When eventually this situation became democratised by technological change, and its falling cost, new strategies and priorities would emerge.

Cyber scepticism: embracing the community *and* campaigning

Investigating atheist online presence in the late 1990s, I could see the gradual adoption of the new technology and its possibilities in the United States (Nash 2002). What was striking about this situation was its mirroring of the situation and problems of the nineteenth-century atheist movement in Britain. The Secular Web acted as a repository of many classic and standard atheistical texts which could be downloaded and printed, providing the possible apotheosis of the 'cheap edition' concept which the Rationalist Press Association struggled for so long to get right. The campaigning impetus was catered for with web links to the main freethought periodicals. Whereas in the nineteenth century the decision to purchase a newspaper may have had both monetary and ideological opportunity cost for some, the web links approach of the internet encouraged diversity of potential contact with related issues. This contact could occur through the simple inclusion of extra links as places the freethinker might wish to roam intellectually. Such roaming could be eclectic but not without controversy, or indeed inherent humour. One debate surrounding the apparent desirability of affiliation concerned who to ‘include’. This could reach into unknown territory, as potential fellow travellers in unbelief asked whether links to groups involved in satanism were desirable. One side of the argument saw satanists as legitimate individuals circumscribed unjustly by Christianity and its cultural attitudes. Therefore they should be treated as potential allies because of their polar opposition to the Christian narrative. The dissenters from this view, which eventually won the argument, strenuously suggested that this was unacceptable because satanists were theists! Nonetheless, this outward desire to be ‘inclusive’ has been noted by some commentators as indicating a potential splintering of effort and ideological will, which essentially means that atheist groups are not competing with Christianity or other religions but rather with themselves (Laughlin 2016, 317–19).

What does emerge from this period is that many who eventually arrived at secularism did so through varieties of ‘seeking’ which saw them, however briefly, embrace forms of Buddhism and Wicca. This perhaps further raises a question about the precise active role of the internet itself in the creation of atheists. ‘Seeking’ around secularism and freethought is scarcely new; however, the ability and ease with which some could tap into a previously unknown subculture was suggestive even in the 1990s (Nash 2002). Many of the formative experiences of 1990s American secularists mirrored those of their nineteenth-century British counterparts and, in a vastly different religious context, the modern Moroccan non-believers described by Richter in this volume. Observing the moral hypocrisy of Christian neighbours, and undergoing the enforced nature of 1990s American religious culture within the social and political spheres, were formative experiences that had British nineteenth-century echoes. Feelings of isolation would also surface, in some cases alongside a strategy that avoided conflict with the wider community – a strategy observed by Gupta in this volume in surveying contemporary India.

Thus, as was the case in the 1990s, new media of communications were lauded as doing something different in creating a safe haven or space in which secularists could contemplate their ideological world and, for a time, escape theism-laden culture. The impetus to create such a haven has been noticed by Lundmark (this volume) in a description of atheism as seeking to ‘think rationally’ rather than pursue the idea of forming a wider movement. From the safety of physical distance (and anonymity, which has echoes in Gupta’s chapter in this volume) secularists had started to use electronic discussion lists to debate with Christians and

Muslims. This recalled the set-piece discussion nights of their mid- to late-nineteenth-century British counterparts, albeit with significant advantages. Individuals expressed hope that this form of debate would transcend the limits of print media and return to a supposed prehistory of healthy organic discussion (Nash 2002, 263). This optimism, however, pre-dated the arrival of antagonistic responses in the form of flame wars and trolling. A consideration of the emergence of this new media may suggest that the optimism about a free trade in ideas asserted by nineteenth-century secularists was echoed in the aspirations of their American mid-1990s counterparts. The idea of the internet being uncensorable spoke to the highly regulated media landscape of 1990s America, and sustained optimism that the online world would remain a form of commons unsullied by vested interests.

The capacity for culture wars to limit freedom of speech was also contemplated by atheists, since the creation of new media meant the transmission of older culture into this media could be limited. Neglect, or cynical and partisan choice about what was moved into this new media, or even about what was moved into it first, had potential repercussions. The apparently laudable aims of Project Gutenberg were slightly tainted by its nomenclature, which signalled the centrality of Christianity to learning and enlightenment (Nash 2002, 284). Objectors to this argued that other unhelpful biases, concerning class, race and gender, would be an issue created around this new canon in its transfer from old to new formats. Whether the effect was anticipated or not, the change to a new form of media meant questions arose about whether the work of Voltaire could more readily be made available than that of street orators. Likewise, would the work of the Enlightenment's aged white males be privileged above that of other gender, race and demographic groups?

Blasphemy: the ambivalent communication

Blasphemy is obviously a transgression, but it is also a form of communication, however unwelcome encounters with it may be. As we have heard, historians rely on its existence as evidence of dissident views. However, some individuals embarked, and still embark, upon blasphemy as a communication strategy to fortify their unbelief, or as result of their repugnance towards or dislike of specific religious doctrines. Blasphemy's existence has thus been a source of ambivalence, or even problematic thoughts, for secularists. We have seen how blasphemous writing, and legal cases around blasphemy, were a vehicle for Richard Carlile's free-speech campaigns, but secularism's relationship to blasphemy has not always been so clear-cut.

When blasphemy was perpetrated by individuals outside the milieu of secularism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the secularists themselves could effectively stand aloof from subsequent events and choose their stance on the matter. Defending individuals against forces ranged against them by a vengeful Christian world was popular inside the movement, and involved forms of support which could be offered without ideological cost. It became easy to call into question laws that could be used to prosecute, maltreat and imprison those suffering from mental impairment (Toohey 1987). Likewise, class narratives could be enlisted as an attack on blasphemy prosecutions, if street-corner orators could be liable to imprisonment whilst academic works largely escaped such censure (Nash 1999, 181–2). In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries blasphemy accusations and prosecutions could be actively useful to secularist groups. These were opportunities to raise issues such as the unjustness of curbs on free speech, the discriminatory nature of the law and the shortcomings of religious explanations of the universe. Thus, commenting upon blasphemy cases headed for prosecution showed that religious progress was a situation of uneven development (Nash 2020, 163–88; Gubo 2015, 102–24).

In the West such 'progress' could be met with grassroots religious initiatives that sought to re-evangelise a world potentially lost to Christianity. In these instances blasphemy accusations and prosecutions were valuable warnings that the preservation of Enlightenment ideals was a work in progress that required renewed vigilance. In instances such as the Salman Rushdie affair secularists could easily reach out to other groups, such as writers and artists, to demonstrate how multiculturalism was potentially asking too much of the Western traditions of free speech and tolerance. In demanding the equalisation of blasphemy laws to protect religions other than Christianity, the presence and the potential power of religion in the modern world attracted attention, unwittingly on behalf of the secularist cause. When modern states beyond the West began to readopt blasphemy laws and define them anew, the accusation that they had ridden roughshod over Western liberal preconceptions and desires was easily made. In cases against Westerners who transgressed poorly understood cultural and religious prohibitions, the secular enlightenment flag could easily be waved. Indigenous individuals who made their own statements against their former faith very easily became lightning-rod causes that seamlessly fed campaigns against blasphemy laws in the West.

The situation became a little more complicated when the blasphemy was perpetrated from within the ranks of secularism itself. Blasphemy in this context does appear as a form of perceived legitimate expression which had a critical message for those who consumed it. What emerged from the survey of atheist attitudes in America in the mid- to late 1990s was that the First Amendment offered the freedom to be scurrilous in criticising Christianity. This perhaps enhanced the idea that pervasive religious landscapes instinctively create their own culture of resistance. Whether this is true or not, there was evidence that blasphemous postings were popular amongst rank-and-file atheists, potentially fortifying them for their lives in a pervasive Christian culture. Whilst not necessarily constituting a community that adhered to an alternative belief system, they could nonetheless rely on First Amendment protection. Moreover, the intended audience of the like-minded was meant to be a safe space into which the theistic world should not intrude, or in which it should at least keep silent, preventing the disruption of a blasphemy prosecution, whereas other contexts would welcome one. Chalfant describes the creation of such phenomena in this volume as a species of 'coming in' to digital spaces (as opposed to the proselytisation of 'coming out' or seeking to offend). Chalfant also saw this as an issue about the choice to be visible or otherwise. The status of such spaces was emphasised by a regime of warning screens to deflect the merely curious or religious from being offended (Nash 2002, 285–6).

Blasphemous expression as the most extreme communications media has been used by those within the movement at specific times to advance various causes; it could even be an accusation against what atheists and secularists considered mainstream educative material (see below). In 1880s England G. W. Foote's *Freethinker* deliberately published blasphemous cartoons in imitation of Bible scenes and stories. They turned religion into a series of narratives that could be considered bizarre or silly, inviting derision. This echoes the contemporary experiences of some Saudis, described in this volume by Khazaal, who found themselves confronting sacred narratives that emerged as 'silly' after serious scrutiny. Foote saw his action here as an adjunct and supportive action in aid of attempts to prosecute England's leading atheist of the late nineteenth century, Charles Bradlaugh. If his cartoons drew further attention to the attitudes of secularists and atheists, this attention was seen as valuable in highlighting Bradlaugh's plight and that of all who shared his unbelief (Nash 1999, 110–11). Not all agreed with this, and those who saw atheist communication and publishing as a way to promote movement culture and support for far-flung atheists in the provinces were embarrassed by the antics of a high-profile metropolitan campaign. Even this judgement could seem ambiguous when the resulting court case triggered petitions from all over liberal Britain against high-handed government action (Nash 1999, 148). In the end Foote had several days in court, and his imprisonment, though uncomfortable, ensured that he would attain the leadership of secularism when Charles Bradlaugh died.

The renewal, revisiting or construction anew of blasphemy laws themselves could similarly galvanise quasi-blasphemous action in defiance of them. Importantly, with electronic media this could be done swiftly and effectively. In 2009 the campaigning group Atheist Ireland were aghast to discover that Ireland's recently passed Defamation Act contained provisions that made blasphemous utterances and publication an illegal act. In response, at the start of 2010 the organisation published on its website a page entitled '25 blasphemous quotes'. It contained texts from the New Testament and the Hadith of Bukhari, and quotes from Mark Twain, Frank Zappa, Salman Rushdie, Björk, Amanda Donohoe, the Rev. Ian Paisley and Conor Cruise O'Brien.[1] It was later expanded with further lists, which fell into a range of common themes. The action of publishing this list was a modern equivalent of Foote's published biblical cartoons and comic life of Christ, since it challenged the government to institute a prosecution and affirm the supposed viability of the law (Nash 1999, 118–30). The difference was that, unlike Foote's publication, which had a narrower distribution, this material was so easily available on the internet that the casual reader could far more readily interact with the quotations' web page. As a strategy it may also have been more effective in Ireland, because the quotations had been available in the public domain in many guises. Displaying them in this form was intended to demonstrate their inherent rationality and reasonableness. They were also manifestly less offensive than the Foote cartoons.

Blasphemy laws and debates about them had only been portrayed as anachronistic when the prosecution of activists was contemplated and executed by authority. In the twenty-first-century world it is the arrival of new laws that has prompted concern and action. Communications media's relationship with celebrity, in some instances, exposed the problems inherent in blasphemy laws and potential prosecutions. The Salman Rushdie affair had proved that media coverage and the publicity it produced around a well-known individual writer were capable of galvanising public opinion on both sides. Nonetheless, celebrity involvement in other blasphemous incidents could, through media coverage, mean that individual high-profile causes could sustain a momentum of their own, providing immense publicity and critique of the legal situation.

This happened in Ireland, where a regular chat show host, Gay Byrne, interviewed Stephen Fry in 2015 on the long-running confessional television programme *The Meaning of Life*. As a parting question Fry was asked what he would say to God were he to meet him. Fry retorted with a rant against a creator who would visit bone cancer upon defenceless children. This was a classic 'problem of evil' statement which ought to have been familiar to all those who debate the nature of religious belief. However, within the context of Ireland's defamation laws Fry's statement was potentially blasphemous.[2] Within a short time an anonymous complaint had been laid at a Garda station in Dublin requesting that the law be used against Fry. The actions of the Garda (or rather their long-time inaction, since they merely filed the complaint, and finally resolved to take no action) further contributed to the anomalous situation of Ireland's blasphemy law.[3] What was significant was that when blasphemy laws could be made to appear untenable, the broadcast media would occasionally create situations that did the atheist and humanist groups' campaigning for them.

Atheist Ireland's campaign to remove the law of blasphemy in Ireland demonstrates what can be achieved through the astute use of communications media, and a recognition that a local or national issue can be made into an international one. Campaigning could be professional and slick, since the cost and availability of cheap technology and places to host its productions brought national or even international campaigning into the realm of even small-scale groups. This democratisation of technology made podcasting and the creation of professional-looking videos both important and increasingly expected. Technology, and proficiency in using it, could respond to campaigning successes, give immediate reports on discussion with government agencies, and broadcast reports and speeches from international meetings of supranational bodies.[4] The last of these was significant, since highlighting how the Irish law provided a precedent for other countries to pursue and retain blasphemy laws was crucial in marshalling hostile international opinion about what the Irish government had instigated without due care. This mistaken course of action could be made to assume the proportions of an international embarrassment (Cox 2019). Ireland's blasphemy law was abolished in 2018 (Nash 2020, 181–6).

In Ireland blasphemy served as a vehicle for accelerating change in the context of a country that was grappling with a liberalisation of its religious outlook. Suddenly its moral outlook adapted, with changes to laws allowing same-sex marriage and abortion. The only note of caution that could be advanced was the consideration that such liberalisation was quite often the result of urban Ireland conversing with itself. The votes cast in these referenda indicated a clear majority in favour of liberalisation in urban centres, with a ‘burst circle’ effect that spread into neighbouring counties, and enthusiasm for this stance waning in more isolated communities. Both broadcast and social media and the causes they espoused could have real effects, but they could not stretch everywhere on every occasion.

Conclusion: the reappearance of the older dilemmas, and their consequences for contemporary atheism

As we have noted, the tension between reaching out to new publics and consoling and comforting a constituency of adherents has been constant. It has appeared regularly in a considerable number of atheists’ interactions on both sides of the Atlantic, since the rise of a recognisably modern movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the contemporary world this tension has to an extent continued, but the nature of this continuity deserves exploration. How does this perennial issue explain the situation of modern atheists on both sides of the Atlantic and the landscape they find in front of them? We might obviously consider that the rise and prominence of New Atheism and New Atheists appear to signal a more strident approach to proselytising and an (at least temporary) end to the culture of assimilation, compromise and cooperation. This had pervaded local relationships between atheists and humanists and those of other faiths. It was also the case that secular rhetoric conveyed a latent fear that the Enlightenment was somewhat ‘in danger’ from the resurgence of religious faith but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the blurring of the distinction between rationality and spirituality, a distinction New Atheists were anxious to preserve.

The problem then became that atheism and humanism continued to assume that all who came to them were seekers who had reached the end of their spiritual road. As such, they still carried the religious baggage and detritus from their journey. In another guise this analysis would appear in the regularly gathered statistics about waning religious belief and belonging, so long a valuable touchstone for atheist and humanist advocacy of their beliefs. Both sides of the Atlantic have seen humanist and atheist groups speak about, some have argued fixate on, these statistics in their communications to the public sphere. Statistics which show adherence to religion waning significantly can superficially be used to argue that countries on both sides of the Atlantic are becoming progressively more secular. Figures may not lie about waning religious belief, but the leeching away of religious adherence by no means equals a recourse to secularist alternatives.

Both religious and secular worldviews have had to confront the phenomenon of the rise of the 'nones', those not schooled or brought up with religion and who potentially have no need to embrace it or reject it (Quack and Schuh 2017). Modes of address and communicating with such people have the capacity to reshape communications agendas. Some commentators have noticed, with a strange amount of glee, just how much this is likely to affect the outlook of atheist humanists and their apparent demands for rationalism, and their distaste for vague spiritual and mystical trappings (Laughlin 2016). But this is to demand of secularists and humanists a degree of ideological purity of outlook and motive that Christianity in the West has long since forsaken and actively traded in. But it is possible to consider that secularism, humanism and atheism are undergoing, or experiencing, a Dietrich Bonhoeffer moment. This is a situation in which the sum of Bonhoeffer's message to Western Protestantism was that it should forsake the idea that religious belief and practice were central to the lives of Western men and women. Such ideas reached the popular mainstream in a number of influential books and pamphlets. The entrance of such ideas into the mainstream has been seen by one historian to have influenced a particular 'moment' at which British society had actively convinced that it had secularised itself to completion, whether or not this was true (Brewitt-Taylor 2013).

Atheism has arguably still to fully realise that its message does not carry the weight of moral indignation and sect-like self-preservation that it once did. Therefore it is having to respond to this constituency of 'nones' and follow them in both their tastes and their modes of communication. We can see some of this in action in relation to the former in, for example, Conway Hall's South Place Sunday Concerts (in London), which offer the regularity of a Sunday 'service' without any other commitment, either religious or secular.[5] What patrons individually gain from this is not clear but, as in post-Bonhoeffer Christianity, their attendance is perhaps all that can be hoped for and their willingness to simply attend has become the entire point. For the modern waning of moral indignation we might consider the message of the 2009 'bus campaign', which did not speak to the intense moral outrage of previous times. Instead it offered the reassurance of diffuse, and even unspoken, doubt (Kettell 2016). Its message that there was probably 'no god' and that individuals should thus simply strive to 'enjoy their life' reached out to 'nones', who were invited to become fellow travellers.

We might also speculate about the conclusions individuals might reach from seeing atheist and humanist organisations widen their appeal through some systematic use of the phenomenon of modern celebrity. Patrons and presidents of the British Humanist Association have come from the world of popular comedy, but also from amongst individuals who cross bridges that link academic subject advocacy and understanding with factual television presenting. Thus, within the history of atheist and secularist communications media a new episode had arrived in which organisations would once again have to cross their fingers about the level of commitment they could expect from individuals who became even partly sympathetic to their views and outlook. Whereas, once, lecture audiences could be counted and book sales calculated, modern media cannot assess commitment from lurking and the occasional comment. Whilst this may look like a difficult position, it is possible to see areas in which modern communications strategies link with consumer demand.

It is arguably the case that many who contact atheist and humanists groups are in search of the rites of passage that these organisations can perform. This also highlights that religious or non-religious affiliation might coalesce around 'moments' that speak to individuals in a post-Bonhoeffer style of requiring only specific needs to be satisfied. This is an area in which humanism itself has tailored its offer to outperform that of conventional religions in some specific ways. A non-invasive means of communicating the worldview of humanists is through the range of funeral provision now available. Humanism in Britain has been quick to prepare publications about secular funerals, which have gone through a significant number of editions and have shown a cycle of development. These publications, interestingly, have been geared to being inclusive and to cornering an increasing market that wants something different from prescribed and off-the-peg religious burial services (Wilson 1989, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2006, 2014). Humanists have been quick to state within these works that the emphasis in secular funerals, at least the ones portrayed in this literature, is on choice. This emphasis increasingly enables a degree of personalisation that pleases individuals contemplating their own funeral, or those close to them who are choosing something they deem to be appropriate. These publications also contain templates for a variety of circumstances pertaining to the manner of the individual's death, or indeed their age and gender (Mountain 2000). Choice and flexibility are the watchwords for this provision (Nash 2017).

If we seek to draw links between some current atheist and humanist publishing provision, ‘worship’ provision and rites of passage provision, there is perhaps a common thread. Alongside the ‘no religion’ declarers, and the ‘nones’ with no trace of religious culture, atheist organisations might be dealing with and assisting some people we might once again describe as deist. These are people who may have a sense of spirituality and a vague sense of a supreme being but want nothing to do with religion. Instead, these individuals seek to ‘shop’ for religiosity from a prepared list of needs (Stolz et al. 2016, 194). The creation of messages about dissatisfaction with religious practices, and, more interestingly, dissatisfaction with their prescriptiveness in an era of choice, means that atheist communications strategies in their role of reaching out to society adopt different stances. They thus use a mixture of ‘popping up’ in front of people in a variety of media, and publicising the possibility of open-ended provision when it comes to rites of passage. Although this can sound as though it contains elements of the story we started with, atheist organisations and their communications strategies have contributed to ensuring that plurality and freedom of speech, however challenged and incomplete, are here to stay.

Notes

1 Atheist Ireland 2010.

2 McSorley 2018.

3 Collins 2017.

4 See, for example: ‘Atheist Ireland responds to abortion law questions at Irish parliamentary hearing’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLrKNmocTNQ; ‘Does God exist? Michael Nugent v William Lane Craig debate’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmlcmVye4hM; ‘You have rights, your beliefs do not: Michael Nugent of Atheist Ireland at OSCE meeting in Poland’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msJ8HWvTNCc; ‘Does society need religious faith? Michael Nugent in debate with John Waters’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPV1l_ZyztU; ‘Can you believe in both science and religion? Michael Nugent debating at UCC’, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KY2Sv25SrYs (all accessed 5 July 2022).

5 https://conwayhall.org.uk/sunday-concerts/history-archive/ (accessed 17 April 2022).

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Jacob Copeman is Research Professor, University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and Distinguished Researcher (Oportunius).

Mascha Schulz is a postdoctoral research fellow on the ERC project ‘Religion and its Others in South Asia and the World (ROSA)’ and based at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Germany).

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