Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies

Lois Lee


To cite this article: Lois Lee (2012): Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies, Journal of Contemporary Religion, 27:1, 129-139

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2012.642742

PLEAS SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies

LOIS LEE

ABSTRACT The recognition of non-religion as a significant social, cultural, and psychological phenomenon represents a sea change—or revolution—in social scientific thinking about religion and modernity. The speedy expansion of the field has, however, left its terminology lagging behind, with most scholars drawing on concepts familiar to the disciplinary or other cultural settings within which they work. The result is a terminology that is used inconsistently, imprecisely, and often illogically. This research note aims to draw attention to this situation and to suggest a working terminology. Focusing on core terms, I argue for: using ‘non-religion’ as the master concept for this new field of study, demoting ‘atheism’ from its illogically central role in the current discussion, untangling ‘secularism’ and ‘secularity’ from both these concepts. This will allow social scientists to be more precise in how they use the four concepts and better equip them for analysing the relationship between them.

Introduction

Over recent years, the idea of non-religion as a significant topic for empirical study has achieved a notable following (see e.g. Zuckerman, Atheism; Kosmin and Keysar; see also the web site of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, which lists research activity in this area). It is especially the scope of the field but also the speed at which it is establishing itself that makes it possible to speak of a ‘revolution’ in the relevant areas of academic research—markedly different to the hitherto gradual accumulation of knowledge. Exciting as this certainly is, one of the downsides is that theoretical and conceptual understanding is yet to catch up with the empirical work starting to amass. Especially noticeable is the lack of sustained discussion of core concepts which is urgently required for researchers to be able to talk about and demarcate the social scientific field of non-religious studies—or whatever else it might be called. The few dedicated contributions include Colin Campbell’s chapter in his seminal book of 1971, Toward a Sociology of Irreligion, Jack David Eller’s chapter on atheism and secularism, and Barry Kosmin’s introduction to his ‘binary typology’ of secularity and secularism. There are also various substantive definitions of this or that term incidental to studies that primarily concern something else and there is quite a sizeable but divided literature on conceptions of the ‘secular’. These contributions all have their shortcomings—Campbell’s terminology is dated by the empirical context it is trying to conceptualise; Eller really provides a basic philosophical rather than a social scientific argument; other contributions are
under-theorised and/or inconsistent with one another (Pasquale)—although they all provide useful resources.

What is most clearly lacking is a comprehensive and centralised treatment of the core terminology for this field of study and this needs to be addressed sooner rather than later. Those working in this field do not have the luxury of deferring such questions in the way Max Weber (1) did when he establish his field:

[To] say what [religion] is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The essence of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social behaviour.

For Weber, a definition of religion was thus not a necessary prerequisite for his empirical investigation. The researcher of non-religion will notice, however, that Weber is nevertheless able to identify a ‘particular type of social behaviour’; indeed, he seems to regard this type of behaviour as self-evident. By contrast, non-religion researchers have had to articulate their research object—for themselves and the audiences who serve them (potential collaborators, publishers, funders) and whom they serve. As Campbell (17) puts it, “[t]he claim of the sociology of irreligion to be accepted as an important and viable sphere of study clearly cannot be admitted until its specific subject of investigation has been outlined.”

This research note focuses on this issue, with the general aim of encouraging further reflexivity along these lines in future research. Its more specific aim, however, is to suggest a core terminology that might be tenable for researchers working in the field, at least as a working terminology for the time being. I draw on the working terminology I have developed in order to conduct my own empirical research in the field and on extensive experience of the emergent field related to the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN). The NSRN specialises in the communication of non-religion research across disciplinary, national, and other cultural boundaries; my co-directors and I have accumulated, often through trial and error, some understanding of how terminology in non-religion studies has worked, and failed, in practice.

This research note is organised around three essential terms—or sets of terms—that make up the core terminology for non-religion studies: 1) those which take religion as their root (non-religion, irreligion, a-religion, anti-religion), 2) those which take theism as their root (atheism, non-theism), 3) those which take the secular as their root (the secular, secularity, secularism). Taking these in turn, I argue: that ‘non-religion’ be given a general definition that qualifies it as the master or defining concept for the field; that the use of ‘atheism’ be strictly restricted to the task of indicating god-centred outlooks and/or individuals and cultures who/which appropriate the term; that the precise concepts of non-religion and atheism be untangled from the confused and confusing terminology of ‘the secular’, ‘secularism’, and ‘secularity’. I further argue that more precise understandings of these terms will give rise to a much improved ability to not only analyse each set of social phenomena in turn, but also the relationship between them. Paradoxically perhaps, a more concise terminology should also enable a more penetrating critical discussion of these terms than is possible with the more inclusive and fluid conceptualisations researchers are currently working with.
Naming the Field: ‘Non-religion Studies’

The emerging field of research that confronts social scientists concerns a wide variety of things. What counts as a legitimate part of this new field is an open question. It is clear, however, that it takes some account of phenomena like atheism, agnosticism, anti-supernaturalism, anti-clericalism, blasphemy, hatred of religion, and so-called ‘indifference’ to religion. It also takes some account of alternative belief systems, ethics, rites of passage, and other matters which point to the way they depart from religion to understand and articulate themselves. Finally, it takes account of the intersections between these areas and gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, nationalism, religious heritage, employment, relationships, health, and happiness. In short, and without exhausting the possibilities, the field in question is demonstrably broad and concerns specific and concrete phenomena. These phenomena share more than a history of being under-researched and this makes it possible to use this commonality to draw a defining concept for the field. For the time being, however, I suggest ‘non-religion’—precisely defined—as a concept capable of capturing these phenomena while clearly demarcating them from others which are not the particular concern of this field of study.

‘Non-religion’ is not defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, nor has it, to the best of my knowledge, been defined in any academic work, although its use is becoming more common. The definition I put forward is, therefore, my own, which developed over the course of my empirical research:

Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion.

An earlier and longer formulation is:

Non-religion is any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious. (Lee, ‘From ‘Neutrality’”)

According to one’s stance on what religion is—and this definition requires the user to be reflexive on this point—non-religious phenomena might therefore accommodate, for example, atheism; atheism is an intellectual or cultural position which is primarily defined by its relationship to a religious phenomenon (theism) while not being considered to be religious itself. Similarly, non-religion so defined would typically admit positions like agnosticism, most contemporary humanist doctrine, and some forms of secularism (see also below). It would include anti-religious action and ‘irreligious experiences’ (Bullivant). It would include indifference towards religion—a stance which requires at least some awareness of religion and therefore taking some position. On the other hand, it would not include phenomena such as rationalism: although researchers may want to talk about a close relationship between rationalist and non-religious cultures, rationalism is ontologically autonomous from religion. By the same token, non-religion would not include many ‘New Age’ or ‘alternative’ forms of spirituality. These perspectives and cultures may have non-religious aspects, but are usually defined by their own core principles and practices, differentiation from religion being a secondary rather than primary consideration. Thus, the concept of non-religion is broad but still meaningfully and usefully exclusive.
What is in a Name?

The term ‘non-religion’, so understood, is suggested because of its potential practical usefulness, but it is also the product of various theoretical considerations which may be useful for other researchers to think through or provide a critique for. Firstly, the term (and definition) takes up Campbell’s view that the object of study cannot be defined substantively but “only as a general form of response” or “a characteristic set of responses” to religion (20–1). It steers away from Campbell’s approach, however, in what it understands these responses to be. Campbell (and common dictionary definitions of ‘irreligion’) suggests only two types of response, both of which are forms of rejections: (i) hostility towards religion and (ii) indifference to or disregard of religion—also called ‘anti-religion’ and ‘a-religion’, respectively (24).

It is certainly important to include both phenomena in our purview—although it might be more accurate to call these things ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ (or ‘tacit’) non-religion, respectively. In addition, however, my research of British non-religiousness has identified a number of orientations which seem to be of relevance, but which cannot be described by either of these types: many people express a sense of difference from religion that neither involves hostility nor indifference. Such views might, for example, involve a sense of otherness from some religious phenomenon—as in the statement, ‘I’ve tried to believe in God, but I just can’t’—while making a positive assessment of that religious aspect—as in the statement, ‘I just can’t, even though I’d quite like it: I feel like it might be comforting.’ Even the broader notion of non-religion as a rejection is likewise problematic in such cases. The concept of non-religion that I propose attempts to capture this variety by using the more general and less oppositional notion of difference.

This meaning is not, of course, intrinsic to the term ‘non-religion’ if taken out of context, but rather derives from being put forward as an alternative to the concept of ‘irreligion’. As well as indicating a shift to a new (and broader) definition, the move away from ‘irreligion’ reflects the concern that the latter term implies an out-group or non-conformist position—which is reminiscent of terms like ‘infidel’ and ‘heretic’, which Campbell certainly treats as being of the same ilk (20–1). Today, some measures find that the non-religious account for larger shares of the population than the religious in many European countries (Siegers; Storm; Voas) and, therefore, such connotations are misleading. Despite its negative formulation, ‘non-religion’ does not appear to have such connotations. In addition, it has the practical benefit of being far more intelligible to people than ‘irreligion’, which has little currency outside the specialised group of people involved in its study. Thus, talking about ‘non-religion’ increases the scope of the field, both in terms of how social scientists conceptualise its contents and in terms of how widely and effectively research can be communicated outside it.

It is theoretically significant, however, that ‘non-religion’ replicates ‘irreligion’ in taking ‘religion’ as its root concept. This requires some comment. Of course, by taking up religion, the idea of non-religion assumes much of the theoretical and conceptual reasoning that has gone into the use of that term as well as the controversies surrounding it. Recent contributions to this terminological debate have tended towards the view that religion is a socially constructed and
contested phenomena (see Beckford 16) and argue that the category of ‘religion’ is historically and culturally contingent (see Asad, Genealogies, for a seminal exposition of this view). Despite these and other critiques, ‘religion’ remains a popular term and a term that is precisely general enough to designate the general field of study. Scholars are correct to notice that the concept of ‘religion’ does not always have emic or ‘insider’ validity, but the tenacity of the concept despite these critiques is testimony to the useful work it does as a general concept. Indeed, non-religion researchers stand to benefit from the tradition of controversy surrounding the concept in terms of the reflexivity this will encourage—researchers take responsibility for making their particular understanding or usage clear.

The passive construction of my definition reflects this responsibility: it requires the user to say who calls a field ‘non-religion studies’ and what they mean by it. The point is not, of course, that non-religion studies should include everything which anyone describes as non-religious—although the question of why this category is appropriated erroneously, as it might be deemed to, will always fall within the remit of this field. What is essential is that social scientists define their area of study not by any empirical case, but by a quality or characteristic—non-religion or non-religiousness—which they appreciate as existing in the social world in intersection with other qualities. Thus, while it will be usually fine to say that the study of organised non-religious groups is likely to be more important to non-religion scholars than the study of occult groups who classify themselves as non-religious, one should recognize that this is shorthand for saying that the former example has more characteristics that can be described as non-religious as compared to the latter. One may not want to describe this second group as ‘non-religious’, but one should not be blind to the non-religious characteristics that it might possess. If a group is called ‘non-religious’, it is likewise shorthand for saying that its non-religious characteristics are dominant (or dominating the social scientific interest) and not that this non-religious group is essentially, comprehensively or even primarily non-religious.

‘Non-religion’ as a Working Concept

Non-religion, so defined, is a working concept that should be useful as long as the concept of religion is. For some years, however, researchers will need the term to do much more work than will ultimately be required of it. There are a number of phenomena which fall within the interest of this field, but which are currently described only as ‘non-religious’ for want of a better word. Some forms of naturalism, for example, and contemporary humanism are of interest to scholars in this field, but might, in theory at least, be described without reference to religion and therefore cannot be called non-religion as such. At this point, the reason to use the term ‘non-religion’ is a pragmatic decision. We simply have no better word to describe these positions, as the real issue is not the concept, but how much more empirical and theoretical work there is still to do.

The concept is discussed in more length below, but it is worth noting here that the ‘secular’ does not resolve the issue, as has been suggested to me in informal
discussion. The far reach of this notion, inclusive of everything which is not religious or primarily religious, means that using it to describe a specific set of phenomena is not theoretically compelling. The study of the secular would, strictly speaking, incorporate anything from supporting a football team to the practice of drinking tea, subscribing to a humanist value system. The continuity between these examples is not always apparent because we tend to focus on other systems of classification to understand the former (‘leisure’, ‘sports’, ‘consumption’, ‘food and drink’), whereas we lack a category to describe atheistic naturalism, humanism, and so on. We have, in fact, yet to decide what precisely such phenomena are; the use of fall-back notion of the secular is an expression of this. Describing such phenomena as ‘secular’ is therefore equally, if not more, tenuous than describing them as ‘non-religious’—added to which there are, I think, powerful reasons not to do so, which are discussed below.

In short, the notion of ‘non-religion’ is not perfect: it is pragmatic. It is not negative— it is, like the term ‘secular’, relative. It is relative to religion because religion has dominated relevant areas of thought for some centuries and continues to do so at the point at which non-religious scholars enter the debate. Were this cultural history different, we might propose ‘non-spirituality studies’ or an entirely different term. Let non-religion researchers be clear: what they are working towards is robust theory concerning the ontology of non-religion, how this relates to the ontology of religion, and, therefore, the possibility of moving beyond these particular categories and towards a universal form (see also Pasquale 761). The goal should be a concept which is comparable to ‘gender’, ‘race’, ‘kinship’ or ‘class’ in being inclusive of all positions. However contested, the concept of ‘gender’ is applied to all: everyone is understood to have a gender. The study of non-religion, like the study of alternative spirituality, is emphatic that the same cannot be said of religion: not everyone has a religion. Problems with the term ‘non-religion’ are real, but the issue is not the concept so much as the state of current knowledge. There are no substantive concepts because social scientists have only recently begun to recognize non-religious phenomena as substantive entities. This is precisely what they should work towards.

A Warning against Encroaching ‘Atheism’

In contrast to ‘non-religion’, the notion of atheism requires no introduction: it is understood, variously but widely, across the world. What is more, the titles of publications in the field have so far been dominated by the concept: notable examples include the collections by Phil Zuckerman, Amarnath Amarasingam, and Michael Martin— Atheism and Secularity, Religion and the New Atheism, and The Cambridge Companion to Atheism, respectively. Properly understood, however, atheism should account for only a part of the field of non-religion studies. My interest here is not to define atheism (resources provide this already (e.g. Martin, “Appendix”; Cliteur; Eller), but to remind non-religion researchers of the exactness of the concept. Whether the definition of it is exclusive or inclusive, negative or positive, whether it means a person who does not believe in God or a person without a belief in God (Martin, “Appendix” 463–5), whether ‘belief’ is the process of relating to the God(s) one wants to put centre stage— whichever of
these approaches are preferred, ‘atheism’ always relates to God. It should therefore be noticed by social scientists as (i) a phenomenon which involves some kind of contra-distinction from theism or (ii) a person or movement who/which identifies him/her/itself as ‘atheist’ and, as a designation, might be helpfully distinguished by capitalisation. In both these respects, the study of atheism is an important and fascinating aspect of non-religion studies, but, just as affirmative relationships with God(s) have been recognized as only one aspect of religious studies and of religion, so non-affirmative relationships with God(s) must be recognized as just one aspect of non-religion studies. As to the common coupling of ‘religion and atheism’, this is simply illogical and should be dispensed with entirely.

In this case and in other cases, being precise enables researchers to ask questions that should be some of the most promising in this new field of research: what are the theoretical and empirical relationships between atheism and other aspects and kinds of non-religion? How and why is ‘atheism’ used as a discursive strategy? Do atheists understand religion in primarily theistic terms or does their atheism reflect a socio-cultural trajectory more than it does a philosophical one? In short, regarding ‘atheism’, non-religion researchers should use the term less but research instances of it more.

The Secular

The discussion of non-religion has so far focused on how the term can be defined and prioritised in order to describe particular empirical realities with greater precision. Good concepts are, however, not only useful for description but capable of liberating social scientific thinking from existing conceptual cul-de-sacs and thereby generating new avenues of research. In this section, I argue that an over-dependence on concepts relating to the secular—‘secularity’, ‘secularism’, and the ‘secular’—has lead to one such impasse. This can be seen in ongoing attempts to define the secular as having two or usually three different meanings, with Karel Dobbelaere’s theory of secularisation (that it occurs on three dimensions or levels—the individual, institutional, and societal) shaping much subsequent thinking. Charles Taylor’s secularities 1, 2, and 3, which he described in his book of 2007 (15), are a more recent example; the ambivalence of his signifiers seems to illustrate how difficult untangling versions of the secular has proved to be. The arguments have become cyclical. The recent ‘post-secularist’ arguments (see McLennan, “Turn”, “Sociology”) have, for example, rehearsed the idea that sometimes secularity means non-religion and that at other times it means a differentiated administrative arrangement. My argument is that separating non-religion from other aspects of the secular might provide a solution and lead to more advanced research questions and methodologies. By using the two terms to describe the two distinct phenomena at hand, respectively, it becomes much easier to treat them as independent variables and discuss the multiple empirical relationships between the two in more precise terms.

To achieve this, it is necessary to restrict our understanding of the secular and of secularism in the following way:

The secular is something for which religion is not the primary reference point.
Secularity (or secular-ness) is the state of being secular.

Secularism is an ideology or system of differentiating or allocating religious and secular spheres.

This understanding of secularism is consistent with many others (e.g. Kosmin). What is different and significant here is the definition of the secular and the clear distinction that is proposed between it and the non-religious. This definition moves us away from contemporary understandings of the secular, which marginalise religion, deride it or totally exclude it, and returns to something closer to the original meaning of the term: the ‘secular’ began as a space or object for which religious reference points were secondary, no longer the first and immediate reference point, as in the ‘religious’ space of the monastery. The resulting distinction between religion and secularity is subtle, but important. Non-religion is primarily defined here in reference to religion, whereas the secular is primarily defined by something other than religion. Non-religion is a relational concept; the secular is purely relative. Non-religion is ‘stuff’; the secular means only the demotion or absence of some other ‘stuff’—the relevance of religion as a variable. Hence, it is quite wrong to think of the ‘secular’ as a more empowering concept than ‘non-religion’ for describing phenomena like atheism or humanism. In fact, non-religion—by this definition at least—describes something that is ontologically distinct from religion in a way that the secular is not.

Viewed as autonomous, this terminological distinction is not only more straightforward but makes space for identifying and describing a range of complex relations between the two entities. It allows us to say very simply what many of the post-secularists are trying to capture, which is that some secularism is anti-religious whereas other secularisms are not. Because the religious and the secular are no longer set up in opposition to one another, we can describe in simple terms the common case of an individual whose metaphysical beliefs are religious, but whose politics are secular. As we no longer need to rely on dimensions to make the distinction, we no longer need to associate the secular and the meso- and macro-levels and non-religion and the micro-level. Thus we are able to consider, for example, someone who is secular in his/her private life (religion and, indeed, non-religion are not primary reference points), but whose politics are non-religious (e.g. Islamophobic). We might more easily compare states which have secularist politics and religious populations (e.g. Turkey) with those that have secularist politics and more non-religious populations (e.g. France) and those that have less secularist politics and more non-religious populations (e.g. the UK). Such complexes of secular, ‘theocratic’, non-religious and religious—in which any of these might manifest in any dimension and sphere—thus come into view and become relatively straightforward to describe.

Conclusion

This final set of examples illustrates how the simplification of terminology can facilitate greater complexity in our understanding of the social world, which is perhaps a good point at which to draw this discussion to a close—albeit only for
the time being. This terminology attempts to achieve a degree of specificity for a field of study, without over-determining its parameters—and, importantly, should certainly not be viewed as fixed in any way but as a springboard for future research and debate.

Acknowledgements

I would like thank Dr Stephen Bullivant at St Mary’s University College, Dr Patrick Baert at University of Cambridge, and the anonymous reviewers of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* for their insightful and stimulating comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to thank Dr Abby Day at the University of Sussex and all the participants of the ‘NSRN Terminology’ virtual conference (2011) for advanced and timely discussions of the issues under consideration here.

Lois Lee is a doctoral researcher in Sociology at the University of Cambridge, preparing a thesis on the topic of British non-religion and the social science of non-religion in general. She is a founding director of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network and the features editor of *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*. CORRESPONDENCE: Department of Sociology, Free School Lane, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 3RQ, UK.

NOTES

1. Although the intention of this research note is a detailed definition, it may be helpful to give a brief introduction to the term ‘non-religion’. Non-religion is an umbrella term for a variety of phenomena which are understood in contradistinction to religion, typical examples being modern atheism, agnosticism, and many forms of secularism. It is more or less synonymous with ‘irreligion’, with which readers might be more familiar with, and with ‘secularity’, but only in the sense given by Kosmin (1).

2. Non-religion has been the topic of my research since early 2006; my current (doctoral) research is a qualitative study and exploration of British non-religious cultures. The dissertation is currently prepared for submission; further details can be found in my publications (see references) or on request.

3. Further details of the NSRN can be found at www.nsrn.co.uk.

4. Although some early contributions indicate that this field of research has existed for some time, it is only recently that work has really begun to amass. It is in this sense that the field can be regarded as new, young or emerging.

5. The concept of ‘indifference’ to religion is, in my view, a misnomer and cannot be empirically substantiated: it is hard to find people who know of religion and do not take some stance (or several stances) towards it. For a brief introduction to this argument, see Lee, “Indifference”. A broader discussion will be in my doctoral thesis.

6. This is consistent with Martin’s guidance concerning the difference between atheism and rationalism and the possibility of rationalist theism (“Appendix” 468–9).

7. Ryan Cragun and Joseph Hammer come to a similar conclusion in their recent discussion of terms such as ‘disaffiliate’ (155) and ‘none’ (160) to describe those who do not have a religious affiliation.
8. ‘Worldview’ has been suggested but is currently under-theorised and overly broad in scope. It may be, however, that non-religion studies will be subsumed under ‘worldview studies’, once more empirical and theoretical work has been done.

9. The Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘secular’ as denoting “attitudes, activities and other things that have no religious or spiritual basis” (OED).

10. This does not mean that the secular and secularism cannot be objects of study. The study of secularism is particularly significant, for reasons that Talal Asad, José Casanova, Tariq Modood, Cannell, and others have outlined: there is no fixed line between religious and secular spaces and where this line is drawn is an important aspect of social and political analyses. Cannell’s anthropology of secularism, for example, would involve the study of cases “where people hope or fear that secularism may be an inevitable condition, linked with the processes of modernity” (86). Studies of the secular are arguably much less interesting, as they merely ask what happens when religion is no longer a factor, but they should be an intrinsic part of religious studies: the secular are the control group against which the religious are measured.

11. The opposite of secularity would, in terms of this definition, be something that takes religion as a primary reference point. ‘Theocracy’, understood in general terms, meaning the authority (or rule) of the religious, is getting close, but this term needs further work and is therefore not included in the discussion.

REFERENCES


---. “‘Indifference’ may be Church’s Best Hope.” Available at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/oct/11/indifference-church-best-hope, access date: 11 October 2011.


