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Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West

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Naturalistic and atheistic worldviews have a long history in Western philosophy, but there was no identifiable culture of atheism within Europe until the 18th century. Prior to then, the number of genuine atheists in European countries was probably very small. This changed conspicuously during the Enlightenment, but the subsequent development of an ethos of disbelief was confined for many years to the intellectual and literary classes.

For Matthew Arnold, 'the sea of faith' seemed to be withdrawing as he wrote his great poem 'Dover Beach' – probably in the late 1840s and early 1850s – but it was withdrawing only from an elite segment of European society. Within that segment, there was famously a crisis of faith for many intellectuals during the middle decades of the 19th century. Nonetheless, this was not a time of anti-clerical upheaval. If anything, it was an age of reassurance; mid-century popular sentiment and public discourse had shifted away from iconoclastic attitudes toward religion such as those associated with Thomas Paine or the French *philosophes*.

There is a complex story to be told about how 18th-, 19th-, and 20th-century scholars and thinkers challenged the truth claims of Christianity – and religion more generally – and developed alternative, non-religious worldviews. They made non-religious understandings of the universe, and humanity's place in it, increasingly available and attractive. Yet, the prestige of Christianity survived until quite recently. Christian faith was, indeed, at something of a peak of visibility and public influence in Europe and North America as recently as the 1950s, an overtly religious decade compared with many others since the Industrial Revolution. For all that, by the mid-1960s church attendances and memberships, along with other indicators of collective religiosity such as religious baptisms, were beginning to plummet in most industrialized countries (with the US as something of an outlier). How could this have happened?

In a series of books and articles, Callum G. Brown has approached the riddle from several angles and with a variety of methodologies. In *Becoming Atheist*, he draws on the methods of oral history to examine how Western nations became markedly more secular – in the sense that the social importance of religion greatly decreased – during the 'long sixties': the period covering, give or take a couple of years either way, approximately 1957–1975.

Brown has a special interest in the decline of what he calls 'discursive Christianity': the decline, that is, of a

recognizably Christian public and even private discourse. From about 1800 to about 1960, this continually produced and enforced modes of personal expression that were strongly gendered, with contrasting ideals of religiosity for men and women. Throughout this period, religion's social authority was not enforced by state coercion to attend church but via a socially pervasive discourse that was overwhelming in its demands for submission. The general culture in streets and workplaces, in popular entertainment, and even in public houses, was saturated with Christian music, language, and iconography. Few individuals could resist this, and most people reflected it in their own manner of speaking. But during the 1960s and 1970s, discursive Christianity was largely swept aside.

To shed more light on how this happened, Brown recruited 85 volunteers who were willing to be interviewed. He located his respondents largely through humanist, atheist, and secularist organizations, though not all respondents were members of those organizations. The interviews, conducted mainly in person and mainly by Brown himself, took place in the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Canada, and Estonia. The respondents comprised 28 women and 57 men. This is, Brown states, slightly higher than the proportion of women among those self-identifying as 'nones' (expressing no religion) in the general populations of relevant countries. As it turned out, one interview was not properly recorded and one respondent declined to give permission to use their interview, leaving 83 respondents. These were born in a fairly wide range of countries: in addition to those already mentioned, respondents came from Austria, Chile, India, Malaysia, and others. Not all were former Christians: for example, some were Jewish, three were ex-Muslims, and four came from Hindu backgrounds.

Brown observes that oral historians typically find similar stories recurring after 20 to 30 interviews, so the historian will then have 'interviewed enough people to have plausibly exhausted the typologies' (p. 15). This may well be correct: I'm no expert here, but Brown cites scholarly support. That being so, it is likely that *Becoming Atheist* identifies the main types of people who *could* have been identified through the methodology employed. A larger number of interviews would probably not have been helpful. Even when the total sample is divided into separate male and female sets of respondents, each set is arguably large enough to capture the range of types. This is important, because, as we'll see, the experiences and perceptions of Brown's male and female respondents were very different.

Brown's interviewing approach encouraged respondents to speak in their own words, enabling him to draw inferences from, for example, respondents' phrasing, episodes of laughter, and general tone and affect. The idea here is not to obtain data in a standardized form suitable for statistical analysis; rather, it is to seek more general insight into the respondents' frames of mind. It is possible, in other words, to reach arguable conclusions from many aspects of a respondent's language and presentation, not solely from the literal semantic content of his or her sentences. This requires skill and judgement, but the same applies whenever scholars attempt to draw indirect inferences from, say, the content of letters and literary texts. Employed sensitively, Brown's approach is potentially revealing. It appears sound enough, so long as the resulting material is interpreted with a degree of caution and epistemic modesty.

Part of the point of encouraging, and analyzing, non-standardized testimony is to make judgements of attitude and tone. We need not assume that respondents remember everything correctly, but even the ways in which they speak, pause, and interrupt themselves can yield important clues. For example, Brown explains that his respondents often laughed – despite his own rather serious demeanour – in recollection of what struck them as their earlier naivety. Those who had experienced distress or trauma, when moving away from religious faith, told their stories with remarkable clarity and strength. By contrast, those who'd not had such painful experiences showed a mix of 'calm contemplation' and 'tender laughter' (p. 163) when discussing the role of religion in their earlier lives. They often spoke with hesitancy, as if struggling for the first time to formulate coherent thoughts on the subject of religion and the reasons for their own apostasy.

Brown has used other approaches elsewhere, but his analysis in *Becoming Atheist* is a useful and fascinating addition. Commendably, the archive of his interviews will be available to other scholars – some of whom might interpret it differently. The archive will be a valuable resource, and I hope others will mine it.

Although the *number* of respondents seems more than adequate for Brown's purpose, there remains a concern that some relevant types of people might have been neglected because of the method of recruitment. Because Brown recruited through certain kinds of organizations, he could have ended up with a misleadingly high proportion of self-conscious and highly committed non-believers. If the sample is sufficiently unrepresentative of non-believers more generally, it might create some false impressions. More significantly, Brown could have ended up altogether missing some types of individuals who turned away from religion during the long sixties.

While this is a theoretical possibility, and perhaps it should be followed up in further research, I doubt that it actually happened. Pending further research, the only test that I can apply is a rough comparison with my own acquaintances who are not religious believers. Many of these have no particular interest in atheist, humanist, or secular organizations. At this admittedly unscientific and intuitive level, my only worry is whether Brown makes more than can be justified of the common choice among individuals in his sample of the term *humanist* for their worldview. This worry might not amount to much, since his sample is never claimed to be statistically representative even of people relatively actively involved in humanist, atheist, and secularist organizations, let alone of non-believers more generally.

For what it's worth, I encounter few non-believers outside of formal organizations who label themselves as humanists, though some might reveal, if asked, that they are atheists or agnostics. But this is not a very serious criticism for several reason. First, and most obviously, my own experience may not be representative. Second, even putting that aside, humanism might well be (for all I know) the most popular label chosen by those individuals who consciously hold a more-or-less comprehensive secular worldview. Third – and this is most important – Brown is properly cautious at this point of his discussion. He does not conclude that most, or a large proportion, of non-believers in the general population identify as humanists. Rather, he observes that 'it is the multiple use of terms by non-believers that is most marked' (p. 166). He concludes that most people who live their lives on the assumption that there is no god are actually 'label-less', which does not mean 'value-less' (p. 168).

If we wish to supplement our more public and quantifiable data, conducting multiple interviews might take us further than obvious alternatives. Published books and articles by men and women who turned away from Christianity (or other religions) can be illuminating. But they are skewed to people with enough literary skill and social clout to get published. Their authors will inevitably be less representative than Brown's sample of respondents. Thus, scholarly contributions such as *Becoming Atheist* are worthwhile and eye-opening. The book is hardly definitive of what happened during the long sixties, but we have plenty of other methodological approaches, and it should not be beyond us to triangulate our results.

The question remains – why the sudden collapse of religiosity in the West, with the US as something of an exception? There was no new argument for atheism at the time, no group of charismatic atheist leaders who rose to prominence, and no pressure from political leaders or foreign invaders to abjure religion. There was, however, social change throughout the 1960s on a revolutionary scale. Much of it included anti-clerical elements, and virtually all of it involved rebellion against gender norms and moral ideas that were closely entangled with religious teachings. Part of the answer, then, likely involves the more general question of what triggered the social revolutions of the 1960s.

Brown emphasizes the recognizably different experiences of men and women who turned away from religious faith. Until the 1960s, self-conscious non-believers were likely to be male, since women faced an almost irresistible pressure not even to *contemplate* a no-faith viewpoint and identity. Indeed, women had historically been enforcers of religion and conventional morality, expected to tame the men in their lives, to

rein in male desires and rebellious tendencies. By the 1950s, this role as moral police was possibly fading; however, indications of piety and conventional virtue remained essential for a woman to be regarded as socially respectable and thus avoid ostracism and vilification. That was far less so for men, as there were ample role models of rogue male intellectuals, or even local village atheists, rejecting religion.

By the 1950s, many men were likely indifferent to, cynical about, resentful of, or even privately hostile toward religion. This was, we might reasonably suspect, less common in the case of women, who were socialized differently. It is notable that Brown's female respondents expressed less bitterness than the corresponding men about the religion of their youth.

As described by Brown, his male respondents typically spoke of their resistance to perceived unreason and injustice, often using the language of science and analysis, and sometimes talking at length about inspirational authors and books. Their experience of losing religious faith was, in some cases, severely distressing, involving traumatic intellectual struggles (for what it's worth, I can sympathize with this from my own similar experience in the 1970s). However, their efforts to free themselves from religion were grounded in familiar intellectual doubts. The sorts of struggle and trauma experienced by women tended to be quite different.

Many men who lost their faith during the long 1960s spoke, in retrospect, of their development of naturalistic worldviews through encounters with science and philosophy, whereas only a few women spoke like this. Instead, women often reported distressful events in their lives from gender-based subordination, abuse, or loss of loved ones. Unlike the men in Brown's sample, the women described their disengagement from family expectations and their rejection of 1950s' ideas of respectability and piety. Conversely, these women did not speak in the same way as men of psychological trauma from the actual experience of shedding religious belief. At a critical transition point in Western history, it seems, men and women tended to become alienated from religion by different paths.

For Brown, certainly, the key change was the alienation of many women in the 1960s. He refers to 'the declining acceptance by young women of the traditional Christian ideal of marriage, motherhood and domesticity' (p. 6). Many women ceased to accept – and ceased to reflect in their own thoughts and speech – Christian moral discourse relating to pious femininity and to moral virtue more generally. Not surprisingly, then, Brown finds strong interconnections between what he calls 'the rise of no religionism' (p. 89) and the dramatic changes for women and families associated with the 1960s' demographic transition. These changes included later marriages, increased sexual activity outside of marriage, a steep decline in fertility levels, and far greater participation by women in higher education and the paid labour market.

At this critical point in history, many women became unwilling to submit to the regime of sexual control imposed by the churches and often enforced through the family. In rejecting this, they inevitably denied the authority of religious culture and discourse. In interviews, feminist respondents often reported a general alienation from religion and conventional morality at an early stage in their lives. This often preceded (and perhaps motivated) their feminism, but their feminism, in turn, preceded their self-recognition as humanists or atheists.

While Brown's interviews were with self-conscious non-believers, it seems likely that there was widespread alienation of women from religion during the 1960s, extending to some who retained a residual faith. *Becoming Atheist* tends to confirm a dissatisfaction among the young women of the time with conventional morals and gender roles. When added to more traditional – largely male – suspicion of religiosity, this could be an effective recipe for snowballing irreligiosity. Bear in mind that some *male* compliance with religious and moral norms may have been in deference to the real or imagined sensibilities of women. An unprecedented defection of women from religiosity could thus have had a very large impact.

The previous paragraph is my own formulation, and it is not exactly how Brown analyzes the issue. However, it seems consistent with the general direction of his research. In any event, there is an impressive

cumulative case that at least one important component of the 1960s crash of religiosity was the historically rapid alienation of women. What still strikes me as surprising, however, is the absence of women (though not men) in Brown's sample who began with strong intellectual commitment to religious doctrines. This prompts a question as to whether the ubiquitous show of pious femininity in the 1950s was partly an illusion. Might it be that, by that point or earlier, much women's compliance was rather skin deep?

If so, and if many 1950s men privately resented religiosity, it is possible that the spread of private attitudes during the 1950s was somewhat out of kilter with public discourse and publicly acceptable opinion. I'm thinking here of the work of Timur Kuran on preference falsification – see Kuran's *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*.(1) In light of this, we might wonder whether Western religiosity was more fragile during the 1950s – more a veneer, more vulnerable to social shocks – than was evident at the time. While this is speculative, such speculation is not necessarily out of place as long as it is not presented as fact.

Brown himself engages in some potentially stimulating and useful speculation. He discusses an alternative 'moral cosmos' (p. 161) that has increasingly gained in popularity since the 1960s; he associates this with religious doubt, separation of morality from religious authority, broad ideas of social tolerance (including a commitment to gay rights), and an openness to entirely materialist or naturalistic understandings of the world. Brown favours the word *humanism* for this moral cosmos – and this does seem one reasonable and transparent sense of the word.

As Brown acknowledges, there is a long history behind the development of humanism in this sense, but he emphasizes that many of his respondents arrived at broadly humanist understandings through their own experience, without engaging with humanist books or speakers. He speculates that humanist intuitions may have been widespread in post-war Western society and may have existed in earlier historical periods. Perhaps, he suggests, these intuitions occur to some people in all human societies – even when their explicit cultural expression is forbidden.

This, of course, raises very large questions. It is not clear, despite the best efforts of anthropologists, psychologists, and historians, why human beings and human societies are so often religious. And nor do we know for sure how societies sometimes turn away from religiosity. Perhaps no single scholar can deal with this adequately. Making progress will require many rigorous and workably narrow research programs, as well as some careful synthesis. Brown's research has an important role to play, and I commend his latest book for study and discussion.

Notes

1. Timur Kuran, *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).Back to (1)

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[1] https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/264329