

This is a draft of a chapter that has been published by Oxford University Press - Bullock, Josh and Bullivant, Stephen (2021) Non-religion and Europe. In: Davie, Grace and Leustean, Lucian N., (eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Europe. Oxford, U.K. : Oxford University Press. pp. 551-567. ISBN 9780198834267

<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-oxford-handbook-of-religion-and-europe-9780198834267?cc=gb&lang=en#>

Nonreligion and Europe

Josh Bullock and Stephen Bullivant

Abstract

This chapter is concerned with the growing phenomenon of nonreligion and its place in modern Europe. The secular is hardly a new idea in European history but its nature and forms evolve. The focus here is on the growing significance of nonreligion in the twenty-first century especially among younger people. This phenomenon is approached in different ways: conceptually, statistically and ethnographically. The conceptual approach emphasizes the shift away from the absence of religion to the presence of a positively chosen alternative. The statistical section underlines the considerable variations in the presence of nonreligion both within and across the different parts of Europe and the reasons for this. Finally, three ethnographic vignettes illustrate the diverse ways in which substantive and engaged expressions of nonreligion ‘make sense’ within their particular socio-religious contexts.

Keywords

Nonreligion, Secular, Secularization, Europe, Statistical and Ethnographic approaches

Introduction

This chapter not only identifies but explains the new emphasis on nonreligion among scholars of religion in Europe (and elsewhere) over the past ten or fifteen years; it also explores some of the methodological issues that arise in this field. An important shift is underlined from the outset: that is an increasing emphasis on treating nonreligious people, beliefs, communities, and cultures positively rather than negatively, in other words as a presence in their own right rather than merely the absence of something else – in this case religion.

To do this, the chapter unfolds as follows. It starts with a brief overview of nonreligion from an historical point of view. The current emphasis may be distinctive, but the secular has been present in Europe since its inception and has ebbed and flowed over centuries rather than decades. The ‘turn’ to nonreligion as such is then explored in more detail, paying attention to what this means, how it is defined, and why it has gathered speed in the new millennium. A section on the European Social Survey (ESS) follows, providing an overview of the prevalence of the ‘no religion’ population across twenty-two countries, together with the reasons for the considerable variation in nonreligiosity across the continent, drawing particular attention to the divide between the ‘Western’ and ‘Central and Eastern’ regions of Europe. In the final part of the chapter, three qualitative case studies, have been chosen to represent three very different countries: the UK, Norway, and Poland. The aim of these vignettes is to display the contrasting, and context-dependent ways, in which concrete nonreligion is manifesting itself in twenty-first century Europe. A short conclusion draws the threads of the chapter together.

The secular in European history

James O’Connell (1991) identified three formative factors in the making and re-making of Europe: these are the Judaeo-Christian tradition, Greek secularism, and Roman organization. Over two millennia all three have combined and recombined in different ways to form the entity that we know as Europe. Clearly the secular thread is as significant as the religious in this process and has come to the fore in a variety of forms at different moments in European

history. These vary in nature and include (among many others) the political, the scientific and the social. Some of these forms are chosen; others are imposed by political regimes – themselves secular – that brook no opposition. The following examples are indicative of a huge range of possibilities.

The political secularism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century is captured in the French case. Both the philosophical and political upheavals symbolized by the French Revolution (1789), and the sequence of events that followed after, were central to the secularizing process, in which the notion of *laïcité* is pivotal.¹ The ensuing debates dominated French history in the nineteenth century, in a series of confrontations referred to as ‘la guerre des deux Frances’: one monarchical, Catholic and conservative, the other republican, *laïque*, and progressive (Poulat, 1987). The decoupling of the French state from the Catholic Church did not become definitive until 1905, when it was inscribed in the law on the separation of church and state.² The creation of a fully secular school system (in the 1880s) was part and parcel of the same process.

Rather different were the intellectual challenges to religious belief that came from the opposition between science and religion in the mid-nineteenth century, epitomised in the epic struggles between creationism and Darwinian theories of human evolution. These were intellectual debates, redolent of earlier clashes between Galileo and the Catholic Church over the Copernican understanding of the universe, and picked up once again in the late-twentieth century by the group known as the ‘new atheists’, spearheaded by Richard Dawkins. Such clashes continued into the new century (Amarasingham, 2012). Different again was the revolution in social mores that took place in the 1960s. Not everything happened at once but by the end of this turbulent decade a series of changes had taken place that affected almost every sector of society, not least an extraordinarily rapid change in sexual attitudes and practice. Against this background, traditional, conservative – and often Christian-based – values could no longer be taken for granted: questioned by many, they were discarded by increasing numbers who either rejected or ignored the discipline of the churches and the ideas that they stood for.

In the 1960s, religious practice fell away noticeably in Western Europe. Further east, however, a rather different picture was emerging in the parts of Europe that found themselves under Soviet domination following World War II. In communist Europe the pervasive ideology was secularism, at times aggressive. Anything other than private belief was considered a threat to the regime and was rigorously suppressed, sometimes brutally. Unsurprisingly, religious practice fell away here as well, though for different reasons and more so in some places than others – a point developed below.

The ‘nonreligious turn’

Since the turn of the millennium, European scholars of religion have found a rather different focus for their work, in the study of what has come to be known as ‘nonreligion’. This recent coinage – or rather, re-coinage (see Guyau, [1886] 1897) – is a deliberately broad term, describing a variety of ‘[p]henomena primarily identified in contrast to religion, including but not limited to those rejecting religion’ (Bullivant and Lee 2016). It includes a wide range of social and cultural manifestations of atheism, agnosticism, indifference, nonreligiosity (e.g., religious non-practice and non-affiliation), secularity, and other ‘religion-adjacent’ topics.

As already indicated, the primary significance of the ‘nonreligious turn’ (Rommel *et al.*, 2020a) is not so much one of topic, as it is one of focus, emphasis, and mindset. To put the

¹ The notion of *laïcité* is difficult to translate into English; it means the absence of religion in the public sphere, notably the state and school system.

² *La loi du 9 décembre 1905 concernant la séparation des Eglise et de l’Etat.*

point in classical Durkheimian terms, nonreligious phenomena are now approached as being real, substantive ‘social facts’ in their own right (cf. Durkheim, ([1895] 1982: 50-9). They are not simply the ‘empty space’ left when the social facts of religious belief, practice, belonging, capital or whatever else have ebbed away or, as in some parts of Central and Eastern Europe during the twentieth century, been forcibly removed. Nor, in the case of (say) organized secularist groups or campaigns, can they fully be understood as solely a mirror image or photographic negative of – or indeed parasite upon – religious ideas or groups. As the American sociologist Christian Smith has noted, using the specific terms ‘secularity’ and ‘secularism’ though one could equally well substitute ‘nonreligion’:

Secularity and secularism are areas in which sociologists of religion have increasingly focused in recent years, ‘the secular’ becoming more properly understood as not a neutral, default human position or category, but instead a contingently situated, particular stance and type, the exigencies of which are worth empirical investigation. (2014: x n. 4)

Before proceeding, some concrete examples might help to make this point more clearly. Hitherto, for example, ‘no religion’ has often been regarded as simply the neutral absence of a (religious) identity – with ‘none’ or ‘nonreligious’ thus being a vacant none-of-the-above identity category, artificially created by survey research (e.g., Pasquale, 2007). Lois Lee’s qualitative studies of the ‘nonreligious’ in London, however, show both ‘how generic non-religious identifications are not merely imposed on people by social researchers but can be made and performed by them in their everyday lives’ (2015: 132), and the various and subtle ways in which their nonreligiosity plays out substantively in their actions and activities. In short, ‘it is wrong to assume that the “nones” are always nothings’ (2015: 153; see also Lee, 2014). This way of viewing aspects of nonreligiosity as ‘somethings’, with their own socio-cultural causes, effects, contexts, and correlates, permits a number of the themes in European sociology of religion to be viewed in a new light.

In practice, a great deal of the existing scholarship on secularization has, in practice, been the study of ‘*de*-religionization’. That is to say, the analytic focus has typically been the weakening of religious belief, identity, and practice, and/or on the waning social influence of religious ideas or groups. Only rarely has the focus been on the numerical growth or increasing cultural salience of the beliefs, practices, identities, communities, influence, which replace them. This is the difference, possibly, between conducting the inquest into ‘the death of Christian Britain’ (Brown 2001) and charting ‘the growth and maturing of noreligionism’ (Brown, 2012: 28) or ‘becoming atheist’ (Brown, 2017), over the same period. Or alternatively, between narrating ‘how the Church of England lost the English people’ (Brown and Woodhead 2016) and exploring ‘the rise of “No Religion” [... as] the emergence of a new cultural majority’ (Woodhead 2016). These ‘twinned’ topics, though obviously and necessarily related, are not simply interchangeable. In both cases, the change of analytic focus from ‘religious decline’ to ‘nonreligious increase’ is not purely semantic. They may well be two sides of the same coin (cf. Davie 2013). But as also with coins, the two sides differ substantively in both appearance and meaning. The obverse is by no means simply the mirror-image of the reverse, or vice versa.

Measuring nonreligion

This understanding of nonreligion as ‘not a neutral, default human position or category, but instead a contingently situated, particular stance and type, the exigencies of which are worth empirical investigation’ (Smith, 2014: x n. 4) – that is, as a ‘something’ rather than a nothing

– has important implications for how best to measure and explore it. The most basic, and bluntest, way is to glean what is possible from largescale social surveys, which often ask questions about religious affiliation and (less often) practice and belief. This is true of several international survey programmes, which periodically ask the same questions (translations permitting) across a range of European countries more-or-less simultaneously, such as the European Values Study (every nine years, since 1981), and the International Social Survey Programme (annually since 1985, but with dedicated ‘Religion modules in 1991, 1998, 2008 and 2018).³ Such surveys, employing nationally representative samples, are a reliable means of gaining a ‘big picture’ overview of religious patterns. They are especially useful for drawing meaningful comparisons between different countries in the same year (i.e., ‘does country X have more Christians/Muslims/Jews than country Y?’, ‘are X’s Catholics, on average, more religiously practising or believing than Y’s or Z’s?’), or between different years within the same country (e.g., ‘have overall levels of religious affiliation/practice in X risen or fallen over the past twenty years?’, ‘are today’s 18-30 year old Christians in Y more or less likely to attend church weekly than Y’s 18-30 year old Christians did twenty years ago?’).

Two caveats are worth noting, however. The first is that, over and above the inherent limits of survey research, questions designed for measuring religion can only go so far in understanding nonreligion (see Remmel and Uibu, [2015] 2019: 479-80). While they are an indispensable starting point, to probe deeper it is necessary either to design new surveys (cf. Bullivant *et al.*, 2019), or to employ much richer and more nuanced qualitative methodologies (see below) – and preferably both.

The second is that (non)religious identity/affiliation is often a complex and ambivalent affair. It brings together aspects – positive or negative, weak or strong – of upbringing, belief, past and current practice, feelings of belonging, and one’s sense of place vis-a-vis familial, cultural, ethnic, social, and national traditions. Different people, naturally, weight each aspect differently. For some, simply having been raised as a Catholic, regardless of present practice or conviction, is enough to make them ‘always a Catholic’; for others, only those who believe every tenet, and fulfil every obligation, count as ‘real’ adherents. Many, perhaps most, people find themselves somewhere between these two extremes. Regardless of where this line is drawn, a significant proportion of people *know* what they ‘are’, religiously speaking, and can be relied upon to answer ‘Catholic’ (or ‘Zoroastrian’, or whatever) when asked. For such people, the precise wording of a question, or the context in which it is posed, is unlikely materially to affect the answer they give. For others, however, questions with different nuances of wording, or even the same question asked at different times, may elicit differing responses.

It is easy to imagine why this might be: why, for example, the same person may feel a ‘Catholic’ in some ways (e.g., sacramentally, culturally, in some beliefs, and to some degree of practice), and as someone of ‘No religion’ in other ways (e.g., in terms of current lifestyle, certain other beliefs or doubts, and in lack of regular practice). Especially if it is not a question they are asked very often, seemingly slight differences in the wording of the question or a host of other, contextual factors – might provoke either response (Day and Lee, 2014; Hackett, 2014). These so-called ‘liminal nones’ have recently begun to attract serious sociological attention (Lim *et al.*, 2010; Hout, 2017). There are moreover good reasons for thinking that the phenomenon might be particularly significant in countries where secularizing processes are well underway, but in which religious traditions and organizations still retain a widespread cultural role (or did until quite recently). This hypothesis, recognizing ‘the complex and messy relationships between [...] different aspects and forms of religion which make up the “fuzzy frontiers” of religious identity’ (Gregg and Scholefield, 2015: 10) would go a long way to

³ See European Values Study, ‘Religion’, available at <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/about-evs/> and <https://www.gesis.org/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-topic/religion>. (all websites in this chapter were accessed on 12 May 2020).

explaining the variable rates of (non)religious affiliation gauged using different survey/census questions, as for example in the UK (Voas and Bruce, 2004; Day, 2011) and Ireland (Bullivant, 2017a).

Keeping these qualifications in mind, the figures from the 2016 European Social Survey, including data from twenty-two countries., are revealing. The ESS asks a two-stage religious affiliation question: ‘Do you consider yourself belonging to any particular religion or denomination? (Yes/No)’, with a follow-up ‘If so, which?’ for those answering yes.⁴

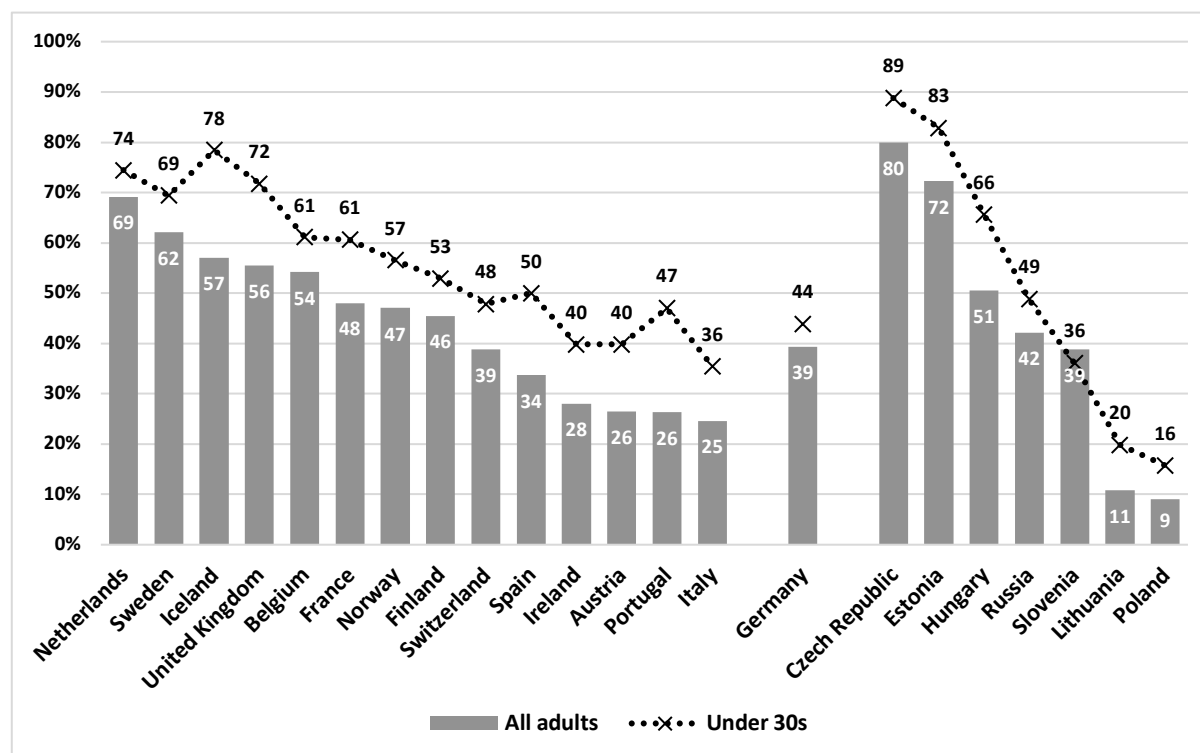


Figure 31.1: Proportions of total adult population, and 16-29 years olds, identifying as having no religion in selected European countries. *Source:* European Social Survey (2016; weighted data).

Fig. 31.1 presents the proportions of ‘nones’ in both the general adult population, and among young adults (i.e., 16-29 year-olds), arranged into three groups: fourteen Western European countries towards the left of the graph; seven Central and Eastern European countries towards the right; and Germany alone between them. These divisions are not, of course, simply geographical (most of Austria is as ‘central’ as the Czech Republic; Finland lies significantly ‘east’ of Slovenia), but rather relate to twentieth-century geopolitical history. Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a cipher for countries that formed part of the ‘Eastern Bloc’ of communist countries during a roughly forty-year period from the end of the Second World War until 1989 (though some of these countries, especially Russia, were communist-controlled for a longer period than this). Western Europe is less easily defined: over this same period, most of these countries were democracies (though not Spain or Portugal for much of it), and/or allied to the United States via NATO (though not the officially neutral countries Ireland, Switzerland,

⁴ This mode of asking seems to produce in a higher proportion of ‘no religion’ than other standard survey questions (e.g., ‘What is your religion?’, ‘What is your religious preference?’ or ‘What religion, if any, do you consider yourself as belonging to?’). This is perhaps because it implicitly signals the normalness of *not* having a religion, thus nudging a certain percentage of liminals to say no who might (equally honestly, for the reasons given above) answer a differently phrased question with a religious answer.

Austria, Norway, and Finland); in practice, ‘not-communist’ is probably their simplest unifier. Contemporary Germany, as the reunified product of West Germany and the (Eastern Bloc) German Democratic Republic, combines both sides of Europe’s geopolitical divide, and hence sits between the two (on the resulting, hybrid German case, see Braun *et al.*, 2007; Wolhrab-Sahr, 2011).

Before considering the relevance of the last millennium’s political history for understanding contemporary nonreligion, it is worth noting first the striking variability within each of the two main groupings. Europe is not, in the global scheme of things, a particularly large place. Yet, even at this bluntest level of analysis, there are notable differences in the proportions of ‘nones’: 69 per cent of the Dutch to only 25-26 per cent of Italians, Portuguese, and Austrians. Even adjoining countries, where *a priori* one might expect the likelihood of shared culture and history to produce similar religious results, can diverge by a fair margin: Italy (25%) versus France (48%), or indeed Ireland (28%) and the United Kingdom (56%). *A posteriori*, however – that is, informed by a proper understanding of the distinct-but-intertwined social, cultural, political, and religious histories of these countries (with the UK and Ireland a case in point) – these divergences make a great deal of sense.

Traditionally, sociologists of European religion have further subdivided the continent, based on precisely these kinds of historical and contextual factors, into different explanatory subgroups: historically ‘Catholic’, ‘Lutheran’, and ‘mixed’ countries, to give a classic example (Davie 2000); or even into specific sub-subgroups thought to be particularly noteworthy for one reason or another (see, for example, ‘Orange Exceptionalism’ in Greeley, 2004: 197-212). While no wholly clear-cut patterns emerge from Fig. 31.1, it is surely worth noting that the five least nonreligious (by affiliation) countries in the sample are all historically Catholic, whereas only one of the most nonreligious – i.e., Belgium – is. That observation, however, needs further scrutiny. It might simply be, for example, that a ‘nominal’ or ‘cultural’ religious identity persists slightly longer in Catholic communities than in Protestant ones (see Bullivant, 2019).

Turning now to the Central and Eastern countries, most striking here is not simply the variation between the countries (as in the West), but the much greater extremes. Indeed, across the entire twenty-two country sample, the two highest and two lowest nonreligious nations both occur among the seven post-communist examples. Furthermore, the religiously mixed Czech Republic with 80 per cent nones, and Lithuania and Poland – both traditionally Catholic countries – with 11 per cent and 9 per cent nones are significantly higher/lower than the Western ‘extremes’. This is important for several reasons. There has been a tendency among Western scholars to bracket the (now former) communist countries, and to treat them as being socially, economically and religiously homogeneous; as, indeed, a monolithic ‘Eastern Bloc’. But as scholars *from* these countries – whose writings on (non)religion, as on other areas, have become more and more widely accessible (see Remmel *et al.*, 2019 for a wonderfully useful English-language survey of nonreligion in these countries) – have long emphasized, this is a grave misconception (Zrinščak, 2004; Borowik *et al.*, 2013). As the Hungarian sociologist Miklós Tomka noted: ‘Eastern Europe was artificially integrated by Soviet power for decades. This recent, but historically short intermezzo did not eliminate differences between subregions and countries’ (2002: 483).

Tomka elaborated this point as follows: not only did pre-modern and highly modernized societies live side by side, but some countries of the Soviet bloc had churches in the Eastern tradition, whilst others had churches in the Western tradition. ‘The former had little historical experience of the social and cultural differentiation that countries further west had experienced in the Investiture Dispute, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment’ (Tomka, 2004: 106). As a result, traditions and mental dispositions differed markedly as did the social rooting of the churches. ‘In Poland, for example, ‘the church organization could keep its independence over against the party state. In other countries the power of the religious

organization was broken or forced to bend the knee’ (Tomka, 2004: 106). Furthermore, the officially atheist ideologies and policies of the various communist parties were not uniform either across the region, or over time within each country (most notably, see Smolkin 2018’s fascinating history of Soviet atheism). Given the complexities of the interacting factors it is perhaps not surprising that communist atheization – both forced and ‘encouraged’ – should have produced such extremes of effect, in both directions, even within the small subsample of countries that appear in the ESS data. Nor that there should be a higher ‘standard deviation’ within these countries (especially bearing in mind that the main outliers of Poland and the Czech Republic share a border) when compared to the more ‘organic’ (Zuckerman 2007) or ‘natural process of secularization’ (Bercken, 1989: 77; cf. Tomka, 1991) prevalent within Western Europe.

For all the above paragraphs’ emphasis on difference, both within and between the two main groupings, it is worth noting finally one striking degree of near-universal commonality. Across all countries, with the single exception of Slovenia, young adults are appreciably more likely than the general adult population to identify as having no religion. Furthermore, despite a small number of exceptions (Slovenia, plus the particular highs of Spain, Portugal, Iceland, and the UK) this difference is surprisingly consistent with a mean difference across all twenty-two countries of ten percentage points. While it is possible that in some countries this is primarily a lifecycle effect (i.e., young adults are always likely to identify as having no religion, but then they generally [re]identify later in life), there is now a very strong body of evidence suggesting the likelihood of generational religious decline (e.g., Voas, 2015; Storm and Voas, 2012).

Three case studies

It seems therefore, that much of Europe is increasingly becoming a post-Christian society with young adults in particular neither identifying with, nor practising religion. That said, Europe’s nations exhibit a great deal of diversity in their (non)religious sociocultural climates: there is no one ‘European’ pattern. Put differently, the decline in Christianity in much of Europe has given rise to very varied and often innovative ways to ‘belong’.

In the following section are three case studies of organized and ‘positive’ nonreligion:⁵ First, the Sunday Assembly, a secular congregation originating in London. Second, the Norwegian Humanist Association, which shares a democratic and ethical life stance. And third, the Kazimierz Łyszczyński Foundation (KLF) originating in Warsaw, an organization furthering both atheism and secular ethics. The Sunday Assembly functions like an Evangelical-style church for nonreligious people; the Norwegian Humanists provide structure and support for a constituency that still wants to mark life events with rituals and ceremonies; and the KLF promotes women’s and atheist rights in face of a populist right-wing government closely linked with Catholicism. As in the previous section, the discussion of the West European cases precedes the central European example, and each case reflects the religious culture of which it is part.

UK: Sunday Assembly

⁵ The material in this section draws on Bullock’s *Nonreligion and The Sunday Assembly* (2020), and on Bullock’s and Herbert’s 2018-2019 Understanding Unbelief research entitled *Reaching for a New Sense of Connection*, which examined the nature and diversity of unbelief, practice and social connections amongst nonreligious millennials in six European countries (UK, Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Poland and Romania). We are grateful to Sanderson Jones (Sunday Assembly), Siri Sandberg (Norwegian Humanists), and Nina Sankari (KLF) for providing up-to-date figures and information about their respective organizations.

The UK Sunday Assembly is among the best-known examples of organized nonreligion to become visible both within society and in academic scholarship. It was set up in January 2013 by stand-up comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans: first as an ‘atheist church’, then as a ‘godless congregation’, and currently as a ‘secular congregation’. By 2019, this was a registered charity (running solely on donations) and had franchised 41 successful congregations in eight countries, including a strong presence in the United States. The Sunday Assembly’s motto is ‘Live Better, Help Often and Wonder More’ (Sunday Assembly, 2013). Its goal is to be ‘a global network of people who want to make the most of this one life we know we have’, and its vision is to establish ‘a godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one’ (Sunday Assembly, 2013).

It began in London, the city which houses the largest nonreligious population in Britain.⁶ London, moreover, is the biggest congregation and has set the tone, style and format for others in the franchise. Meeting at the Conway Hall,⁷ on the first and third Sunday of each month the Sunday Assembly regularly attracts 400-500 people. A wide range of small group interactions take place throughout the week outside the main ‘service’, including a choir, article club, theatre and dance, and opportunities for volunteering. The Sunday Assembly frequently self-describes as having ‘the best bits of church, awesome pop songs, but no religion’. Rather than singing hymns, they opt for popular music ranging from Queen to Carly Rae Jepsen. Rather than listening to a sermon, they opt for a TED Talk;⁸ and rather than praying, they have a secular moment of reflection. The structure also includes a member of the congregation taking to the stage in a testimonial style ‘trying their best’ section. In this respect, the Sunday Assembly acts as a secular mirror – leveraging on distinctive and relatively popular forms of Christianity.

The current and previous beliefs of ‘Assemblers’ highlight how many of them have followed a similar trajectory: transitioning into post-Christianity by leaving a Christian faith and now identifying as primarily nonreligious and/or atheist, humanist, or agnostic. Some participants identified with one of these terms, others with some or all of them: they could be nonreligious in life-style, atheistic regarding God(s), agnostic about the universe, and humanistic in their values. The majority of the participants (75%) had grown up with varying degrees of Christianity in their background.⁹ This was often a source of nostalgia, whether it was attending Sunday school as a child or being a member of an evangelical or new religious movement when older. The remaining 25 per cent, who grew up nonreligious, were seeking a secular community, seeing the value of community in religion. The vast majority of the Sunday Assembly are ethnically white and do not reflect the diversity of Greater London. The age range is predominantly Generation Y– i. e. those born between 1980 and the mid-1990s – who were 20 to 35 years old at the time of our study.

It is Generation Y that has provided the appropriate conditions for the Sunday Assembly to create a small-scale global congregational movement. Clichéd as it may sound, the world was not ready for the Sunday Assembly even 25 years ago — simply put, it would not have served a purpose; nor was the role of the internet and social media sufficiently developed – a crucial factor in the rise of organized nonreligion. However, with the dawn of the new millennium, then post-9/11, post-new-atheism, and amidst a decline in Christianity in the UK, the Sunday Assembly has been able to thrive as a ‘half-way house’ for those leaving

⁶ Proportionally London has, by far, the fewest ‘nones’ in Britain at 31per cent, but the most in absolute terms (see Bullivant, 2017b: 3).

⁷ An impressive building in central London assumed to be home to the oldest freethinking organization in the world.

⁸ TED talks are influential videos devoted to spreading innovative ideas.

⁹ This figure is estimated from informal conversations accompanying the ethnography and semi-structured interviews.

their religion and those who had never been religious, but who are seeking what religious communities have to offer (not least an abundance of social capital, and a sense of belonging).

All that said, and despite its relative success, the future of the Sunday Assembly is uncertain. Franchised congregations have already failed in many cities including Paris and Berlin.¹⁰ If Christian heritage is abandoned completely, the current model of the Sunday Assembly will no longer resonate. Alternatively, it can adapt: embracing ‘secular spirituality’ or ‘wellbeing’, or even training its congregational leaders as secular chaplains, thereby creating new rituals and strengthening community ties.

Norway: Human-Etisk Forbund

In 2019, the state-funded Norwegian Humanist Association (Human-Etisk Forbund [NHA]), founded in 1956, had 120 local/county offices and a large main office in Oslo. This is one of the largest Humanist Associations in the world (and the largest of all in proportion to population) with more than 90,000 members, equalling 2 per cent of the Norwegian population. If the Sunday Assembly represents a particular type of organized nonreligion drawing on a post-Christian culture and a need for congregational belonging, the NHA provides a more structured approach in terms of ceremonies and rituals for life events. This is a campaigning organization (for example against the ritual circumcision of boys); it also offers community gatherings (activities such as board game/ movie/ philosophy/ debate nights for their youth chapter).

Gordon-Lennox *et al.* (2017: 90) explain that until 1911, Christian confirmation in Norway was obligatory, a rite made mandatory for all young people by the Protestant Church of Denmark-Norway. From 1736, citizenship was dependent on confirmation. In 1951 the NHA established a secular alternative ‘so that non-religious youth could confirm and keep their integrity’ (Gordon-Lennox *et al.*, 2017: 90) and thus maintain a tradition that was culturally engrained. Currently, Norwegian youth have the option of marking this coming-of-age celebration through either a humanist or a church confirmation.¹¹ Sandberg (2018) states that approximately 20 per cent (circa 12,000 in 2019) of fifteen-year-olds opt for a NHA confirmation, whereas 60 per cent still opt for the traditional Protestant rite, and 20 per cent for nothing at all. It is worth noting that the numbers of people selecting secular rituals for life events in general remain very constant.

Gordon-Lennox *et al.* (2017: 92) also remark that in recent years ‘young people participate because humanist confirmation has become part of their family tradition’. After 65 years, it seems that in some families humanist confirmation has become established practice over several generations. Sandberg (2018) explains that an essential element in completing the confirmation process is a course that explores questions of identity, human rights, and ethics. This course poses ethical questions to the candidates who are fourteen when they sign up. Thus, they are exposed to ideas that they may not have previously considered. The overall aim of the course is to make young people more aware of their own viewpoints and values. ‘It is not assumed that they are all humanists, since they are in the process of finding out who they are and what their worldview is. The goal is not to force them towards humanism but rather to encourage them to develop a considered outlook as they embark on the path to adulthood’ (Sandberg, 2018).

¹⁰ At their height (2015) there were 70 congregations in eight different countries but the movement has seen both rapid rise and rapid fall.

¹¹ Coming-of-age secular confirmations can also be found across Scandinavia and East Germany.

In 2020, the Humanist Youth (Humanistisk Ungdom) had one thousand members aged 15 to 25.¹² They exist as an individual organization, not simply as a group within the NHA, with their own governing structure, board and budget, and with an elected leader and two full time employees. Across Norway they have sixteen local chapters. Fieldwork in their Kristiansand branch (in South Norway) revealed more about humanistic rituals and ceremonies, ‘Camp Refugee’:

[You] simulate being a refugee travelling across borders, travelling to different refugee camps, getting to Norway and trying to get into Norway, getting asylum, and then automatically getting rejected. This is all taking place over 24 hours. It’s really intense. You barely get any food [same calories as a refugee would have]. You barely get any sleep. You don’t know what time it is... I think it was really important in giving people perspective, because when you're talking about refugees we often forget that these are humans that have suffered a great amount getting here, and having some sympathy for their experience, and knowing some of what they go through, and not just they got here and are trying to basically live off everyone else.

Poland: Fundacja im. Kazimierz Łyszczyński

The third case study is located in Warsaw, Poland. Kazimierz Łyszczyński (1634-1689) was a Polish philosopher and author of *De non existentia Dei* (*On the non-existence of God*). The surviving fragments of the manuscript proclaim that ‘man is the creator of God’ and exists only in the human mind being nothing more than a concept. Łyszczyński was the first well-known atheist in Poland, and was accused by one of his debtors of having denied the existence of God; he was tried and executed for his atheistic beliefs in 1689 (Kraśiński, 1840), suffering a horrific death in the Old Town Market Place in Warsaw. In communist Poland Łyszczyński was celebrated as a martyr to the atheist cause.

The Fundacja (foundation) im. Kazimierz Łyszczyński (KLF) was established in 2013 – i.e. in the same year as the Sunday Assembly as an organization working for the freedom of conscience, word and expression and secularism of the state, as well as promoting the worldview of atheism and secular ethics.¹³ In 2019, the KLF organized their sixth annual ‘Days of Atheism’ conference on the 330th anniversary of the death of their patron. In the course of this meeting, a variety of topics were discussed, notably freedom of choice and the need to protect the rights of discriminated groups, as well as ethical and moral issues such as the right to end your own life. In addition, there was careful scrutiny of both financial and child abuse on the part of the Catholic Church.

The KLF has the following goals. It aims to inform the Polish public on issues relating to rationalism whilst at the same time promoting the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state. Members aspire to popularize science and scientific method and to establish a knowledge-based society. They defend the rights of people experiencing discrimination on the basis of ‘worldview, gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity’, sentiments captured by their Vice-President, Nina Sankari; ‘It’s clear that without liberation from religious oppression, there will be no women’s rights... Without a secular state there will be no democracy’.¹⁴ In addition, the KLF supports the activities of other nonreligious international organizations (e.g. Humanists International). It strives for the idea of an ‘open

¹² ‘Norwegian Humanist Youth’, available at <https://humanistiskungdom.no/om-oss/english/>

¹³ See Kazimierz Łyszczyński Foundation, available at <https://lyszczynski.com.pl/index.php/en/about-us/>

¹⁴ See Women Vote Peace (2019) available at <https://www.wilpf.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Women-For-Peace-Publication-WILPF-Germany.pdf>

society' and the protection of human rights, freedom and civil liberties, in particular the combating of prejudice and right to equality.

The KLF, is similar to the Sunday Assembly, in so far as its hosts community-building activities such as 'atheist picnics' (up to 50 people) and other gatherings, as well as innovative contests – for example the 'atheist of the year' award, which recognizes individuals, organizations and institutions for 'counteraction against discrimination based on belief'. But unlike the Sunday Assembly, the KLF was born out of opposition to religion; there is no nostalgia here. And if the Sunday Assembly acts as a 'secular mirror', the KLF functions as a focus of resistance to what is seen as populist, nationalist and Catholic oppression. Importantly the KLF links its secular and atheist battles to feminism and women's rights. They take this stance for two reasons. First, they view religion to be oppressive particularly towards women, and second, they want to change the face of atheism as an 'all male club'. As a result, they have developed close links to the *Family Planning and Women's Rights Federation* (Federa) and the *Polish Women on Strike* (OSK) with members of the KLF and women's rights organizations supporting and speaking at each other's events.

The KLF is not associated with any political party; rather they support the secular demands of any party which formulates them (in Poland, this will mean left-wing parties). The KLF attracts a membership with an average age of 40 plus, but also includes a number of retired people and a few (very few) students. It is predominantly white (such is the demography in Poland) and middle-class – thus a similar but slightly older demographic to that of the Sunday Assembly.

Conclusion

This chapter began with a short overview of the place of the secular in European history. Its primary focus has, however, been the recent (twenty-first century) and growing significance of nonreligion in the lives of increasing numbers of especially young Europeans. This phenomenon has been approached in different ways: conceptually, statistically and in three ethnographic vignettes. The conceptual approach emphasized the shift away from the absence of religion to the presence of a positively chosen alternative. The statistical section underlined the considerable variations in the presence of nonreligion both within and across the different parts of Europe. The vignettes illustrated the diverse ways in which substantive and engaged expressions of nonreligion 'make sense' within their particular socio-religious contexts.

Important as the latter are it is clear that the great majority of Europe's nonreligious have little to no involvement with organized nonreligion in the sense of '[a]ctivities formally organized for the purpose of discussing, practising, or promoting nonreligion' (Bullivant and Lee 2016). To what extent this may change over time remains, of course, an open question. Far less uncertain, judging from the evidence adduced in Fig. 31.1 (see also Bullivant, 2018), is that nonreligion – in whatsoever forms it manifests itself – looks set to be an ever-more prominent feature of the European religious landscape in the decades to come.

References

- Amarasingham, Amarnath (ed.). 2012. *Religion and the New Atheism*, Leiden: Brill
- Bercken, William van den. 1989. *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union*, translated by H. Th. Wake, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter

Borowik, Irena, Branko Ančić, and Radosław Tyrała. 2013. 'Central and Eastern Europe' In Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 622-37

Braun, Christina von, Wilhelm Gräb, and Johannes Zachhuber (eds). 2007. *Säkularisierung. Bilanz und Perspektiven einer umstrittenen These*, Münster: Lit-Verlag

Brown, Andrew, and Linda Woodhead. 2016. *That Was the Church That Was: How the Church of England Lost the English People*, London: Bloomsbury

Brown, Callum G. 2001. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, London: Routledge

Brown, Callum G. 2012. *Religion and the Demographic Revolution: Women and Secularisation in Canada, Ireland, UK and USA since the 1960s*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press

Brown, Callum G. 2017. *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West*, London: Bloomsbury

Bullivant, Stephen. 2017a. 'Religion in Ireland: Recent Trends and Possible Futures', Iona Institute lecture, Dublin, 24 August, available at <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/religion-in-ireland-current-trends/>

Bullivant, Stephen. 2017b. *The "No religion" Population of Britain: Recent Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey (2015) and the European Social Survey (2014)*, Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, available at <https://research.stmarys.ac.uk/id/eprint/1525/>

Bullivant, Stephen. 2018. *Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops* (Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society/Institut Catholique de Paris), available at <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf>

Bullivant, Stephen. 2019. *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bullivant, Stephen, and Lois Lee. 2016. *The Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bullivant, Stephen, Miguel Farias, Jonathan Lanman, and Lois Lee. 2019. *Understanding Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics Around the World: Interim Findings from 2019 Research in Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States*, Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society, available at <https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/172083346/UUReportRome.pdf>

Bullock, Josh. Forthcoming 2021. *Nonreligion and the Sunday Assembly*, London: Routledge

Davie, Grace. 2000. *Religion in Europe: A Memory Mutates*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Davie, Grace. 2013. 'Belief and Unbelief: Two Sides of a Coin', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 15 (3): 259-66

Day, Abby, and Lois Lee. 2014. 'Making Sense of Surveys and Censuses: Issues in Religious Self-identification', *Religion*, 44 (3): 345-56

Durkheim, Émile. [1895] 1982. *The Rules of Sociological Method*, translated by W. D. Hall, New York: Free Press

ESS Round 8: European Social Survey Round 8 Data (2016). Data file edition 2.1. NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive and distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC, available at <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/download.html?r=8>

Gordon-Lennox, Jeltje; Lene Mürer, Siri Sandberg, Inger-Johanne Slaatta, Louise Marie Petersen, Bjarni Jonsson, and Tuomas Rutanen. 2017. 'Case Study: A Nordic Rite of Passage Comes of Age' In Jeltje Gordon-Lennox (ed.), *Emerging Ritual in Secular Societies: A Transdisciplinary Conversation*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Guyau, Jean-Marie. 1897. *The Non-Religion of the Future: A Sociological Study*, New York: Henry Holt and Co.

Hackett, Conrad. 2014. 'Seven Things to Consider When Measuring Religious Identity', *Religion*, 44 (3): 396-413

Hervieu-Léger, Danièle. 2000. *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press

Hout, Michael. 2017. 'Religious Ambivalence, Liminality, and the Increase of No Religious Preference in the United States, 2006–2014', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 56 (1): 52-63

Lee, Lois. 2014. 'Secular or Nonreligious? Investigating and Interpreting Generic "Not Religious" Categories and Populations', *Religion*, 44 (3): 466-82

Lee, Lois. 2015. *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Chaeyoon Lim; Carol Ann MacGregor and Robert D. Putnam. 2010. 'Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity among Religious Nones', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 49 (4): 596-618

Pasquale, Frank L. 2007. 'Unbelief and Irreligion, Empirical Study and Neglect of' In Tom Flynn (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus, pp. 760-6

Poulat, Emile. 1987. *Liberté-Laïcité. La guerre des deux Frances et le principe de la modernité*, Paris: Cerf/Cujas

Rommel, Atko, and Marko Uibu. [2015] 2019. 'Outside Conventional Forms: Religion and Non-Religion in Estonia' In Indrek Peedu (ed.), *Estonian Study of Religion: A Reader*, Tartu: University of Tartu Press, pp. 462-84

Rommel, Atko, David Václavík, and Tomáš Bubík. 2020a. 'Studying Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: An Introduction' In Atko Rommel, David Václavík, and Tomáš Bubík (eds), *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge, pp. XX-XX

Rommel, Atko, David Václavík, and Tomáš Bubík (eds). 2020b. *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe*, London: Routledge

Sandberg, Siri. 2018. 'Humanist Confirmation Ceremonies', available at <https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/humanist-lives/0/steps/55731>

Smith, Christian. 2014. *The Sacred Project of American Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Smolkin, Victoria. 2018. *No Sacred Space is Ever Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Storm, Ingrid, and David Voas. 2012. 'The Intergenerational Transmission of Religious Service Attendance', *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society*, 25 (2): 131-50

Sunday Assembly. 2013. 'Our Story', available at www.sundayassembly.com/story

Taylor, Charles. 2007 *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

Tomka, Miklós. 1991. 'Secularization or Anomy? Interpreting Religious Change in Communist Societies', *Social Compass*, 38 (1): 93-102

Tomka, Miklós. 2002. 'Introduction', *Social Compass*, 49 (4): 483-95

Tomka, Miklós. 2004. 'Post-Communist Europe and the Continued Existence of Atheism', translated by John Bowden, *Concilium*, 2: 105-13

Voas, David. 2015. 'The Mysteries of Religion and the Lifecourse', *CLS Working Papers 1*, available at <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/shared/get-file.ashx?itemtype=document&id=1985>

Voas, David, and Steve Bruce. 2004. 'Research Note: The 2001 Census and Christian Identification in Britain', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19 (1): 23-8

Wohlrab-Sahr, Monika. 2011. "'Forced" Secularity? On the Appropriation of Repressive Secularization', *Religion and Society in Central and Eastern Europe*, 4 (1): 63-7

Woodhead, Linda. 2016. 'The Rise of "No Religion" in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority', *Journal of the British Academy*, 4: 245-61

Zrinščak, Siniša. 2004. 'Generations and Atheism: Patterns of Response to Communist Rule among Different Generations and Countries', *Social Compass*, 51 (2): 221-34

Zuckerman, Phil. 2007. 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns' In Michael Martin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 47-65

Suggested Readings

Bullivant, Stephen. 2018. *Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops*, Twickenham: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society/Institut Catholique de Paris, available at <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf>

Bullock, Josh. Forthcoming 2021. *Nonreligion and the Sunday Assembly*, London: Routledge

Davie, Grace. 2013. 'Belief and Unbelief: Two Sides of a Coin', *Ecclesiastical Law Journal*, 15 (3): 259-66

Tomáš Bubík, Atko Remmel, and David Vaclavik (eds). 2020. *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe: The Development of Secularity and Nonreligion*, London: Routledge

Lee, Lois. 2015. *Recognizing the Non-Religious: Reimagining the Secular*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bio

Josh Bullock is a Lecturer in Sociology and Criminology at Kingston University, London. His recent publication include, as co-author with David Herbert, 'The Diversity of Nonreligion: Meaning-making, Activism and Towards a Theory of Nonreligious Identity and Group Formation' in Vegard Ree Ytterbøe, and Erlend Hovdkinn (eds.), *Formatting Nonreligion in Late Modern Societies* (Springer, forthcoming 2021).

Stephen Bullivant is Professor of Theology and the Sociology of Religion at St Mary's University, London. His recent publications include, as author, *Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II* (Oxford University Press, 2019), and, as co-editor with Michael Ruse, *The Cambridge History of Atheism* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).