

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sovereign of Herself: Women's Narratives of 'Lived Atheism'

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In most western societies the number of female non-believers is growing and atheism has become one manifestation of nonreligion among many (Pew Forum, 2015). However, little is known about female atheists. This article fills the gap by providing the voices of a small percentage of women who consider themselves 'practising' but not 'active' atheists. Through a sociological analysis of qualitative interviews with twenty self-identified atheist women I argue for the importance of researching the mundane aspects of female atheism which often fall under the radar when scholars focus predominantly on the vocal and politically active atheists. 'Lived atheism' comprises small and seemingly insignificant actions and utterances which structure atheist women's lives and contribute to the creation of new worldviews, symbols, and reflexive strategies. Micro-actions triggered by religious content, symbols and utterances, found in the nominally secular fabric of everyday life, add up to novel forms of gendered agency which is markedly different to outspoken activist atheism, and yet not the same as agnosticism, pure indifference, or 'none-ism'. By examining 'atheist flashpoints' – moments when dormant atheist convictions come to the surface – I demonstrate how women practice 'everyday atheism' as they navigate personal and public spaces.

Introduction

In the 'Golden Age' of Freethought (1875–1914), an exciting vision of the 'new woman' gradually emerged out of the speeches and writings of female Freethinkers. In 1911 Eva Ingersoll, the daughter of the prominent secularist Robert G. Ingersoll, described the future woman who 'will belong to no church, [...] will be fettered by no senseless formula or puerile dogma'. She will be an agnostic but tolerant and open. Most importantly, she will be 'sovereign of herself', 'free and fearless' in 'thought, word and deed' (Kirkley, 2000: 68–69). In the words of Harriet Martineau (1805–1876), another champion of nonreligion and an early sociologist, she would be 'a free rover on the broad, bright breezy common of the universe' (Peterson, 2007: 13). This prophecy has since come true to a certain extent. In most western societies the number of female non-believers keeps growing and atheism has become one manifestation of nonreligion among many (Pew Forum, 2015). But self-professed female 'nones' remain the minority, and women are much less likely to identify as atheists than men (Mahlamäki, 2012: 60; Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012).¹ Generally, over three quarters of the respondents who tick the 'no religion' box in surveys are men (Brewster, 2013; Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2006; Keysar, 2007; Rice, 2003; Zuckerman, 2009). The apparent freedom to declare oneself an unbeliever, or an atheist, is a relatively recent development in the western world, but the increasing willingness of individuals to do so is one of the main markers of western democracies (Brown, 2010: 1).

This article focuses on women in the twenty-first century West where the status of hitherto dominant religious institutions and discourses has altered significantly (Bruce, 2011; Casanova, 1994; Davie, 1994; 2000). The weakening of traditional religious authority, and the transformation of the meaning of religiosity and spirituality, combined with religious pluralism and individualisation of beliefs and practices, have created a new landscape and set of normative standards. The participants in this research characterise themselves as atheists and live their lives in line with their personalised definitions of what an atheist is. Their accounts exemplify the complexity of individual positioning vis-à-vis belief systems in the post-secular era. How do atheist women navigate their daily lives in societies where, according to some, 'the presumption of unbelief' has become the norm (Taylor, 2007: 12–13), and according to others the space between the sacred and the secular is filled with a wide range of other options (Day, Vincett, and Cotter, 2013)? In what follows I explore gendered accounts of 'lived atheism' in order to counter-balance the now substantial body of research on women's religious and spiritual lives. By 'lived atheism' I mean a version of 'lived religion' (Orsi, 2002) which Meredith McGuire describes as a set of beliefs and practices residing in a 'subjectively grounded and potentially creative place for religious experience and expression' (2008: 12). Crucially, 'lived religion' is not individualistic but created collectively as people draw on shared religious worlds. While there are few organised atheist bodies which mirror the religious equivalents McGuire contrasts the intersubjective version with, we can still distinguish between socially visible and invisible atheism. Socially visible atheism is exemplified

by the atheist activist movement and regular nonreligious cultural events, such as the London Sunday Assembly, but there is much more going on under the radar. While discussing the place of religion in the West Grace Davie offers a helpful metaphor of an iceberg: only a small part of the phenomenon under investigation is immediately visible, the rest is submerged and thus often ignored (2010). Beliefs and behaviours which fit into clear categories are accounted for, while everything in between remains marginal to the big narrative. This analogy lends itself very well to the study of 'lived atheism' in its gendered version. 'Lived atheism' then refers to the collected convictions, and ordinary acts which do not seem meaningful in separation but together add up to what it means to be an atheist woman in the twenty-first century. To put it simply, 'lived atheism' could be described as the ways in which atheist beliefs are translated into everyday behaviour which is not activist or revolutionary in its desired effects (unintended consequences might differ), but which is of great practical importance to the individuals who engage in it. It is informed by the diverse and contradictory cultural resources which atheists select from on a daily basis to construct lines of action (Swidler, 1986). 'Lived atheism' comprises small and seemingly insignificant actions and utterances which structure atheist women's lives and contribute to the creation of new worldviews, symbols, and reflexive strategies of action.

Gender and non-belief: Background

Non-religion has been gradually receiving more attention from sociologists, and the field of study is growing fast (Bullivant and Ruse, 2013). The topic itself is complex and debates over definitions and methods of studying secularism and non-religion rumble on (Lee, 2012). Research to date has focused on a number of themes: the process of and reasons for becoming an atheist (Bainbridge, 2005; Hunter, 2010; Smith, 2010; Lee, 2012; Smith and Cimino, 2012), societal attitudes to atheists (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Hartmann and Gerteis, 2006), the link between atheism, well-being, and morality cross-culturally (Zuckerman, 2008 and 2009), and atheist activism (Cimino and Smith, 2012; Smith, 2013). However, little is known about female atheists. The publications on the subject veer towards the conundrum of the gender gap in religiosity (Brewster, 2013; Mahlamäki, 2012), the compatibility between feminism and atheism (Overall, 2007), and apostasy among different generations of women (Eccles and Catto, 2015). Locating data on the number of female atheists worldwide is challenging, especially because self-identified atheists constitute a relatively small percentage of non-believers globally (Lee, 2012: 591; Gallup, 2015). Also, most surveys ask questions about 'nones' (Brown, 2013: 229), instead of making specific distinctions between non-believers, atheists, and agnostics. They rarely break the sub-categories down by gender.² According to the Pew Research Forum: 'Fewer women are religious "nones", but the religiously unaffiliated are growing among women at about the same rate as among men. Nearly one in five women (19%) now describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, up from 13% in 2007

(2015: 14).³ Survey data on the percentages of atheists around the world have shown that males significantly outnumber females among positive atheists and the general rule in the studies of gender gap in religiosity – that it is smallest at the extremes of religiosity and secularity – is confirmed (Trzebiatowska and Bruce, 2012: 11–12).

A note on definitions

This article explicitly focuses on non-religious ways of living that are not overtly associated with social movements, political involvement, or activism of any kind. It explores how the seemingly passive atheist beliefs held by women translate into action in their everyday lives. Atheism could be classed as an identity based on rejection or negation of the religious worldview (Smith, 2013) but, as LeDrew points out, 'atheists share beliefs that they affirm, not only ones they reject. It is clear that atheists reject religious beliefs – the more problematic issue is what beliefs they *do* hold.' (2013b: 465). Indeed, it is best to treat secularism 'as a substantive, rather than negative category (more than an absence of religion)' (Schwartz, 2013: 24) so that we can fully account for the interaction between religion and secularism in the same cultural space. To this end this article examines the everyday worlds of female atheists from four liberal democratic countries and provides a qualitative understanding of the manner in which non-activist atheist women create meaningful lives without, but also in relation to, religion. I draw on qualitative data to explore the supposition that 'atheism may be just as complex as religion [...] and [...] there are many ways of "becoming" and "being" atheist.' (LeDrew, 2013: 469). For the sake of clarity, atheism could be described as 'an intellectual or cultural position which is *primarily* defined by its relationship to religious phenomenon (*theism*) while not being considered to be religious itself' (Lee, 2013: 131). Although this definition is concise and serves as a useful heuristic device, applying it to 'real' lives brings with it a couple of complications. The participants in this research do not consider themselves spiritual, nor do they combine their atheist identity with a belief in any supernatural power (including God). All of the female volunteers emphatically stated that they would tick the 'atheist' box in any survey on religion, spirituality, belief systems or practices. If the option was not listed, they would add it themselves, such was their conviction of the importance of the label. They self-identify as atheist and felt strongly enough about their 'beliefs' that they were willing to share their stories and reflections. Their voices are those of a minority within a minority – a small percentage of women in a small percentage of atheists among the more general category of non-believers.

When a belief system is considered contextually deviant, the adherents might either refuse to discuss it altogether for fear of consequences, or on the contrary, they might wish to publicise it to correct common misconceptions. As a category, non-militant atheism blends into non-belief, and may thus be perceived as a private matter. As such it goes under the radar. In this sense, my participants blend in, and as evidenced below, do not generally suffer negative social sanctions on account of their worldview. And

yet, they felt a need to talk about their atheism. This need originated from two sources: a) the desire to explore the roots and background of their belief system, and b) their frustration at the unwillingness of other women to speak out about their atheism in everyday social settings. In light of this my aim is to re-interpret (female) atheist identity as an active practice. In this sense the participants in this research consider themselves 'practising atheists' (Lee, 2013: 592) but not 'active atheists' (LeDrew, 2013) who are political activists and members of atheist organisations. It is also important to note that these women do not fall into the category of the 'fuzzy faithful', which denotes those loosely attached to a religious tradition or believers in 'something out there' (Voas, 2007: 161). They are 'positive atheists' (Keysar and Navarro-Rivera, 2013: 554) who do not believe in God, but who come close to Christel Manning's term, 'Philosophical Secularists': individuals who 'understand our existence to be shaped by nature, society, and other material forces that we can rationally and empirically explain' (2015: 41).

Absence and 'not doing' in everyday life

Existential sociology (Manning 1973), or sociology of everyday life, serves as the broadest theoretical framework for the data and argument that follow. The reason this approach best frames the narratives of atheist women is that existential sociology departs from the typical interactionist assumption of actors following a script. Existential sociology combines interactionism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology, and the salience of the embodied subjective experiences of human agents. Thus, it casts atheist women in several different roles in the creation of everyday life without God or gods. Atheist women do not follow a script because there is no script. They invent their own ways of being-in-the-world. A central aspect of existential sociology's take on human experience is constant change. This has never been more relevant than in the first quarter of the twenty-first century when uncertainty and change define daily life, particularly in relation to technology but also employment, relationships, and health. Sociology of everyday life allows us to investigate the meaning of small stories for large social transformations, and equally, 'find a big story in the most trifling ordinary detail' (Back, 2015: 836). Everyday life refers to mundane social existence, incorporating space, time, body, and emotions. In this sense, everyday life encompasses everything and nothing, which calls for a systematic analysis. It is the most suitable 'strategic research site' for the sociological inquiry into human existence (Sztompka, 2008: 8). But most sociology of everyday life focuses on actions, or 'doings', of the individuals and groups under scrutiny. Aspects of social behaviour which are labelled as absences (or a lack) escape our attention simply because they are not immediately visible unless they contravene collective expectations. The act of 'not doing' as a form of agency has been discussed mostly in relation to abstinence from alcohol, sex, different types of food, or technology (Mullaney, 2006). While what individuals do defines them in social terms on a daily basis, what they do *not* do performs a similar function and sets them apart from others. Doing is imme-

diately visible, whereas 'not doing' only becomes socially meaningful when the actor is placed in a situation where they explicitly account for their position. Non-activist atheist women are thus invisible unless provoked by the situational context. In a world marked by individualism, cultural and religious pluralism, as well as emphasis on diversity and freedom of thought and speech, these situational contexts have become more complex and unstable than ever before. Atheist identity often remains peripheral until awoken by the changing circumstances, both short- and long-term. Although non-religion is no longer an oddity in statistical or cultural terms, atheism is a different ball game, particularly for women (Edgell, Frost and Stewart, 2017). Consider, for example, the statement made by one of Zuckerman's Danish female interviewees who distanced herself from the atheist label because she was "not that fanatic – 'atheist' is too strong" (2008: 163). In a study of Swedish and Scottish nonbelievers, a Scottish participant deemed the word atheist to be 'a bit hard-lined', while Swedish women described atheists as 'harsh' and 'not very sympathetic people' (Kasselstrand, 2015: 41–42). Thus, it seems that adopting the atheist label is an act of defiance, non-compromise, and audacity in the face of softer, more open stances on the supernatural. But what if an individual identifies with 'strong' atheism and yet chooses to channel it through mundane avenues of social life? We can map their lived atheism through treating the supposed 'absence' of belief as a belief in itself, albeit one which is still connected to 'remnants of religion' through long-standing customary and institutional practices (Kasselstrand, 2015: 39).

Research methods

In 2009 Baker and Smith attributed the lacunae in the qualitative research on 'nones' to the fact that non-believers are simply hard to recruit because they are unaffiliated, and consequently such research requires 'creativity and determination' (2009: 730). The gap has now been filled to some extent (e.g. Blankholm, 2014; Cotter, 2014; Smith, 2013) but the challenge of researching a social category rather than a group remains. This article draws on the data from semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 20 self-identified atheist women from the UK (England and Scotland), Australia, the US, and Poland. Participants for the project were selected according to two general criteria: a) their willingness to self-define as 'atheist' and b) their readiness to share experiences of 'everyday atheism'. Unlike research conducted in 'ready-made' sites, such as secularist organisations or meeting groups, this method of sampling is problematic due to potential bias inscribed in the process of selecting participants. Purposeful sampling, however, is entirely appropriate where the researcher seeks to interview individuals with a particular characteristic, in this case atheist convictions, in common (Patton, 1990). The sample was therefore non-random and adverts were placed on social media, and message boards in cafes in cities in the four countries. Inviting participants to contact me meant that the final sample consisted of self-identified atheists willing to contribute to a study of gendered non-belief and practice. The interviewees came

from different cultural contexts, which went some way toward ensuring that the common patterns that emerged could not be solely explained by references to collectively created narratives and meanings of the atheist experience. All respondents were city dwellers, and all except one held an undergraduate degree. Seven had doctorates in a variety of subjects, including humanities, social and natural sciences, and theology, which might reflect the positive correlation between higher education and non-belief (Sherkat, 2008). All participants were white and heterosexual except for one who identified as a lesbian. Four women lived in Australia, eight in the United Kingdom (England and Scotland), four in Poland, and four in the United States. All participants permanently resided in their countries of origin. The youngest interviewee was twenty-eight and the oldest fifty-one. Seven participants had children and were married (to men), while two of those were divorced and raising their children alone. It is possible that the above-listed characteristics gave these women a relatively privileged status in their respective cultures, which meant that they had more choice in expressing their atheism on their own terms.

The interviews lasted an hour on average. They were conducted over ten months in 2014, via Skype or in person and digitally recorded.⁴ The recordings were transcribed and, where appropriate, translated into English. Each interview was coded holistically as a narrative about living as an atheist woman and later recoded according to emergent themes which were compared across interviews.⁵ The sample is relatively small and as such it cannot be used for the purpose of generalisation. My goal is to explore and conceptualise the lived realities of a hitherto under-researched population. This article covers three emerging themes: managing encounters with religious individuals'; negotiating rites of passage; and atheist parenting. What follows provides an overview of gendered narratives of living without religion or spirituality.

'Atheist flashpoints': From wallpaper to a neon sign

In societies where religion continues to play a key role in public life and dictates the moral code for the majority, atheists are inevitably marginalised as outsiders, or the 'other' (Edgell et al. 2006; Guenther, 2014).⁶ The more religious the society overall, the more likely atheists are to face challenges in their everyday life as they deviate from the status quo. Initially, I expected to find some evidence of this stigmatisation in some of my interviewees' accounts but it was not the case. Overall, the participants did not feel ostracised but rather mildly inconvenienced by their atheist identity. The social sanctions they faced were subtle and infrequent. Some women were disturbed by religious overtones in the public sphere, and in particular politics and education, while others pointed to private encounters (such as face-to-face interactions with relatives, friends, or strangers) as riskier, and thus to be avoided. The latter group invested conscious effort into managing their daily interactions. They deliberately avoided potentially inflammatory conversations, and acted respectfully and empathetically towards religious interlocutors, regardless of how they felt. At the same time, they reported 'athe-

ist flashpoints' which could be defined as unexpected confrontations with explicitly religious individuals. Such situations forced them to reflect on their own standpoint in that particular moment. Amelia (40, UK) described it as follows:

I don't really talk about religion or God with very many people, so it just doesn't occur in my everyday conversation, so I don't really know what their real thoughts are. I just tend to assume that people don't believe in him, actually. And then when occasionally I run into people who do believe in him, it kind of rocks me a little bit. I feel thrown by it and try to navigate around it. I try to be polite about it.

For this interviewee encountering believers in social situations can be challenging but not traumatic. Her account echoes the sentiments expressed by Danish participants in Phil Zuckerman's study of the non-religious in Scandinavia (2008). Religion is a non-issue because it simply does not come up in everyday conversation (Zuckerman, 2008: 76; 108). If it does, many Scandinavians adopt the attitude of 'benign indifference' (Zuckerman, 2008: 104; 142). This benign indifference played a role in my interviewees' lives, although it seemed at times that it stemmed from politeness rather than from genuine indifference towards religious people. For Amelia, like for many others, the emotional side-effects of interacting with believers tended to be short-lived as one can physically remove oneself from the setting immediately, or keep the social engagement to the minimum. However, the scenario could not be more different for Shannon (28, Australia), who was engaged to a Christian at the time of the interview. Although her fiancé did not practise regularly, his beliefs mattered to him, and Shannon was surprised to find out in the early stages of their relationship that he believed in God:

[He] seems like an everyday, normal person until you actually ask him whether he believes in God [laughs] and then he says 'yes'! I had a very interesting conversation with him about religion and I went to work the next day and said to my best friend: 'I just can't believe that conversation we had! I just can't believe he can be so unreasonable'. And she basically turned around and said: 'well, I believe in God as well'. And I was like 'ooooh, my God, I'm surrounded by them and I didn't even know!

This episode clearly reflects Shannon's assumption that non-belief is the norm. A similar sentiment was echoed by Naomi (39, UK), who socialised with non-religious, though not necessarily atheist, friends but who occasionally found herself working with religious individuals. In one instance, a new work colleague revealed that he was a Mormon. Naomi recalled not handling the news well, which resulted in a breakdown of the interaction:

He was like 'there was one day I felt it in my heart that God was talking to me', and I was like 'what? I liked you up until this point!' You could see he was trying to be kind because he was a lovely person

but at the same time you could see he couldn't understand why I didn't believe in God at all.

Evidently, religious beliefs made her question her relationship with this co-worker, regardless of his other, overwhelmingly positive, qualities. She added that she made religious people uncomfortable by openly stating her lack of beliefs and bringing up science (*and physics in particular*) to back up her atheist stance. In stark contrast, Gloria (51, Australia) deemed her views private and decided not to engage in conversation with religious people, partly because she thought she lacked appropriate evidence to support her stance. She found that *'if people are religious, then it's because it's in the Bible. It's written down and they believe it's true. Whereas for me it's written nowhere that it's true or false, it's just what I believe, so I don't really say that because I don't have anything to back it up'*. Evidently, Gloria did not seek scientifically-based refutations of the existence of God. Her inner sense that the supernatural did not exist sufficed, so she was not interested in looking for proof. In this sense, her rejection of religion was not motivated by positivist concerns, as is the case with the atheist movement of the twenty-first century (LeDrew, 2012: 77). She believed in subjective feelings and emotional intelligence which she could not explain in rational terms but neither was she ready to label them religious or spiritual. The following section discusses the situational context in which dormant atheism, such as hers, becomes outspoken.

The useful metaphor for religion as the 'wallpaper' in social life – taken for granted to the point of invisibility (Brown, 2012: 14) – can be applied to different types of non-belief in a nominally secular setting. Atheism is commonly associated with explicitly anti-religious attitudes of the 'founding fathers' of the New Atheist movement which are stated vociferously, frequently, and publicly. This is unsurprising as extreme statements and actions tend to be the most visible, and often mistaken for the norm. The non-activist atheism exemplified by my participants might be more accurately described as a neon sign which lights up only when religion enters the orbit of the women's everyday lives. While some interviewees rarely found themselves having to defend or explain their atheism, others reported becoming more outspoken after moving to a different location. Such a change of locale prompted the 35 year-old Londoner, Celia, to voice her views. She left the capital to live in a small city in the north of England which she described as *'dominated by white male Christians'* which meant that her atheism *'became an issue'* in need of highlighting. Upon meeting with a chaplain for work-related reasons, Celia felt the need to inform him *'quite early on that I was an atheist and he kind of just ignored it really [laughs]. He kind of...if I was to guess, he'd probably think that I didn't know what I was talking about'*. Evidently, the atheist neon becomes visible to the women *themselves* when they discover that their immediate context is implicitly informed by religious values hidden within the social fabric. Here the physical place and the flash-point encounters mesh.

The situation can be reversed, of course, as in the case of Megan (38, US). Raised in the Deep South where atheism still counts as deviant behaviour (Heiner, 1992; Kosmin and Keysar, 2008, Pew Forum, 2012), Megan moved to a big city in the North in her late teens. Her atheism did not cause her any social difficulties but she inevitably compared her current place of residence with her childhood environment. When Megan was six years old, her grandmother and the pastor in her local congregation forbade her to associate with Black children in the neighbourhood. She explained: *'religion taught me that [some] people should be marginalised and I was supposed to be kept away from them and I saw that the religion I grew up with could be a really, really bad thing.'* Consequently, she saw her own atheism as a logical refutation of Christian upbringing which continued to haunt her in adulthood: *'I get the heebie-jeebies going to the South; it makes me uncomfortable'*. While reflecting on her experiences Megan concluded that the status of atheism in the United States tends to be dictated by the geographical location, regardless of gender differences because *'even in certain liberal places if you have an employer who has a prejudice against atheists, you have to be careful. Don't ask, don't tell.'* By invoking the phrase which captured the ban on gay and lesbian service members in the United States military (until its repeal in 2010), this interviewee highlighted the precarious status of atheists in her country. Unlike race, gender, or even sexual orientation, atheism as a belief is easier to conceal, even in religiously conservative environments.⁷

Additionally, in some scenarios, open declarations of atheism may be dismissed by religious people as a whimsical phase. Aga (29, Poland) resignedly told me:

My mum just thinks that I'm so liberal and forward-thinking that it's something I made up to be different but that I don't really believe it. She says it's my gay friend who taught me how to talk this way but that one day I'll see through it and return to the fold.

Aga's extended family also saw her atheism as a childish fad that she would grow out of over time.⁸ In response she chose to distance herself from religious people because she largely disagreed with everything they represented:

If you separate faith, which I obviously don't agree with, from other beliefs and views, I don't agree with them on anything. They tend to be very patriarchal, intolerant of differences and minorities and these things work like a red rag to a bull for me. I can't talk to them and so I try not to interact with them.

Another interviewee, Joanna (28, Poland) was instructed by her sister (a believer) not to raise the topic around relatives because *'they would get upset'*. However, she refused to remain quiet: *'if the subject came up I wouldn't hide my views and I'd most likely provoke some anger because they're...you could say...ultra-Catholic, so I'd definitely get into trouble'*. The confrontation never occurred because the family never questioned Joanna's assumed religiosity.

This kind of avoidance and subterfuge features heavily in Christel Manning's study of unaffiliated parents in the United States (2015). Her participants found the strategies both stressful and difficult to carry out when confronted with religious grandparents. While the women in this research mostly succeeded at shunning direct confrontations with religious people, they felt it was harder to hold back where politics was concerned. According to Candice (39, Australia), Christian content was routinely *'smuggled'* into Australian politics through references to tradition and values (Crabb, 2009), without any overt mention of religion. She found this 'crypto-Christianity' deeply disturbing:

I actually don't like the fact that Australia is becoming a more religious country in its leaders. Our previous PM, Julia Gillard that was in for a while was our first openly atheist PM and [...] the big Christian lobby wasn't happy with her at all. Our current PM is very Catholic and openly so, and there's a lot more conservative values espoused, with religion as a label for it all, as well...And that concerns me...

Other participants expressed similar concerns, although equally they felt that it was almost impossible to separate Western cultural tradition from Christianity. The influence of Christian values is subtle and difficult to tease out but omnipresent nonetheless. Alice (35, UK) felt so resentful about the residual Christian elements permeating British public life that she planned to leave Britain permanently. When asked to elaborate, she said: *'I mean the Christian values that are behind those white males [who run the country]. The public sector policies which are chosen, they suit those people – those people are more comfortable with them, less nervous about them.'* Similarly, when reflecting on the place of religion in public life, another participant, Danielle (38, UK), defined Britain as *'post-Christian in its traditions'*. To her it meant that public life and culture remain infused with a Christian legacy. Here, the atheist neon lights up when the participants reflect on the presence of religious values in public life. Atheist women do not differ from their agnostic, or even religious counterparts in their dislike of religious influences in political and public life (see Baker and Smith, 2009: 730) but they seem more attuned to the implicit presence of Christian tradition in the public sphere. My participants referred to *'the annoyance of having to swear on the Bible in court'* (Australia), *'politicians smuggling the watered down Christian line into speeches'* (Poland), *'a Christian lobby'*, *'pro-natalist Christian discourse running through my country'* (UK) and *'white Christian males in power making decisions about our lives'* (US). The religious legacy they refer to resonates with a secularised version of *'discursive Christianity'* (Brown, 2000) – an unquantifiable dimension of religion subtly inscribed into public institutions. Moreover, living in a world where the key rites of passage remain tied to religious institutions and discourses presents atheist women with dilemmas, and it is to these dilemmas that I will now turn.

Atheist women and rites of passage

All of my participants experienced dilemmas with regard to the key rites of passage, such as weddings, christenings and funerals. At the same time, they found the space to practise non-belief and resisted pressure from family members and religious acquaintances. They did so by bending the truth or opting out of engagement in rituals and conversations with believers. There is some research evidence which points to the tendency to respect both the wishes of immediate family members and tradition when deciding on a church wedding. In such cases non-religious couples may opt for a church ceremony for social reasons (Walliss, 2002). Contrary to this finding, most of my participants refused to get married in a religious setting. For instance, despite growing up a devout Christian and only rejecting religion in her late teens, Candice (39, Australia) chose a secular marriage and did not christen her children *'whereas all of [her] siblings did'*. Organising one's own wedding often involves elaborate negotiations and potential conflict with parents and relatives (Smart, 2007), but yet again my atheist participants simply stated their case and ignored the ramifications. Aga (29, Poland) grew up in an ultra-religious family where daily mass attendance was a non-negotiable duty, but even she insisted on a secular ceremony. When asked how her family felt about her decision, she shrugged:

The church question didn't really come up. I did say from the beginning that I wasn't getting married in church because I didn't believe in God and it meant nothing to me. So that's what I told my parents. They passed it on to the rest of the family. My mum probably lied to my grandma and told her I would have a church wedding next year.

For Shannon (28, Australia), whose fiancé is a Christian, the decision was more complicated. At the time of the interview she had just entered the final stages of planning her wedding. She told me: *'if I get married in church or not doesn't mean anything to me. [...] but it means more to Jeremy if we don't do it. It would bother him.'* Shannon consciously decided to have a church wedding to make her fiancé happy. The religious aspect of the ceremony was irrelevant to her personally, so she believed she remained true to her private views on religion. When the reverend asked if the couple wanted to include the blessing of their future children in the wedding ceremony, she recalled telling her fiancé:

It means nothing to me if my non-existent children are blessed or not, so it's totally up to you because it doesn't mean anything to me. So I can handle it, I don't need to avoid those sorts of things, as long as you understand that it doesn't mean anything to me. I prefer them not to be blessed but only because it doesn't mean anything to me.

Shannon left the decision to her fiancé as someone who found the ritual meaningful and important but at the same time she did not wish to be included in a blessing she found pointless. Her reasoning seemed to be driven more

by indifference to, than hostility toward religion, although she heavily emphasised the *meaninglessness* of the religious blessing. Another atheist, Gloria (51, Australia), also ended up having a church wedding despite her lack of belief. Her story illustrates the web of interdependencies atheist women get caught up in, which eventually takes agency away from them. Gloria fell in love with a Christian man but they agreed to have a secular ceremony in a beautiful city garden they had found. She bought a white dress with a long train. Her mother suggested the dress would get *'ruined in a garden'*, and advised that a church was a better location, especially as the future husband belonged to the Anglican Church. Gloria went along with the idea. The vicar insisted on her being baptised before the wedding, which she said *'haunts me to this day. I did that and I still hate it! All I wanted to do was get married. I didn't want to get baptised. I wish I'd been stronger, I wish I'd spoken up. But I was baptised and I've resented that ever since.'* For Gloria, this involuntary baptism meant a bargain she was forced to strike in order to marry her fiancé. Even though at the time she did not question the requirement, retrospectively she felt powerless and angry about not resisting it. In this sense, her atheism only became more outspoken as she grew older and more confident. This demonstrates an important implication about the link between religious belief and normative femininity: if women are socialised into the narrowly defined feminine norm (compounded by religious discourse on gender), it may take longer for them to become assertive and confident enough to express their atheism openly. They are 'framed before they know it' by gender normative expectations which in some cases extend to religious rituals (Ridgeway, 2009).

Attending other people's church weddings caused discomfort for other participants because they found themselves in a setting where religious ideas were pronounced openly and applied to everyone indiscriminately. Yet again, the atheist neon light switched on inside them. For example, Debra (29, Australia) recalled her anger at what she saw as overt sexism of the ceremony at her sister-in-law's religious wedding:

It got my back up. Because smack in the middle of the wedding the priest was there saying 'you will abide by him, you will follow his lead and his instructions' and I was like 'fuck off'. Hello?! It made me angry because it was so patronising to the female race. It wouldn't have bothered me if the groom had to say the same thing to her but he didn't.

Previously, Debra had entered into numerous arguments with religious friends about her refusal to take her husband's name where she referred to the religiously-sanctioned ownership of women by men as an outdated and chauvinistic *'buddy protocol'*. But rites of passage are one-off events. Parenting, and motherhood in particular, on the other hand, involves a series of daily decisions on how best to pass on one's values to the next generation. The following section sketches out the conundrum faced by atheist mothers.

Atheism and mothering

The transmission of religious values from parents to children is key in ensuring the continued religiosity of social groups and cultures. If beliefs and practices are not reinforced through social interaction, collective efforts, and social sanctions, they will not persist. In fact, longitudinal studies of religiosity clearly demonstrate that if parents fail to pass on beliefs to future generations, loss of religious faith among the offspring is more than likely to follow (Crockett and Voas, 2006). Having children statistically increases individuals' belief in the existence of God (Sherkat, 2008: 454; but see Manning 2015). Even those previously unconcerned with religion may experience a need for supernatural elements after the birth of their children (Sherkat, 2008: 441).⁹ The women in this study had been committed atheists long before becoming mothers and did not renege on their stance as a result of having children. Nonetheless, they faced a decision on whether to raise their children as non-believers, or leave them to make up their own minds.

Valerie (40, Scotland) was a self-defined *'militant everyday atheist'* whose children attended a nominally secular school with strong ties to the neighbouring Presbyterian church. Her narrative exemplifies the everyday struggles with lived atheism rather well. She strove to promote purely secular language in her own household: *'I try to say 'OMG LOL' instead of oh my God, just to kind of take away that power and it's very difficult because you're socialised into it'. And I try to eradicate it.'* Despite this, she felt that her efforts were constantly undermined by the school. Her six-year-old son was *'indoctrinated for two full weeks before Easter'* when a minister told the class the story of the crucifixion. The boy recounted it to his mother in great detail. Valerie reacted by treating it like a *'Roald Dahl story; [...] I didn't reinforce it or dismiss it'*. But her son subsequently made a big wooden crucifix and drew Jesus on it: *'with his mouth open and there were lines coming out of his mouth which was his last breath, his hands were nailed, his feet were nailed, and there were circles at his feet which he said were the people watching him being crucified'*. Valerie found it amusing on one level but on another she was perturbed by her son visualising the crucifixion – a *'violent and aggressive'* event – so vividly. He took his creation to school and Valerie was pleased that the teachers might be forced to re-assess their actions after being faced with such tangible *'consequences of their indoctrination'*. She continued to send her sons to the same school because of the high quality of education and resources they receive there.¹⁰ Candice (39, Australia) was less determined to shield her children from religious influences and they attended a private Christian school. In this case, her concern with giving her daughters the best possible education trumped her qualms about religion. When her children asked why the family did not go to church, Candice told them it was *'because mummy doesn't believe in God and church and neither does daddy, but it's fine that you hear about these things at church and you can make up your own mind what you believe'*. She stressed informed choice was central to her parenting approach. Yet, teaching the value of informed choice to her children in the context of an overtly religious school

required a degree of negotiation, if only to ensure that the school staff were fully aware of the family's atheism. Candice wanted the school, *'to reassure me that there were other religions in the school as well and that it was alright that the children did or did not go to church because as a family we did not go to church and it wasn't our values, but that's okay because that's part of what the school does'*. 'But,' she said, *'I would certainly not be happy if they were saying that everybody has to do it and that other religions were wrong.'*

Another instance of reassurance occurred when Candice's mother-in-law became terminally ill. The chaplain in her daughters' school recommended a non-religious book about death written specifically for young children. Candice said she was relieved that he did not judge her as *'that atheist mother'* but rather accommodated her preference. While some participants sent their children to religious schools for educational reasons, others engaged in a form of religious tourism to provide them with a choice of whether to believe or not. A mother of two, Anna (35, US), raised in an atheist family herself, had religious neighbours with whom she frequently socialised: *'so I thought, alright, I'll take my children to church to give them the experience and to see if they like it and want to go back'*. While there she could not take the service seriously and described it as *'ridiculous'* and *'beyond belief'*. She never experimented again. When Valerie (40, Scotland) took her family to a christening of a friend's baby, she also found the ceremony unpalatable, albeit for different reasons. She worried her child might be scarred by a particularly evocative sermon on sin:

The woman... it was absolutely vile what she was saying! She was talking about us not being fit to receive crumbs from the Lord's table. We were sitting in this church and I said to my son ... Because she was talking about orgies and fornication, and I said: do not listen to anything that this woman is saying. You are most certainly fit to receive crumbs from anyone's table...absolutely disregard it.

However, some atheist mothers experienced conflict between their wish to pass on atheism (or block religious indoctrination) and the fear that it would have detrimental consequences for the existential security of their children, particularly if they were simultaneously exposed to religious teachings at school.¹¹ One interviewee defined herself as a staunch atheist but simultaneously worried about upsetting her son because *'if my husband and I were to say we didn't believe in God, I felt our son might be frightened for us. So I just tell him belief is very private and it's nobody's business what you believe in'* (Laura, 31, US). Manda (39, UK) was brought up a strict Catholic but, like many, she started questioning faith and eventually abandoned religious practice when she was in her teens. Her nine year-old daughter attended a Church of England school due to its convenient location, rather than Manda's preference. Even though Manda never talked to her about atheism, her daughter often returned from school with questions. One day she told her mother that she had decided not to pray at school and sought permission to be

exempt from *'saying the words'*. Manda's reaction reflects her conflicted position rather well:

Although I'm an atheist, I don't want to imprint my views on her, I've always said I want her to grow up with her own experiences. So she comes home and says 'I don't get this Adam and Eve thing, how could they possibly have populated the world as just two people?' Which is a valid question. I wouldn't have dared to mention it as a child!

Manda had silently found her own answers as a child, but her daughter inhabited a very different public and private world where personal choice had become the defining principle. This generational difference illustrates the point made earlier: growing up in a more secular and egalitarian society empowers women to exercise agency over what they believe, and consequently, how they live their adult lives.¹² The strategy echoes Manning's (2015) findings with regard to None parenting in the U.S. whereby their self-professed 'not doings' paradoxically amounted to creating a whole worldview for their children through exposure to a wide variety of ideas and practices. In the absence of a coherent template, the task is challenging, or as Susan Jacoby puts it, 'When your mind is your own church, it can take a very long time for future generations to make their way to the sanctuary' (2004: 103).

Conclusion

'Lived atheism' is messy. It manifests itself in the unplanned and the unexpected. While my participants adopt the atheist label without hesitation, they also modify and manage the expression of atheism as they go about their daily business. Their agency is unique because they engage in 'not doing' in two distinct ways. First, they do not *do* religion or spirituality. They do not hold any supernatural beliefs, or engage in any other form of spiritual practices; neither do they attribute causal power to non-human entities, such as the universe, or 'something out there'. Second, they do not *do* activist atheism. They do not belong to atheist organisations or seek out fellow atheists to develop their identity. But these 'not doings' are not tantamount to passivity either. When sudden change occurs in their taken-for-granted world, such as discovering that an intimate partner or a work colleague is a believer, they improvise. It is a reaction but even though decisions need to be made on the spot, they are informed by background experiences and pre-judgments formulated over a long period of time. Unlike atheist activists, the women in this study distanced themselves from religion for the most part, except for instances of 'atheist flashpoints' when they felt compelled to react. These flashpoints were most pronounced with regard to politics and mothering, although highlighting one's own explicit indifference to religion and the meaninglessness of religious rituals also formed a significant part of their semi-conscious strategies. For example, through deliberately neutralising religious language, as Valerie, Manda, and Shannon did, the atheist women's 'not doing' becomes a type of agency in that it produces palpable social consequences.

Just like 'lived religion', 'lived atheism' is intersubjective. It manifests itself in the creative use of symbols, texts, and rituals in ordinary lives (Orsi, 2003). Micro-actions triggered by religious content, symbols and utterances, found in the nominally secular fabric of everyday life, add up to novel forms of *gendered* atheist agency which is markedly different from outspoken activist atheism, and yet not the same as agnosticism, pure indifference, or 'none-ism' (the category of unaffiliated and unchurched). As the data above show, this type of agency means 'being polite' and 'navigating around', not attacking, undermining, or correcting believers. It means describing a religious colleague first and foremost as 'a lovely person', and trusting in one's own subjective and emotional convictions but not necessarily feeling the need (or having the confidence) to proclaim them out loud. It seems that while the women insisted on their willingness to speak out when provoked, more often than not the desire to stay out of trouble guided their choices in this regard. It is clear from the data that the anger they felt was real, but they rarely chose to externalize it. While Eccles and Catto (2017: 158) attribute such reticence to political correctness, I would argue that there is a gendered element at play here. The participants conform to the 'tyranny of nice and kind' – the pressure on women to be well-behaved (Brown and Gilligan, 1992: 53). This conformity could be read as stifling women's autonomy but on the other hand this form of atheist agency brings subjectivity and emotions (both central to existential sociology) to the table. The atheist women's way of being-in-the-world is infused with empathy, relationality, and aversion to imposing their worldview on others. In this sense it could form an alternative to the 'angry atheist' stereotype.

Perhaps the most striking theme in the data presented above is the relative lack of stark differences between the participants' experiences, despite the fact that they come from four cultural contexts. One possible reason for this could be their shared demographic characteristics and relatively privileged social status. My initial expectation that the North American and Polish interviewees would have a harder time living out their atheism was not reflected in the data. This could be due to the successful impression management and a highly developed practical consciousness, or virtuosity (Bourdieu, 1977: 79). The women have mastered operating in their cultural field to such extent that their ability to steer clear of trouble may not even be fully conscious. For example, Joanna and Aga (Poland) anticipated the kind of trouble they might get into and understood the cultural mechanism underlying their family's reactions. Their family members instinctively guarded the status quo through informal means: Aga's mother dismissed her atheism as a phase, while Joanna's sister protected the rest of the family by coaching her to stay quiet. Both strategies amount to ignoring, silencing, and trivializing the female experience. It is also worth noting that this policing of women's atheist sentiments is often carried out by other women for the good of the family or community.

The conclusions offered above are tentative. For some western women 'lived atheism' may not be socially

problematic but this is partly because they structure their behaviour so as not to upset others, regardless of their own sentiments. Future research could examine further the impact of gendered socialization on the possible difference in 'lived atheism' between men and women as evidenced in mundane aspects of their everyday existence.

Notes

- ¹ While the seeming universality of the gender gap in religiosity has also been questioned, both in terms of gender categories used in surveys (Cornwall, 2009) and the evidence available, this debate is beyond the scope of this article. For a comprehensive analysis see Sullins (2006).
- ² With the exception of [atheistcensus.com](http://www.atheistcensus.com), an online voluntary survey set up by the Atheist Alliance. For a critical analysis of the methodology and general usefulness of the census, see <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2013/demographics-of-atheism/>.
- ³ The report pertains to the U.S. data only. For a nuanced analysis of the gender gap in religiosity globally, see Pew Research Center 2016.
- ⁴ Skype interviewing comes with its own technological and ethical challenges but it allowed me to overcome the geographical and financial implications of conducting international research (Hanna, 2012; Seitz, 2015).
- ⁵ Analysis is embedded in the research process from the moment the interview begins through transcription to the subsequent formal analysis of the text of the interview. The context shifts from communal to individual: first the researcher co-constructs the data with the participant but then she or he works with the transcribed text. This potentially leads to difference in interpretation and the final reading changes without the non-verbal cues and body language (Butler, 2015: 172). Special care was taken during transcript analysis so as not to misrepresent the worldview of the participants through the 'lost in translation' effect both in the literal and metaphorical sense of the phrase. This was achieved through a comparison of fieldwork notes and verbatim transcripts (text) with recordings (verbal and visual) to ensure the meaning was captured as accurately as possible. In a few cases I contacted the interviewees again to double-check that their words and non-verbal communication were reflected fairly in the written text. This aspect of the research highlighted the importance of not relying solely on the interview transcript but also on other communicative modes.
- ⁶ See also http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/26/atheist-discrimination-humanist-association_n_5531296.html and for an exception <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/03/madison-wisconsin-bans-religious-discrimination-atheists>.
- ⁷ This was the case with another American participant, Julia (43), who recalled realising that 'there was no God' at the age of eight, and subsequently hiding her true views from others while continuing to go along with the rituals until she left home for college.

- ⁸ This is a charge often levelled at devout individuals by non-believers, and resonant of Freud's comparison of religion to a childhood neurosis (1927). In a predominantly religious society a rejection of God signifies a lack of maturity to some (see also Zuckerman 2008).
- ⁹ See Manning (2015) for more nuanced qualitative data based on her discussion of parents' religious orientation.
- ¹⁰ Faith schools have a longstanding reputation for providing education superior to their secular counterparts. However, when the UK-based study by Schagen and Schagen (2005) tested the claim and the results were mixed and dependent on the denomination. Jewish schools were the only ones to significantly outperform non-religious institutions, while for CoE and RC schools the difference was slight to the point of being insignificant.
- ¹¹ See Hartman Halbertal (2005) for similar dilemmas among feminist and religious mothers.
- ¹² However, growing up in a religious society where personal choice comes second to social obligation can also galvanise women to exercise agency and assert the self. This theme appeared in Eccles and Catto's study (2015). Their female participants aged between 45–92 had grown up as churchgoers and were more likely to be both early and deep apostates than the younger generation. Eccles and Catto (2015) argue that all of their interviewees 'have left because they can' but they do not fully elaborate on the structural circumstances which made leaving possible for both groups.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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