Non-religious identities as lived

Tristram Hooley
Sariya Contractor
Non-religious identities as lived

This presentation is based on two research projects:


Religion and belief in higher education: the experiences of staff and students
About the project

• Project on religion and belief in higher education.
• Funded by the Equality Challenge Unit.
• Undertaken by a team from the University of Derby.
• Report available from the ECU website. Published as
  
Methodology

• Literature review
• Stakeholder consultation
• National online survey (responses 3077 staff, 3935 students)
• 7 case studies of institutions
Focus

- Participation and access
- Accommodating religious observance
- Discrimination and harassment
- Good relations

The report gives general findings relating to each of these issues.
Key issues that emerged

• Most participants would be willing to provide further monitoring data around religion and belief. The current lack of this data offers challenges in understanding religion and belief in the sector.
• Alcohol plays an important role in the student (and to a far lesser extent the staff) experience. This intersects with religion and belief identities in sometimes problematic ways.
• Some staff were unsure how to balance the sector’s commitment to freedom of speech with sensitivity to individuals’ religion and belief positions.
• Many issues relating to religion and belief emerge in the context of the curriculum.
Secularism and the politics of the study

• The research team represented a mix of religion and belief positions. However, it included a high profile religious scholar. This led to concerns about impartiality and hidden agendas.

• A few individuals with no religion (and the National Secular Society) assumed that a project of this nature was seeking to privilege or entrench a religious position.

• A few individuals with no religion objected to the use of public money to investigate this issue.

• Some individuals with no religion did not recognise that “belief” could or should include them.
## Survey responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Staff (3077)</th>
<th>Students (3935)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No religion</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncodable</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participation and access

Those who described themselves as spiritual or having no-religion were...

- more likely than most other groups to feel uncomfortable with (officially) disclosing their religion or belief.
- less likely than most other groups to feel that their course was not sensitive to their belief position.
- less likely than most other groups to feel that their institution makes no provision for their dietary requirements.
Furthermore…

- A few staff with no-religion expressed a lack of certainty as to how they should handle religious issues that emerged during teaching and learning.
- A few people with no-religion disagreed with the accommodation that was made around diet for people with religious beliefs.
- In institutions where attempts have been made to limit alcohol some people with no-religion felt that their perspective was not being respected.
Religious observance

Those who described themselves as spiritual or having no-religion were...

• Less likely to join a belief based society (e.g. secular and humanist student societies) than most other groups.

Furthermore...

• A few non-religious students found public observances of religion challenging and unwelcome (e.g. around festivals).
• A few non-religious people raised concerns about the incorporation of religious observation in institutional business (e.g. prayers and hymns at graduation).
Furthermore…

- A few non-religious objected to the use of religious venues for institutional events or religious symbols on institutional publications.
- A few individuals with no religion objected to the allocation of (publicly funded) space to religious groups.
- Many of these issues were particularly highlighted in faith-based or faith informed HEIs.
- Where there was compulsion to attend an event with a religious element non-religious participants expressed greater concerns.
Discrimination and harassment

Those who described themselves as spiritual or having no-religion were…

- Less likely to feel discriminated against or harassed than most other groups.

- However there were still some cases (particularly in faith-based institutions) where those with no-religion described themselves as having been discriminated against.
Good relations

• Staff who described themselves as spiritual were more likely to disagree with the statement “my place of work values freedom of speech” than any other group.

• A few people with no-religion said that they felt that “inter-faith” activities excluded them.

• Some tensions exist between religious groups and members of other protected characteristics (e.g. gender, race, sexuality). Some people with no-religion highlighted these issues.
Conclusions

• Our survey suggests that there is a large and identifiable group of people who describe themselves as having no-religion in HE.
• Our survey suggests that there is a larger than expected group of people who describe themselves as having a spiritual belief in HE.
• There are a range of ways in which their belief position interacts with their experience of HE.
• There is a vocal minority of people with no-religion who expressed a wide range of concerns about their experience.
Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales (2010-2012)
About the Project

AHRC / ESRC Religion and Society Funded Project

• Religion and Belief, Discrimination and Equality in England and Wales (2010-2012)
• Project website: http://www.derby.ac.uk/religion-and-society
• Six Focus Group Discussions with ‘Non-Religious’: Derby (pilot study), Leicester, Cardiff, Blackburn, Newham, Norwich
• 50 participants in all including pilot study
Methodology

‘It has become something of a cliché to begin social-scientific studies of non-religion, secularity, atheism, and related topics by bewailing the dearth of previous research’

Bullivant & Lee, 2012

- Participants’ experiences, perceptions and understandings of: (1) ‘non-religiosity’ and (2) discrimination and equality

- Recruiting participants,

- My own positionality within the research
Interim Findings: What’s in a name?  
(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

‘Non-religion is anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion’- Lee 2012

• What is the default position?
• How?: ‘A journey away from faith’, ‘coming out as non-Religious’, ‘never knew anything different!’
• Diversity: Atheist, Humanist, Secularist, Agnostic, Non-believers, non-religious, etc:
• Labels as problematic: ‘[…] but I have no desire to give myself another label’
• Relationships with and opinions of Religion – Multiple opinions which did not always agree with each other
Definitions of ‘Non-Religious’
(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

• ‘Religion is a set of rules. In every religion you have rules for prayers or the crucifix and you have to believe in God. People who don’t believe in god and don’t have a set of rules are non-religious.’

• ‘… if you imagine a diagram and you’ve got a circle in the centre and that’s religious and then everything else outside of that is non-religious! Because if you define what’s religious then surely non-religious is everything else’

• ‘A stance that is based on scientific and logical reasoning, a moral stance and the possibility to be spiritual (without being religious)’
Interim Findings – Unfair Attitudes
(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

• Looked down upon
• Perceived as lesser human beings
• ‘there is this default position that you are supposed to be religious preferably Christian in this country and if you’re not you are in some way a bad person, or a deficient person or a dodgy person in some shape or form’

Implications of such attitudes
• Occasional difficulties with ‘religious’ friends;
• assumptions about attending religious functions;
• more serious implications
Interim Findings: Unfair Treatment-1
(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

Education
• Schools – Faith schools, Religious Assemblies, Home Schooling
• SACRE - Religious Education Committee membership

Employment
• Teachers
• Prejudice in the Workplace
• More Holidays / Facilities for Religious People
Interim Findings: Unfair Treatment-2
(Health Warning: Draft Findings, Not for quoting)

Broader / National / International Issues

• Monarchy as Religious / Head of Church / Bishops in the House of Lords
• Legal frameworks that make special allowances for religious groups
• Sunday working hours
• Campaigns led by Religious groups such as anti-abortion campaigns
• Euthanasia
• Media Portrayals – ‘lots of mischaracterisations, a typical one would be that you can’t be good without religion’; ‘Militant Atheism’
Tristram Hooley
t.hooley@derby.ac.uk

Sariya Contractor
s.contractor@derby.ac.uk

Thank You