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Secular or nonreligious? Investigating and interpreting generic 'not religious' categories and populations

Lois Lee*

School of Public Policy, UCL, The Rubin Building, 29/31 Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9QU, UK

In research dealing with religious affiliation, generic nonreligious categories – 'no religion', 'not religious', 'nonreligious', 'nones' – are frequently used to measure secularity and secularisation processes. Analysis of these categories is, however, problematic because they have not received dedicated methodological attention. Using qualitative research conducted in the UK, this article investigates what nonreligious categories measure and, specifically, whether they indicate non-identification or disaffiliation as assumed or an alternative form of cultural affiliation. Findings suggest that generic nonreligious categories are sometimes used to express substantive positions and public identities, and that these are diverse. These findings flatten distinctions between religious and nonreligious categories as 'positive' and 'negative' respectively and indicate problems therefore in using nonreligious identification to measure secularity and secularisation. They suggest nonreligious identification is, however, a useful indicator of the advance of nonreligious cultures and the 'nonreligionisation' of societies.

KEY WORDS: nonreligion and secularity; quantitative methods; atheist identities; indifference to religion; secularisation; nonreligionisation; religion in Britain; religious identities; disaffiliation

The generic nonreligious categories frequently used in survey questionnaires appear to differ fundamentally from other identification or affiliation categories. Whether phrased as 'no religion', 'not religious', 'nonreligious' or 'none', these categories are apparently negative, allowing participants to record that a form of cultural identification lacks meaning or relevance to them or is perhaps entirely absent in their lives. Consequently, social researchers and reporters often describe and interpret the use of these categories as acts of 'disaffiliation' or 'non-identification'. Generic nonreligious categories seem, therefore, distinct from more explicitly positive confessional classifications that are also offered in religious identification survey questions. Selecting a category like 'Christian' or 'Hindu' indicates that a respondent is familiar with this term as a cultural marker and that it is meaningful to them to some degree. Such categories allow respondents to share an emic representation – the one that they would

*Email: lois.lee@ucl.ac.uk

use in daily life or a reasonable proxy for the one they might normally prefer ('Christian' instead of 'Anglican', for example). By contrast, generic nonreligious options seem to be etic categories, used to locate the remaining individuals inside an analytical rather than a phenomenological framework. As Pasquale (2007, n.p.) says of the 'none' category, the terms themselves indicate that they are 'a function of survey method rather than a self-description'.

In many countries in the world, increasing and large numbers of people are today choosing generic nonreligious categories: in Britain, the empirical focus of this article, 51 percent selected 'no religion' in the British Social Attitudes survey in 2009. Yet these categories have not received dedicated methodological attention. In particular, qualitative research is needed to understand how respondents interpret these categories and what they seek to express by selecting them. This methodological question does not undermine research which takes nonreligious populations as a starting point or component part such as demographic research (e.g., Keysar 2007; Voas and McAndrew 2012; Wilson and Sherkat 1994), investigations into the stability of nonreligious populations (e.g., Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010) or research investigating how nonreligious identification correlates or combines with other measures of religiosity and nonreligiosity, namely, belief and practice (e.g., Sherkat 2008; Storm 2009; Voas 2009). Such work enriches our understanding of nonreligious populations. Yet qualitative research is also needed if we are to understand the efficacy and meaning of demarcating nonreligious populations in this way, just as we call on ethnographic knowledge to understand and interrogate religious categories like 'Christian' when they are used in social research. How do we know therefore that people selecting generic nonreligious categories are being forced to take up the analyst's language, as Pasquale suggests, rather than identifying themselves as they would in their everyday lives? Enriching our understanding of nonreligious categories in this way will deepen analyses and interpretation of the populations they capture.

The objective of this article is, therefore, to use ethnographic data to investigate and understand what it is that generic nonreligious categories actually measure. The most common use of data generated by generic nonreligious categories is to indicate secularity and secularisation, and the second objective of this article is to scrutinise the validity of this application. The study suggests that respondents use generic nonreligious categories to identify with substantive nonreligious and spiritual cultures more commonly than scholars and even respondents themselves appreciate and that we cannot therefore assume that their use indicates disaffiliation or non-identification rather than affiliation and identification. The nonreligious and spiritual cultures they can be used to express are, however, diverse and this limits our ability to deduce the spread of different nonreligious or spiritual cultures from the data they generate. On the other hand, these findings flatten distinctions between religious and nonreligious categories as 'positive' and 'negative' respectively and, whilst problematising its use as measure of secularity and secularisation, they also suggest that nonreligious identification is a useful indicator of the advance of nonreligious cultures and the 'nonreligionisation' of societies.

Background: positives and negatives

This paper addresses: (1) insufficient methodological scrutiny of generic nonreligious categories; and (2) the assumption that these categories are necessarily

negative and measure secularity and secularisation. These two issues are in fact closely related and derive from the secularisation paradigm in which they emerge. Secularisation theory, like the dominant Western theologies that preceded it and continue today (Fitzgerald 2000), views religion as a singular phenomenon with no complete equivalent in the secular world. Hence, the research methodologies used to investigate religion and secularity are both religion focused, the former concerned with religion itself and the latter concerned with the decline of religion towards the zero point rather than attending to how religious phenomena are reshaped and remoulded in secular settings (Lee 2012b; Taylor 2007). General nonreligious identification options have been developed in this context and for this second purpose. They have therefore received minimal methodological attention because, on the one hand, they are of secondary or 'residual' interest to the primary concern, religion itself (Campbell 2013 [1971]; Pasquale 2007), and, on the other hand, in their apparent negativity, these categories appear perfectly equipped to capture what is seen to be the only meaningful alternative to religiosity: its absence.

There is some reason to believe, however, that these linked theoretical and methodological assumptions are unsatisfactory. One of these is the observation that these categories in fact capture concrete nonreligious identities such as 'atheist' and 'humanist' and that they require respondents to affirm a position in relation to religion and are positive in that sense also. This point has been argued by Day (2011) who lobbied successfully for the decennial census for England and Wales to change its 'none' category from 2001 to a 'no religion' category in 2011 in view of this. In summary of that work, Day (2013, 107) says:

> The word 'none' seemed to imply an absence of beliefs, faith or values and undermines the complex identities of people, such as secular humanists, who hold many beliefs and values, albeit not religious ones.

In other work, Day (2011) has explored the meaning behind religious and nonreligious identifications, arguing that people use both of these options to identify themselves in relation to the people and groups to which they belong. This research indicates that selecting nonreligious categories may have some substance or meaning rather than being merely or purely negative.

The assumption that generic nonreligious categories are negative also sits in tension with work that notices a difference between negative secularity and positive nonreligion, also referred to as secularism by some authors. This distinction is as follows. Secularisation involves the marginalisation of religion in one or several spheres of social life; secularity is when religion is relatively, though not necessarily absolutely, marginal.[1] Irreligion is the rejection of religion (Campbell 2013 [1971]) and nonreligion is a related, more inclusive concept indicating anything that is identified by how it differs from religion, regardless of whether this sense of difference involves hostility, dismissiveness, curiosity or even veneration (Lee 2012a). Examples of nonreligion include popular cultures like the New

[1]Although some scholars emphasise differentiation over marginalisation, they do not mean to describe internal compartmentalisation within a still religious whole, but rather compartmentalisation as well as the marginalisation of religion within at least one of these newly differentiated spheres, politics being the most often mentioned. Though some would protest, therefore, marginalisation and marginality are the best and most useful ways to understand secularisation and secularity (Lee 2012b).

Atheism or rituals and practices developed in contradistinction from prior religious ones like many civil ceremonies and seasonal festivals. Thus, secularity is a concept used analytically to study the relative significance of religion whereas nonreligion can be used descriptively, to outline the presence, nature and impact of distinctive social phenomena. In this sense, secularity is a negative category whilst nonreligion and irreligion are positive ones and the two are clearly distinct (Lee 2012b). If people and things can be not religious in these quite different negative and positive senses, this then raises a question about which of these it is that generic nonreligious identifications measure.

Arguably, secularity and nonreligion are two sides of the same coin, in which case it might not matter either way. However, the relationship between nonreligion and secularity is an open and significant theoretical question. For secularisation theorist Steve Bruce (2002, 42), for example, a high level of engaged irreligion is a sign of a still-religious society, whereas secularity involves indifference towards religion – and, we might argue, towards irreligion also. Campbell (2013 [1971]) makes the same distinction between irreligion and secularity but a slightly different argument. His contention is that irreligious cultures may be drivers of secularisation processes, a view that might imply that irreligious movements are part of the transition to (post-(ir)religious) secular society but might equally imply that irreligious cultures are in fact a necessary and intrinsic feature of secular societies, crucial for the maintenance and longevity of secularity. The latter case has some resonances with Taylor's (2007) and others' pluralist understandings of secularity in which substantive nonreligion – or unbelief, in Taylor's belief-centred approach – is a crucial ingredient and determinant of secularity. In this model, sometimes referred to as 'postsecular', negativity plays a marginal role altogether; instead, both secularity and nonreligion are defined in positive terms. Understanding the extent to which people use nonreligious categories to express an engaged or disengaged position will make it possible to apply the data they capture to the question these alternative possibilities raise. For example, if generic nonreligious categories are chosen by people wishing to register their indifference to religious, spiritual and nonreligious cultures, this would be at odds with the Taylorian model, but consistent with Bruce's formulation of secularisation theory.

Methods and data

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the UK, and particularly on data gathered in interviews with people identifying as 'not religious' or 'nonreligious' rather than 'religious'. These in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in Cambridge in 2006 (*n*: 12) and Greater London between 2009 and 2011 (*n*: 30) and explored participants' understandings and experience of religious cultures and 'religious-like' things (life-cycle ceremonies, for example) in relation to their general nonreligious identification. In order to explore the potential variety of positions and meanings that underlie generic nonreligious identifications, the sampling approach sought to maximise variation by working with people who differed according to an array of demographic characteristics (age, gender, race, religious background), although recruitment methods meant that the final sample was biased towards those with tertiary-level education. Asking interviewees to imagine they were responding to the census, interviews typically began with a discussion of their general religious

self-classification – their 'hospital clipboard' identification, as one participant referred to it. Typical survey options (mainstream denominations – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, etc. – and a generic nonreligious one, 'no religion' or 'none') were often provided as a prompt. The typical discussion then opened out into broader discussion of self-classification and, in turn, a wider discussion of issues relating to religion. A full review of the methodology used to gather these data can be found in Lee (2012b).

Findings

The findings from these interviews suggest that generic nonreligious categories are more likely to measure affiliation to a nonreligious or spiritual culture than has previously been recognised. In fact, the term had some meaning for all participants making use of it. However, generic nonreligious self-classification was used to different ends. This section outlines the main ones of these. In summary, 'nonreligion' (or equivalent generic nonreligious category) was used,

(1) as a proxy or synonym for another nonreligious identity
(2) to indicate a loose or general nonreligious position
(3) in contradistinction to 'religion' by people of an alternatively spiritual orientation
(4) to express spiritual and non-spiritual non-nominal identities
(5) to express 'engaged indifferentism'

A type of nonreligion

Most obviously, perhaps, respondents used generic nonreligious categories as proxies for other nonreligious identifications. In Western culture, 'atheist', 'agnostic' and 'humanist' are commonplace nonreligious identities and this was reflected in these data. Cat,[2] for example, a 26 year-old charity campaigns officer from London, said that she thought she would chose 'no religion' from the census options, but when I asked her what she would do if 'atheism' and 'agnostic' were also provided as options, she said, 'Oh, that's very difficult' before explaining that she would probably still prefer the 'no religion' category because it was, in her view, a better proxy for her preferred identification, 'humanist'. In Cat's view, therefore, 'generic' nonreligious classifications had a distinctive character but could be used as a reasonable proxy for her preferred identifier. She explained why she would prefer a 'no religion' option to an 'atheist' or 'agnostic' one:

> [Because] I think I identify more with 'humanist' than 'atheist'. I'm definitely not agnostic … but I don't think it would be particularly useful to type 'humanist' because I think that would come out with really low numbers because so many people don't really know what it is, so it would be a political decision not to put 'humanist'. If there was a 'humanist' box I'd tick it but if it was 'atheist' or 'agnostic' box I wouldn't tick it; I'd just go with 'no religion'.

This preference for 'no religion' over 'atheist' or 'agnostic' was despite the fact that Cat actually identified atheism as fundamental to her understanding of humanism:

[2]Pseudonyms have been used to anonymise research participants.

> For me, if you believe in God, you're not a humanist. … some people will disagree with that, but, for me, that is a fundamental thing because 'humanist' has to focus on the fact that human beings can make the world better for themselves by working for each other. … I mean it is very complicated but if there is any suggestion of there being a creator or there being some sort of score sheet at the end, that's not humanist at all.

Cat did not detail her concerns with 'atheist' as a self-identification but her discussion highlights that her preference is shaped by social rather than intellectual associations with these terms. Her discussion also highlights subtle differences between nonreligious representations like 'atheist', 'nonreligious' and 'humanist' that are not always recognised and treated as more straightforwardly interchangeable than they are. Nevertheless, Cat's discussion illustrates the use of generic nonreligious categories as a stand-in for other nonreligious ones.

Some interviewees did use generic nonreligious classifications interchangeably with other nonreligious classifications, sometimes preferring one or other according to different social contexts or meanings. Cat's discussion provides an example of this situational aspect to nonreligious identification when she says that her choice is 'political' ('it would be a political decision not to put "humanist"'). An awareness of popular (mis)perceptions of 'atheism' is another reason given by research participants as to why they might identify as 'nonreligious' in one setting and 'atheist' in another. Victoria, an editor from London in her late 20s, identified herself as 'nonreligious' but later introduced scenarios in which she would describe herself as 'atheist'. Reflecting on this, she said,

> I suppose it depends who you're talking to. Cause if I was talking to someone who was really religious, it might somehow seem a bit, um, *aggressive* to say I was an 'atheist' or something, so I'd probably say 'I'm not religious'.

For Victoria, 'atheist' and 'nonreligious' were so consistent in meaning that they could be substituted as required and she was content with either to represent her position. Whilst Cat uses generic nonreligious categories as a proxy for her preferred term, Victoria is typical of many others in using generic and specific nonreligious categories interchangeably to express a single, more or less coherent position.

Generic nonreligious identities

Some people regarded a general nonreligious identification as more or less synonymous with another term. Victoria, for example, makes a distinction between 'nonreligion' and 'atheism' that is more to do with social context and social connotation than with meaning. However, describing oneself as 'not religious' or 'nonreligious', having 'no religion' or 'none' was sometimes understood to be the more general term; indeed, it might be that the softness Victoria associated with it has to do with these categories being less determined, less thought through. In relation to this, it is worth noting that, in interviews and in other aspects of fieldwork, dissatisfaction with available nonreligious identifications was commonly expressed. In the context of research, it became clear that what I had initially conceived of as a wide array of nonreligious identity labels – 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'free-thinker', 'rationalist', 'sceptic', 'Bright' or 'humanist' – actually presents a limited range. 'Humanism' apart perhaps, all of these terms are explicitly or culturally identified with a rationalist critique of religion and are focused on the cognitive aspects of religion rather than the

practical or social which many nonreligious people recognise. As a result, when I presented interviewees with a long list of these identity labels, it was possible for people to reply that they would identify with all of them – or none. For those unhappy with or uninterested in these nonreligious cultures, alternative representations are not always forthcoming, leading to an unresolved ambivalence about nonreligious self-representation. This ambivalence is seen in the British context, as elsewhere (cf. Taira 2012), in the use of qualified identities: 'I'm an atheist but I'm not a New Atheist'; 'I'm an atheist but not a Richard Dawkins-style atheist.' The 'atheist plus' identity which has emerged in recent years is a nonreligious identity which responds creatively to a demand for more diverse nonreligious representations whilst also illustrating the hold that established terms have upon our cultural imaginations. For those people whose nonreligious identities are still emerging or developing, generic nonreligious categories do not act as a proxy for a more specific identity but are used in want of a better word.

'Spiritual but not religious'

Because my sampling method only made a distinction between religious and nonreligious positions, it included people who reject traditional religiosity and/or religions but who are alternatively spiritual. As Crowley (2014) says in her contribution to this special issue (drawing on work by Davie, Heelas, and Woodhead 2003), alternative spiritualities are often articulated or defined according to how they differ from traditional forms of religion. They are therefore nonreligious to this extent. That is, alternatively spiritual people frequently make use of nonreligious discursive strategies to articulate identities and cultural affiliations that are not more widely nonreligious in character. Where only conventional religious denominations are provided on surveys, it is likely that generic nonreligious categories will be favoured by many in this group. The extent to which generic nonreligious classifications are used to record 'spiritual but not religious' identities is sometimes, though inconsistently, recognised by scholars, and is certainly excluded in discussions which assume that 'the nones' are nonreligious in general terms.

Non-nominal identities

Rather than synonyms or stand-ins for other terms, generic nonreligious categories are also conceptually salient for two groups. Firstly, they appeal to people who seek to reject categorisation in general, a group I describe as 'non-nominal'. Counterintuitively, the negative term helps to describe this outlook, which involves a perceived liberation from restrictive classificatory frameworks. When included, 'spiritual but not religious' categories also provide some people with an option for expressing the non-nominal perspective: 'religion' is often associated with its institutional forms, whereas spirituality is perceived to be the underlying experience. Although the largest volunteered 'religion' in the census for England and Wales was Paganism – a tradition often categorised as an alternative spirituality and associated with the 'New Age' – a resistance to classifications makes generic nonreligious categories another option for this group, as Crowley (2014) discusses in her contribution to this volume.

Importantly, however, this research indicates that the non-nominal group is not limited to the spiritual because some non-nominal people reject spiritual cultures as

well as religious ones. Jude, a South African graduate student living and working in Cambridge, said:

> I think that at times there's a sense of knowing within myself that it's something that doesn't require scientific or rational explanation, and it works on its own regardless. That is some sort of additional, I don't know, connection. Some people might call it religious, some people might call it spiritual, I'm not sure what I'd call it. […] See for me […] I think over-analysing that space kills it; I think belonging to a religion kills it; because I prefer the idea that it's unexplained – because that makes life more exciting.

Jude's non-nominalism is discursive, but it is also substantive, involving a veneration of the unknown, ineffable and the uncategorised. This veneration of the unknown is seen in traditional religious and alternatively spiritual cultures, but this research also encountered materialist forms of romantic mysticism. Whilst they shared some of alternative spirituality's romanticism, individualism and non-nominalism, and rejected rationalist immanent cultures along these lines, this group also shared a naturalist and humanistic outlook with the latter and rejected the more extensive focus on subjectivity that is associated with alternative spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The naturalist non-nominalists are therefore a distinct group and, importantly for this discussion, they used nonreligious categories as their primary and emic mode of identification. Emic identification with generic nonreligious categories has a substantive basis: naturalist non-nominalists state a rejection of all forms of categorisation – perceived to be too fluid, amorphous, restrictive or repressive to be applicable or pleasant – but they also have a strong sense of otherness from the concepts of religion and spirituality which gives the negative formulation, 'nonreligion', a double resonance.

The use of generic categories to express non-nominal positions of all sorts raises a useful possibility for methodologists seeking to measure modern religiosity and nonreligiosity. Whereas scholars like Campbell (2013 [1971]) and Pasquale (2007) have critiqued generic nonreligious categories for being too general and underdetermined, closer attention to the orientations that people are attempting to express through them suggests that these categories sometimes measure specific, first-order identifications. Some survey designers have sought to replace general categories with ones they consider to be emic such as 'atheist' and 'humanist'; this study shows that apparently generic categories might in fact have the same emic validity themselves. What is more, it may well be that general-sounding identifications will be increasingly significant in the context of individualised societies in which institutional identities make less and less sense. Instead of doing away with general nonreligious categories, it might therefore be helpful to include them on affiliation surveys as well as *other* general categories – 'religious', 'spiritual' – in addition to alternative self-classifications, such as 'atheist' or 'humanist', 'Christian' or 'Muslim'. This approach might work best if respondents are able to select multiple options, to prevent confusion for those who see generic and specific categories as part of a classificatory hierarchy; for example, some respondents might prefer to choose 'religious' and 'Christian' or 'humanist' and 'not religious' whilst others might see a general 'religious' or 'nonreligious' affiliation as the truest account of their self-understanding.

Expanding the use of general categories would allow researchers to investigate how pervasive the emic use of generic nonreligious, religious and spiritual

categories are, whereas, because other generic categories are not always included alongside nonreligious ones, it is currently difficult to assess the extent to which nonreligious categories are capturing those who prefer not to classify themselves at all or those who wish to register (consciously or sub-consciously) a sense of otherness from religion – people for whom being differentiated from a perceived religious other is the one form of categorisation they want to make. The inclusion of a range of generic categories as well as nonreligious ones and, significantly, a 'none of the above' option would allow participants to opt out or reject *all* categories and/or attempts to categorise. By offering this variety, such an approach has the potential to vastly improve our understanding of 'religious landscapes' that include non-institutional as well as institutional forms of religious, spiritual and nonreligious identities.

Indifferentism

Another specific end to which apparently general nonreligious classifications can be put is to express a position that I have called 'indifferentism' or 'engaged indifferentism', a position that is significant in the British context of this research. Engaged indifferentism can be distinguished from indifference itself: indifferentism is when disinterest in religion (and sometimes in overt forms of nonreligion also) is the core aspect of an individual's 'religious' identity and is something they are invested in and committed to. Because their 'indifference' is an important part of their identity it is therefore misnamed. Thus, indifferentism is distinct from actual indifference or disengagement from religion, in which the individual might not, for example, mind being (mis)identified as religious. Though a positive rather than a negative phenomenon therefore, the negative formulation of generic nonreligious identities appeals to indifferentists precisely because it disclaims any engagement and can be used to locate themselves outside of religious culture in general.

For example, Victoria's initial identification as 'nonreligious' was intended, she said, to accurately present her lack of interest in topic:

> If I was to say I was 'atheist', it sort of suggests I actively pursue that in a kind of formal way. Erm. Whereas, I don't really give it a huge amount of thought very often.

In the same way, Edward, an academic in his 70s, also living in London, described himself using the terms 'none' and 'areligious' in order to identify what he viewed as his overwhelming indifference to the subject matter: at the beginning of our interview Edward questioned whether he was an appropriate participant in the research at all, saying 'I am not anti-religious but I'm just, you know, uninvolved.' In these cases, it is precisely the generic quality of such categories that appeals.

Despite these secular identities, however, Victoria and Edward engaged with religion, spirituality and/or nonreligion in diverse and meaningful ways. Victoria, for example, was privately and publicly committed to a nonreligious stance that she identified elsewhere as 'atheism': she expressed, for example, a strong antipathy towards the institution of marriage and towards church weddings in particular and she understood this in relation to her 'atheist' views; she was strongly critical of people who used church services when they were not actively religious, viewing it as hypocritical and morally weak; and, in her social life, she described how

discovering that a friend was religious came as a shock and acted as a barrier to easy conversation between them thereafter. In fact, Victoria's self-understanding as 'indifferent' wavered over the course of the interview and this gave her an opportunity to reflect on a range of different social identities and behaviours that might not be brought into contact with each other in her normal life. By contrast, Edward never wavered in his self-understanding as indifferent, yet he also described points of engagement with religion, spirituality and nonreligion in the course of our discussion that suggested he was far from indifferent: he was able to locate his beliefs in relation to friends and acquaintances', most of whom he could classify in religious and nonreligious terms and sometimes in great detail; he discussed the nonreligious views he shared with his wife, and stated that he valued this shared perspective very highly; and, discussing his parents' religion, Edward positioned himself in relation to a long history, going back not just one or two generations, but several centuries:

> So my family, my father's family, was Presbyterian. They had been Presbyterian for three hundred years, three hundred and *fifty* years actually and they had – they were forced out before the Civil War because they were radical Puritans of what later became Presbyterianism …

This 350-year-long history is a characterful illustration of the way in which people who understand themselves as indifferent can be highly engaged with nonreligious and religious cultures. The somewhat counter-intuitive proposition of engaged indifferentism is summed up well by one younger man (Walt, a researcher in his mid-30s) who reflected on some of the strong and often acutely emotional commitments to especially nonreligious culture that he had discussed over the course of our interview, saying:

> I tend to think that I don't really care – you know, like I said before: I'm *such* an atheist that I don't care. But obviously I do.

As well as strength of feeling, the embeddedness of a nonreligious orientation also leads to people taking that position for granted such that they consider themselves to be indifferent. Consider the following vignette, from discussion with Jonathan, a journalist from London, living for a time in New York. We are discussing his self-classification and whether identifying himself in this way is something he can recall doing in social settings. He says:

> No, I don't [identify my (non)religion in social settings] – no, I don't feel like it's a significant part of my life, like, *explaining* my situation. I live in New York now and a *huge* portion of my friends are sort of secular Jews. Um, you know, I've been to more Seder dinners in the last four years than I have, at *all*, growing up with a nominally Jewish father and, um, this stuff just never comes up: they seem to exist in a very comfortable, kind of – happy to perform rituals without needing to make a deal about [it]. I'm talking about it now, but I wouldn't say that … [breaks off].

Jonathan identifies his friends in religious and nonreligous terms, 'secular Jews'; he is frequently participating in 'rituals' that are both religious and nonreligious in nature; and he is enjoying this participation. Yet he indicates that identifying himself in (non)religious terms for the purpose of our interview is unusual, even artificial ('I'm talking about it now, but … '), dismisses having a (non)religious identity as making 'a deal' out of something unnecessarily and says that *explaining* his

position is not a big part of his life. Jonathan's practice and self-perception are therefore somewhat at odds, and this is partly because he and his friends apparently communicate their (non)religious identities tacitly, though clearly, through their everyday discussion and practice. It is precisely because his engagement with religion and nonreligion feels unexceptional and quotidian that convinces Jonathan that he's not really interested:

> I wouldn't want to give the impression, because we're focusing on it in this conversation, that it, like, weighs on my mind and I have to describe myself a lot in that … I choo – I opt into pub arguments against people who are sort of like Dawkins atheists, but that's for fun.

Here, engagement with nonreligion does not really count when it is just 'for fun'. Yet, Jonathan chooses to participate in discussions on the topic. In response to a question about belief in God or a higher power, Jonathan says he 'would screw up the survey and throw it across the room' because it fails to accommodate the complexity of the issue – because he 'would want to write an essay about' it. These examples from Jonathan illustrate an engaged (non)religious stance self-understood as indifferent precisely because it is so established that it seems unexceptional – a possibility that Bagg and Voas (2010) speculate about in their chapter on the pervasiveness of British indifference.

For indifferentists, like Victoria, Edward, Walt and Jonathan, therefore, generic nonreligious categories are not residual but apposite self-classifications. The negative form fits with a self-understanding as a person lacking cultural attachment and its generality communicates non-engagement; at the same time, the 'non' allows participants to distance themselves from religious cultures and ensures that they are not being mis-positioned in the cultural milieu. As with non-nominalism, for indifferentists, generic nonreligious concepts are emic or first-order categories.

Discussion: secularisation and nonreligionisation

One of the core implications of this research is that nonreligious identification cannot be used as a direct measure of secularity. Whilst the number of people affiliating with confessions may indicate the salience of 'religion' as a category and tell us something about the significance of religion in contemporary discourses, affiliation data do not reveal anything more extensive about secularisation because it is not possible to differentiate between positive nonreligious identities and minimal or negative ones. These examples demonstrate that generic nonreligious categories can be used to describe an array of concrete spiritual and nonreligious affiliations, but this does not mean that they necessarily do. Walt, for example, would prefer to say, 'none' if asked about his religion, or 'nonreligious', 'because', he explained, 'I would think of it in terms of affiliation to an organisation.' In such cases, people are not expressing a generalised disaffiliation but a specific form of disaffiliation – from traditional, institutional religion. What is more, there are other indications that relatively large numbers of people are actually indifferent to religion, spirituality and nonreligion. For example, 22 percent of Britons say that neither religion nor nonreligion is very significant to them (Table 1). However, the relationship between indifference and religious, spiritual and nonreligious identifications is complicated and there is no reason to suppose that nonreligious categories capture the indifferent or secular population more effectively than religious categories do. In this section, I

Table 1. Religion and non-religious commitment.

	Britain	United States
Respondent describes themselves as …	percent	percent
… very or extremely religious	7	26
… somewhat religious	30	51
… neither religious nor non-religious	22	7
… somewhat non-religious	11	6
… very or extremely non-religious	26	9
	1986	*1365*

Source: Voas and Ling (2010, 71).

detail the problems of using nonreligious identification data to measure secularity and secularisation, and argue that they are, however, a useful indicator of nonreligious cultures and the 'nonreligionisation' of societies.

Nonreligious identities and secularity

There are three important correctives to assuming a particularly strong affinity between nonreligious categories and indifference or 'secularity'. The most important of these is the inclusion of real 'opt-out' options in addition to nonreligious categories in some datasets. The census for England and Wales is one example of this because its 'religion question' was, unlike every other question, voluntary and respondents were made aware that they did not need to answer it. As a result, the censuses of 2001 and 2011 not only recorded the number of people who said they had 'none' or 'no religion' respectively, but also made a separate record of the number of people who declined to answer the question entirely. In both years, the 'not stated' category was in fact the third most popular one, after the 'Christian' and 'none'/'no religion' categories and it was double the size of the next largest category, the 'Muslim' group. In 2011, 4 038 032 did not state a religion, a decline from 4 433 520 in 2001. Representing a slight decline in percentage terms, the nearly 400 000 people who decided to state a 'religion' in 2011 is a significant figure in its own right, larger in fact than most of the minority religious affiliations – more than the 263 346 people who said that they were 'Jewish' on the 2011 census, for example. Although the 'voluntary' status of this question is particular to obligatory surveys like the census, other surveys allow people to record a 'not sure' or 'not stated' option. The scale and significance of these 'opt out' groups is interesting and deserves further research; for the purposes of this discussion, the important point is that these real opt-out options highlight the extent to which generic nonreligious categories are opt-in ones, involving identification rather than non-identification. Accurate reporting would describe the 'not stated' group as having made neither a religious *nor a nonreligious* identification.

Secondly, the qualitative data discussed in this paper correlate with quantitative indications that the nonreligious population is distinct from the secular one. For example, in their reporting of British Social Attitudes survey findings concerning British religion and nonreligion, Voas and Ling (2010) include data concerning how religious or *nonreligious* British and American respondents consider themselves to be (Table 1) and find that a large number of nonreligious people feel strongly about their nonreligiosity. In fact, in the UK, more people

identify as strongly nonreligious (26 percent) than identify as strongly religious (7 percent). In total, 37 percent of the population measure their nonreligiosity in positive terms, exactly the same number who identified as atheist or agnostic about the existence of God in that year and only slightly less than the number who said they had no religion. Given that survey methodologies have been shaped by religious singularism, it is unlikely that this item was designed to measure explicit nonreligiosity, but the possibility of being 'very or extremely non-religious' nevertheless transforms it into a measure of substantive nonreligion. This measure is notable for being a rare case in which indifference is measured relative to both religion *and* nonreligion.

If the findings presented in this paper flatten distinctions between religious categories and nonreligious categories as 'positive' and 'negative' measures respectively, this prompts us to re-evaluate the assumption that nonreligious categories are a more effective measure of secularity than religious ones. In fact, where religious identifications are the norm, it is arguably more likely that someone indifferent to these themes will affiliate with a religious rather than a nonreligious category. Being 'indifferent' to religion implies a degree of intellectual, practical and emotional detachment and it would be reasonable to assume that people experiencing this detachment would follow the path of least resistance when it comes to self-classification; given that the majority, albeit a small and fragile one,[3] still affiliate with a religion in the UK, religious affiliation is more likely to offer this than a nonreligious affiliation. In places where religious affiliation is declining, nonreligious categories are the newer option and are therefore more likely to require the individual to actively switch to them than is the case for dominant or once-dominant religious classifications. The data in Table 1 support this view in that they suggest that people are more likely to wear their religiosity lightly than they are their nonrelgiosity: the majority of those identifying as religious describe their attachment in moderate terms whereas the majority of those identifying as nonreligious describe their attachment more forcefully. It possibly follows that people in this and similar contexts are more likely to be nominally religious than they are to be nominally nonreligious.

Indifference is, then, a phenomenon that is poorly captured by affiliation statistics and synchronic analysis, partly because people overstate their indifference and even use it as an emic category to position themselves (indifferentism) and partly because looking at affiliation alone does not reveal the significance of that affiliation. Rather, in pluralist landscapes in which religious and nonreligious affiliations are equally familiar and socially permitted, the best measure of indifference is a longitudinal study which captures casual or arbitrary switching between options in a manner that survey researchers would not be able to predict (Siegers 2010). Diachronic analysis, such as the work of Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam (2010) showing large numbers of people switching between religious and nonreligious categories in the US, might be a more effective methodology for capturing indifference. This point is extremely important for those who understand secular society to be a more or less postreligious one and attempt to use affiliation to

[3]A full 50 to 60 percent affiliated with a religion in most years of the last decade in the British Social Attitudes survey, apart from 2009 when 51 percent said they had no religion.

religious and nonreligious categories to understand the extent to which this has or has not occurred.

The nonreligionisation of society

If the number of people adopting nonreligious identities neither proves nor disproves that secularisation has occurred but is instead independent of it (Field 2014), this research suggests that affiliation data are useful for measuring nonreligion itself, that is, the number of people who recognise themselves as other than religious, and for measuring 'nonreligionisation' processes. Just as the number of people identifying with a religion is inclusive of the nominally religious, so the number of people identifying as nonreligious will be inclusive of the nominally nonreligious, thus neither figure can be interpreted as a perfect measure of religiosity or nonreligiosity. However, these figures provide a general indication of both populations and observing the changing ratio between them can be used to get an overview of the balance of power between them.

That said, it is important to recognise that the nonreligious population is not confined to the one identifying with nonreligious categories. Just as Day (2011) and others have drawn out a distinction between religious populations and people who identify as religious, this paper draws out an important difference between nonreligious populations and people who identify as nonreligious. Even very staunch nonreligious perspectives may not be identified with nonreligious categories. In my research, I met people who had or would consider identifying with a religious category for reasons relating to tradition and family background, or for strategic reasons to do with perceived benefits that might follow particular census findings. Nonreligious people might also have preferred to elect a specific nonreligious identity such as 'atheist' or 'humanist' or, in the case of the census, may have warmed to the international secularist Internet campaign which called for people to protest against the gathering of data concerning religion by volunteering 'Jedi Knight' as a religion or similar. Although it is not clear that everyone choosing the latter category did so for this reason (Singler, forthcoming), it is likely that a sizable number of people did so in nonreligious secularist protest. By the same token, nonreligious affiliates may be significantly religious or spiritual in their orientation but prefer to identify as nonreligious for one of the reasons outlined above. The population identifying with generic nonreligious categories is not equivalent to the nonreligious population *per se*, just as that identifying with religious categories is not equivalent to the religious population.

It is necessary therefore to be specific about what nonreligious affiliation means, namely the number of people who wish to represent themselves in contradistinction from religion. This is interesting and significant in itself. Nonreligion can be a first-order category or used to describe a feature of an emic self-understanding – and there is, as we have seen, no reason to believe that 'atheism', say, is more likely to be an emic category than 'nonreligion', as many scholars have argued. Some forms of nonreligious identification are more minimal than others, such as a Pagan identifying as nonreligious but having few nonreligious practices beyond this. Even this, however, is a significant cultural, social and political phenomenon, and one that is possible in some cultural contexts and not others. Whether nonreligious identification reflects a minimal or maximal nonreligiosity, it will be increasingly important to understand and chart nonreligious as well as

religious and spiritual identities in diverse societies. Furthermore, better knowledge of nonreligious cultures will advance our understanding of how nonreligion and secularity relate to one another, whether nonreligion catalyses or hinders secularity.

Conclusions

This article demonstrates that survey affiliation data are insufficient for understanding processes of secularisation, but by opening up and crystallising the difference between nonreligion and secularity (see also Lee 2012a), it opens up methodological possibilities for investigating both phenomena. This study and its argument that generic nonreligious categories measure something fundamentally substantial rather than insubstantial also have more immediate implications, particularly regarding the interpretation and reporting of 'non-affiliation' data. Despite a certain contradiction inbuilt to the act of positively choosing a negative category, reporting often emphasises the negativity more strongly. This can be done discursively, as in British Religion in Number's (2012, np; emphasis added) reporting of data from the British Social Attitudes survey: 'Asked whether they regarded themselves as belonging to any particular religion, 44 percent of adults replied *in the negative*.' Other accounts go further and omit the category altogether, a tendency seen in both academic and journalistic writing. For example, the *Guardian* (Booth 2012, np) excludes the 'no religion' population entirely from its reporting of 2011 census figures for England and Wales:

> [In 2011, 'Jedi Knight'] remains the biggest single category after the leading faiths of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism. It ranked higher than followers of other established religions, including Rastafarians (just 7,906 in England and Wales), Jains (20,288) and Baha'i (5,021).

Because Booth lists 'categories' rather than 'religions', his list is simply inaccurate. In fact, it excludes not only the second largest category recorded in the census but arguably the third largest also: the 'no religion' and the 'not stated' respectively. If the latter omission might be explained in terms of its not being a category that was offered on the closed list of options presented in the census, the exclusion of the 'no religion' category is clearly erroneous and seriously distorts our understanding of 'religious landscapes'. For example, in this case, the size and proportion-share of minority religious affiliations are exaggerated, whilst the much larger 'no religion' and 'not stated' groups, which exceed the size of all minority groups combined and several times over, are obscured entirely. Given the politicisation of immigrant religions and of Islam, such distortions are not merely inaccurate but are potentially dangerous in their effects.

As well as these discursive issues, the understanding of nonreligious categories as negative also shapes analysis of these and other data. Most obviously, effectively excluding generic nonreligious categories from affiliation data leads to a huge under-reporting of nonreligious identification, such that these figures are out of step with other measures of nonreligion. Failing to historicise nonreligious identities also curtails various lines of research and is associated with incoherent research designs. To take another example from journalistic commentary on the 2011 England and Wales census, the *Guardian* (Morris 2012) attempted to investigate regions with high numbers of people reporting 'no religion' by exploring, not the

appeal of this type of self-description, but the declining popularity of Christianity, through interviews with local clergy. Between 2001 and 2011, the England and Wales census did record a decline in people identifying as 'Christian' that was similar in scale to the increase in people identifying as having 'no religion', and there may well be a relation between the two. The data used in this article do not show this, however, and treating the two as sides of the same coin makes a leap that might be misleading. Moreover, it obscures other possibilities, not least that people might have been moved to choose 'no religion' for a positive reason. It also implies that Christianity is an unstable religious category whilst others are fixed and vital, which is to extrapolate beyond the data in a way that might again feed into simplistic and problematic notions of the nature of different religious cultures in Britain today. In short, recognising the extent to which generic nonreligious categories actually express a variety of substantive positions opens up new lines of enquiry and promises a better understanding of the quantitative data that we have available.

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Lois Lee is Research Associate with the Religion and Political Theory research programme at UCL and has a PhD in Sociology from the University of Cambridge. She is founding director of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN), co-editor of *Secularism and Nonreligion*, features co-editor of *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* and co-editor of the new book series, *Religion and Its Others: Studies in Religion, Nonreligion and Secularity (RIO)* (De Gruyter).

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