

JANET ECCLES

Independent researcher

Ph.D. from Lancaster University

janet.b.eccles@btinternet.com

THE NEW (ATHEIST) WOMAN: A LEGACY OF THE 1960S CULTURAL REVOLUTION?

Abstract: It is undoubtedly true that a number of British women turned their back on religion, from the beginning of the period of the cultural revolution of the 1960s and onwards. To what might we attribute these defections and the taking up of a new nonreligious identity? Was it the change in sexual mores and the rise of second wave feminism, the increase in women entering higher education opening up new worldviews to them or increasing affluence? This article examines a variety of factors through the eyes of self-identified women atheists/humanists most of whom have lived through that period. It notes that, while these factors may well be significant to different degrees for different women, the turn to atheism, specifically, results largely from women having been damaged by religion and the deep emotional impact thus left behind. The turn to atheism is not a uniform experience as the women are enmeshed in differing types of 'emotional regime' which affects how they respond.

Keywords: atheist woman; cultural revolution; 1968; feminism.

Introduction

Twentieth century Britain witnessed considerable social and cultural change, including that which occurred in the field of religion. In particular, commentators focus on the events of the 1960s and onwards, claiming this period precipitated many of these changes, from the rise of the feminist movement, the advent of the permissive society, the relaxation of censorship in the media, the burgeoning youth culture, to increasing levels of affluence and the decline in religious attendance and affiliation (Brown 2001, 2006, 2010, 2011, McLeod 2007). On the latter point Voas and McAndrew (2012: 29), for instance, comment that lack of religion seemed bohemian or even disreputable at the beginning of the twentieth century; by its end, it was the norm, while Zuckerman (2007: 56) notes that by 2004 Britain came in the top 15 nations with the largest percentage of those identifying as atheist, agnostic or non-believer in God. In the 2011 UK National Censusⁱ those professing no religion had increased to 25 per cent from just under 15 in that of 2001ⁱⁱ while the British Social Attitudes survey in 2012 reported that Britain is 'becoming less religious' with each succeeding generation (Lee 2012b: 182). The atheists in this article are among those professing no religion, although the nonreligious are not a homogenous group (Lee 2012a: 130). All nonreligious people are not necessarily

atheist. Based on a series of interviews with women living in the northern half of England, this article demonstrates how the major cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s: changes in sexual mores, the rise of the feminist movement, greater affluence, the expansion of higher education, among other factors, may have played their part in propelling women to an atheistic stance, but it is the role of the emotions which seems key in these women's specific turn to atheism/humanism and the 'emotional regimes' in which their life is implicated.

Context and Methods

Having worked on a project studying the views of Young Atheistsⁱⁱⁱ in 2011-12 (Catto and Eccles 2013), I decided, as an independent researcher, it would be interesting to follow this up with a smaller self-funded project on older women atheists, as I am particularly interested in older women's religion and nonreligion. A consideration of the material contexts in which atheism among the young and older women manifests itself can be found in a recent book chapter (Eccles and Catto 2017). This particular article, however, considers solely older women and what might be their motivations in turning to atheism. Consequently, between 2014-15 I spoke to 13 women, with an age span of 45 years, who self-identify as atheist/secular humanist/free thinker, sometimes all three, although one asserted she was definitely an atheist but did not want to be a member of any humanist association: 'If you get too many of them it becomes a religion. So I won't join. I'm quite happy ploughing my own furrow.' I made contact initially through a British Humanist Association (BHA) branch in the north of England with a group who self-identify as secular humanists and atheists/freethinkers. The BHA^{iv} was founded in 1967 although Bagg and Voas (2010: 92-3) claim that atheism came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century in Britain, under the influence of reformers such as Robert Owen, George Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh and continued through the likes of Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer in the twentieth. However, as the century progressed British opinion on the subject evolved slowly and what had been lodged earlier in the public consciousness, through these reformers, became accepted, without fanfare, as legitimate ideology. By the time atheism resurfaced during the cultural revolution it had been 'integrated within a rationalistic moral philosophy and life stance dubbed "humanism"'. By atheists I (and the participants) mean those rejecting the g/God favoured by theism (Cliteur 2009), a conscious and explicit position defined by a complete denial or belief in gods; by secular humanism I mean the positive stance that affirms ethical values, humanistic virtues and democratic principles (Cimino and Smith 2010). By freethinker, I mean those who remain sceptical of all religious positions and opinions until they have considered the evidence and made their own minds up, on the basis of reason (Pasquale 2010: 46).

Initially, ten women volunteered to take part. In the event only five followed this through and the rest were found through the snowball method or contacts via other networks but they were a difficult group to find. Possible subjects who gave the impression of not being religiously inclined turned out to be either indifferent but not atheist, or irreligious but not atheist. As remarked above, being nonreligious/irreligious is not synonymous with atheism. Taking our definition of atheism as being that which is defined in distinction from theism and a conscious and explicit position defined by a complete denial or belief in gods limited me to

fairly small numbers of women and a self-selected sample. What follows can only be illustrative rather than representative, clearly, and was also limited by being a self-funded study. These findings would need to be examined through a much larger study which would provide useful sociological data on what appears to be an increasing trend in the UK but also could be replicated in other countries and with other age cohorts^v. The UK 2011 Census recorded 25 per cent of the population identifying as nonreligious but this includes far more than just atheists. The Atheist Census online^{vi} claims only a fifth of its numbers are women and they tend to be younger rather than older, so unsurprising that numbers to choose from are limited. This study, therefore, considers a little studied, small group of older women (the majority of whom were aged at least 60) who may, however, increase in the future if the number of those identifying as being of no religion continues to grow, as happened between the UK Censuses of 2001 and 2011.

The respondents were white, Western, largely well educated or certainly well read (Bagg and Voas 2010, Beit-Hallahmi 2007, Brown and Lynch 2012, Zuckerman 2007). Semi-structured conversations, sometimes in my home, but usually in that of participants, were initiated by my simply asking participants to 'begin at the beginning and tell me something of your life story and how you have arrived at your present stance'. This open-ended method is one I have employed for a major part of my researches because it allows conversation to flow freely, to develop naturally and minimises danger of the researcher 'directing' the story which rightly belongs to the participant, or simply being given the answers participants think I want to hear (See Droogers 2014 for an interesting discussion on this point). When data gathering is over and transcriptions are complete, I spend many hours reading and re-reading the data, looking for common themes and variations. The major theme emerging here was that of the role the emotions in causing these women to turn to atheism. What I shall describe, therefore, is the major theme and how it manifested itself among a sample of the women, together with a number of variations. All names are pseudonyms and no exact locations are described in the interests of preserving confidentiality.

Major cultural shifts

Changes in sexual mores and second wave feminism

I begin, then, by sketching the historical period through which these women have lived, a period including the cultural revolution of the 1960s, one which was key, commentators have argued, in shifting perceptions and changing attitudes across the whole spectrum of British public and private life. Callum Brown has argued, for example, that the change in sexual mores and the rise of second wave feminism gave women permission to quit the role of being the pious 'angel in the house' and to cast off churchgoing as they donned the mantle of liberation and personal autonomy (2001, 2006). He claims that the relaxation of sexual taboos shattered the churches' traditional conception of piety, substituting that for diversity and freedom of individual choice in moral behaviour (2006).

Cultural historian Hugh McLeod (2007: 161-69) comments on there being more explicit references to sex made in the media, the birth control pill becoming increasingly available to younger and unmarried women, possibly leading to greater numbers of those having sex at a younger age. Couples lived together before marriage and some people had more than one sexual partner before marriage.

Commentators have argued that the publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 caused the biggest change in attitudes for Catholics. Vatican II had led many to assume that radical change was on the way, especially regarding birth control and the enforced celibacy of the priesthood. Catholic couples had simply begun to use contraceptives in anticipation of the presumed upcoming changes. When the publication of *Humanae Vitae* forbade the use of artificial birth control methods such as the pill, couples were simply not prepared to fall in line with the traditional views of the past (Davie 2015: 54; Hornsby-Smith 1987: 90-91; McLeod 2007: Wolffe 1994: 431).

Coupled with the advent of the sexual revolution came the rise of the feminist movement. Commentators largely agree that second wave feminism viewed religion as patriarchal and misogynistic. Hence many feminist women found it hard to remain within religious traditions (Furseth 2010; Mahlamäki 2012; Redfern and Aune 2013) which legitimated the oppression of and discrimination against women (Brewster 2013; Namazie 2009; Overall 2007; Woodhead 2006, 2008). Some of the women I spoke to found the principles of the secular humanist movement more in tune with their sense that all be treated equally, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.^{vii} Groups like the BHA and the more militantly secularist and atheist National Secular Society^{viii} have made significant contributions to the debates in and around reform of the law in matters relating to divorce, homosexuality and abortion. One of the participants in this study noted the accepting attitudes of BHA women of homosexuals and lesbian women, in particular, when narrating her early entry into the newly formed BHA. While some women in this study had found religion damaging to women specifically, others felt it was a damaging influence for all. However, my own finding supports that of McLeod: most women had probably given up on Christianity before they learned about feminism and perhaps not all that many were committed to the movement, although they may have had sympathies with some of its aims and some of the women display attitudes suggesting they are familiar with feminist discourses in the media at that time.

The increase in affluence and higher education

While the liberating influences of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the feminist movement may be a factor in women disaffiliating in some numbers, other equally important contemporary cultural influences should be noted. McLeod (2007: 115-118) and Sandbrook (2006: 103-146), for example, point to increasing affluence during this period, when employment prospects were good. The increase in the numbers of women entering higher education meant better job prospects for women as well as men leading to greater financial independence and autonomy. Greater interaction in the workplace with men, considered to be less religious than women (Feltey and Poloma 1991; Furseth 2010; Gelder and Escott 2001; Mahlamäki 2012), may also have been an influence on women (DeVaus and McAllister 1987; Vincett, Sharma, and Aune 2008: 15), causing them to abandon religious faith while adopting a more agnostic/atheist position. Higher education also generated new and more secular meaning systems, competing with theistic interpretations of the world (McLeod 2007: 70-72, 195, 212, 241).

The importance of home and family

More surprising, perhaps, in view of the foregoing is McLeod's contention (2007: 173) that well educated women, although wanting a job and even a career, did not abandon home and family commitments (see also Author 1, 2, Sandbrook) . Home

remained both the principal focus of women's lives and, importantly, the place where they continued to exercise power. They remained the main socialisers of their children and, in consequence, some began to raise children without the benefit of religion, which was simply 'unconsidered' (McLeod 2007: 262).

The role of the emotions

However, important though these factors may be in explaining accelerating numbers of women disaffiliates from the 1960s onwards, they do not necessarily turn women into atheists (Eccles 2012). Possibly the more powerful driver at work among the women here is damaging experiences with religion which have left a profound mark, causing them to roundly reject it and turning to atheism/humanism.

Riis and Woodhead (Riis and Woodhead 2010) have argued for placing much more emphasis on the part the emotions play in changed and changing beliefs and values. Emotions are not merely private, personal and subjective inner states but are constructed in the interplay between social agents and structures, including those found within religion. They are also found in the 'ever-changing relations with complexes of cultural symbols and material settings'(7) in what they term 'an emotional regime' (21). They see emotions as being involved in a triangulated relationship between the individual, society and symbolic/material culture (47–51) in which relationships seldom remain static because the connections and disconnections between self, society and symbols do not remain static. They also argue that the interaction of emotional regimes with power is an important part of the analysis. Because symbols, religious and non-religious, channel and communicate emotional power, they can both reinforce existing social relations but also destabilise them.

Merino and Mumford (Merino 2012; Mumford 2015) have argued that the part the emotions play in their subjects' rejection of religion was not immediately obvious at first. Atheists will often cite religion as being illogical, irrational, patriarchal, intellectually incredible, hence they identify as atheists, disbelieving the g/God theism favours. Evidence from Mumford's informants, however, suggests that the rejection of religious beliefs may often be initially motivated by individual emotional responses to specific events or experiences in people's lives. The perception that decisions based on reason and evidence are considered more valid than those based on emotional reactions may explain why so many people subsequently frame rejection of religious beliefs in reference to scientific discoveries and historical evidence. But, if Mumford is correct and my own evidence suggests she is, we should not assume that rational explanations are the only reason for turning to atheism. I now consider the women themselves.

Sex and the politics of being atheist/humanist

Stephanie, a very feisty science teacher in her late fifties, a former Catholic of Irish descent and one of five children, described a poor and severely constricted childhood in a northern industrial city.

So we were poor in terms of just general things, food, clothes, universal things, and socially poor because my parents had no social graces at all. And they had no knowledge of appropriate behaviour other than behaviour that had been passed down to them, essentially through, for my mother, the

(Catholic) church, so this enormous sense of duty, this enormous weight of duty from an early age.

Stephanie chose to go to a Catholic secondary school, because 'although there was resentment there was also a level of security offered, that you were part of something'. She had already given up on belief in God by this time but she continued to

play the God game. And the God game is quite a good game when you're a Catholic because there are certain buttons to push and if you push them well, then you are considered to be a good person and the consequence of that is that good people get good rewards and if you're a good female, and you're an intelligent female and you behave well in your Catholic school, then gifts come flooding your way and things are sweet.

She watched girls around her objecting and rebelling but thought they were fools, 'not fools for what they thought but fools for not playing the game. And I have this thing in my life called the game and playing the game determines quite a lot what happens to you.' We shall return to the importance of playing the game with another participant below. Stephanie's true convictions only surfaced openly when instructed to take part in an anti-abortion rally which she refused to do, at which point, no longer playing the game, she was duly ostracised by her Catholic community.

Stephanie discovered sex as she entered the sixth form,

Some of the girls, you know, there was quite a lot of promiscuous young ladies around and most of my intelligent friends and me lost our virginity when we were about 16 or 17, which again, was quite early in those days. I think that was a Catholic thing and it was a little bit of a rebellion, you know, but it was (said in a whisper) with a Catholic boy. I can't remember any of my friends, from when they lost their virginity, doing anything other than with a Catholic boy.

She lived openly in the late 1970s with the man who was to become her husband and only married then (in a civil ceremony) because 'I went to a school that even though it didn't declare itself Christian was most certainly a Christian environment and teachers were still expected to show an example'. She has only 'come out' as an atheist in the last dozen years, largely because she sensed stigma in owning up to it, also reported by other participants who had long kept quiet. Finally, Stephanie realised that, 'like being gay', such an identification is 'part of who you are' and therefore she should hide her identity no longer. She declares herself overtly feminist but had become an atheist long before she was actively conscious of the feminist movement, as McLeod (2007: 182) asserts above. However, we could argue that feminist discourse, consciously or unconsciously, seems to have influenced her attitudes as she was growing up, in deciding a woman should control her own body, hence refusing participation in the anti-abortion rally, and that she would live with her husband before they were married, even though the Church disapproved of both abortion and pre-marital sexual relations.

I shall remain with Stephanie to make a final point in this section. This concerns a recent encounter she had with a Muslim woman wearing a niqab. Now, Stephanie is used to encountering veiled Muslim women and girls in the school

where she works but this encounter was different. This woman, who is a white Muslim convert, has a son who met Stephanie's daughter at university and they were now living together. For many months the Muslim son concealed the relationship from his Muslim convert mother, a situation which affronted Stephanie, in that she felt her daughter, living in a relationship which is entirely mainstream now by white Western standards, was rendered 'invisible' and marginalised in the boy's family circle.

Having established a good relationship with the boy and frequently entertaining him under her roof, Stephanie was adamant he tell his mother and that her daughter be marginalised no longer in his family circle. She also asked to meet his mother.

And we had a really good conversation because she came, we met her in a coffee bar with (my daughter), she took her niqab off which was good because I would not have, she needed to show respect for me. (I think by this she meant that the other woman could see Stefanie's face and would be able to read cues from Stefanie's facial expressions, whereas Stefanie would have been denied this opportunity.) And how can she not respect me if her son is spending his time, is being fed by me, is being looked after by me, is being, you know, nurtured by me, which she did.

AS a result of the conversation the boy's mother, while disagreeing with Stephanie's strongly atheist views, agreed she would acknowledge Stephanie's daughter within her own family circle but that it would be difficult. Stephanie, nonetheless, felt she had done the right thing because, as she said, she wanted her daughter 'to be able to walk along the road with (him) and hold his hand and be proud to be with him and I am proud she has him as her boyfriend and I want that reflected physically to everybody else. So it's quite an interesting ... it's about declaring yourself, isn't it?'

Financial in/dependence: 'speaking up for myself'

Almost certainly higher education has been a factor in exposing the women in this study to a plurality of worldviews, as McLeod (2007: 115-117) asserts, and allowing them access to better paid jobs.

Marie, in her early fifties, was brought up in a liberal non-religious household and has worked for much of her life as a political researcher. Although having left school at 16, she was very well read, one wall of her sitting room being entirely covered in her collection of books on politics, literature and philosophy. She was earning her own living, owned her own house and determinedly pursuing her atheist stance, when I spoke to her, although her new partner, whom she had just invited to share her home, was a practising Christian, which, she admitted, she was finding difficult.

I don't think I ever believed, even as a child, so it's not like I had this big experience which left a big gap in my life. So even from being old enough to think about it, certainly from 17 or 18, I've never really believed there's a god, simple as that. I've joined the Humanists relatively recently. Partly because of the 9/11 stuff (see Davie 2015: 37) and Richard Dawkins^{ix}, A.C. Grayling^x have become much more visible, haven't they? And that sort of ... I've always been an atheist but never sort of talked about it; people didn't

talk about religion in general, did they? And then I read *The God Delusion* and people have become a lot more vocal about atheism, erm ... so, yes, it's just a good discussion and not to be too militantly atheist, and just remember that other people have views as well.

Marie had been troubled about the role of religion ever since the bombing of the Pentagon and the Twin Towers in New York in 2001. She had found the work of the New Atheists (Amarasingam 2012) helpful in formulating her own response to the horror generated by the attack and, in particular, the English academics and polemicists Richard Dawkins and A.C. Grayling. She had learned through them to think for herself and stand on her own feet without the 'prop' offered by religion. Consequently, she found it disconcerting that her partner 'seems to live his life in fear of some unseen presence watching his daily actions' and that he was not 'free to think for himself'. For Marie, the BHA meeting provided a comforting space, somewhere she could be herself and express her sincerely held views. I sensed she felt torn between her affection for her partner on the one hand and his beliefs, on the other, which she could not share, hence her assertion that one should not be too militantly atheist, even though she greatly admired the work of two writers who are.

Clarissa, in her late eighties, a Londoner, had worked as a secretary both in London and the north of England. Although evacuated during the war she knew of the devastation being wreaked on the capital and its inhabitants and at this point she, along with others she knew, found it 'hard to believe in a God of love who looked after everybody because obviously that didn't happen. So there was a break, a schism between what you believed on the surface and reality of life.' It was clear from her conversation that she had experienced the liberalising influences of the 1960s, explaining that she had withdrawn her children from religious education in the early 1970s, because she knew she had the right to do so^{xi} and by then, she could 'speak up for myself', adding, 'I think there were changes in society, weren't there? There were years of upheaval and non-acceptance (of previous social conventions) and I suppose I absorbed some of that.' However, it should be noted that such a withdrawal for the reasons Clarissa gives were unusual at the time.

Carol, the only working class woman in the study, was unable to go on to higher education, as Johnson (1994: 10) remarks of many working class children in the mid-twentieth century, but was keen to see her two daughters attend university at the start of the millennium and has brought them up as atheists. Carol was born in 1954 to a Catholic mother and Protestant father, the fourth of six children. From an early age she noted many tensions in the mixed marriage and her mother worn out by constant childbearing. At the age of twelve she decided she could not reconcile the two different 'gods' of her parents so perhaps neither existed. She describes her emotional response: 'I thought I was having a nervous breakdown. I used to get panic attacks because it was coming into my mind about God and then I had to go outside and take big deep breaths because I thought, I don't believe in it, I don't believe in it, how can it be?' Growing up, she realised her only road to relative freedom from poverty and religious strife lay in leaving home. She married in 1977 in a registry office but did not share her atheist views with work colleagues until she reached 40 as also noted by Stephanie above.

I think lots of women my age who were working full time, and I was, changed because they could be independent. Like before this, women stayed at home and the man said (was in charge) and the (women) didn't have a say like they do now. When you're a woman and you have a job you feel as if you've got more of a say. We're in the middle of a changeover to what my mum was like and what my daughters are like now and I think it made us more powerful. And I feel as if I could say what I wanted and when I did, women, anyway, felt the same.

Stephanie spoke of 'playing the game' to achieve certain personal objectives. Carol admitted to the same so that her children could attend 'good schools'. They were baptised and went to Sunday school in order to be assured of a place in the village Church of England primary. Her daughters also participated in church-organised village events, an integral part of village life, and Carol attended the Methodists to ensure they had the necessary religious and social capital in a village where such capitals were paramount to be accepted even though, privately, they remained atheists.

Eve, just 60, the daughter of Jewish immigrants, does have a university degree but lamented bitterly how little she had been able to make use of it. Her atheism stems from her anguished relationship with her mother, ongoing when we spoke as mother approached her 92nd year. Eve found the conventional Jewish circles, in which her mother encouraged her to move, stifling and constricting, finding every opportunity to thwart her mother's plans to integrate her into the north London synagogue community of which her mother so yearned to be a part. On leaving university, Eve had tried to enter what she described as the 'misogynistic' world of commodity trading, 'a set-up, I believe has not changed.' She married 'out', to another non-believer, in a registry office and eventually moved to a village in the north of England, welcoming the opportunity to be free of her mother's overbearing presence. While her husband shared her atheistic views he did not share her feminist leanings and the tears shed during our conversation expressed years of frustration at being unable to earn her own living, other than in a lowly paid charity, a job constantly belittled by her husband. She blamed the very traditional household in which he had been reared, although, interestingly, both parents were humanists and his mother held an Oxford history degree. When Eve finally entered full time employment rather later in life, the work proved uncongenial and repetitive. An accountant by profession, her husband also denied her serious input into family finances, another bone of contention. She, like Carol, spoke of the churches' dominant influence in her village: 'there are two and if you don't belong to either of them, you're nowhere as far as they're concerned'. Unfulfilled in her career aspirations, denied the equality she would have liked within the domestic economy, as an atheist, Eve is also marginalised in a strongly religious community.

Perhaps unsurprisingly she views religion, particularly Orthodox Judaism, her parents' tradition, as damaging to women. 'It was always a male rabbi and I believe it's a male rabbi now. And the women, who were always regarded as no more than baby-making machines, were separated for the services, so to me, it's why?' Summing up her life, she commented wearily, 'For all this thing about you're equal, no I wasn't and it's partly because of the background (her husband's and her own). Here we are after 27 years of marriage' (bitter laughter). So, although Eve is well aware of second wave feminist discourse and the changes in British social and

cultural life which she has witnessed, her inability to benefit from them has left her embittered and resentful at what she sees as wasted opportunities.

Angela simply ceased church attendance in her teens and, initially, this was something that made little impact on her life. It was, as McLeod (McLeod 2007: 262) has remarked, 'unconsidered'. However, the later part of her career as a university lecturer took her to work in an area characterised by a very strong dual religious culture, Catholic and Muslim. Speaking of the first decade of this century, she said,

And I think in recent years there were probably influences in the institution where I worked. I think I was becoming more and more, because of having to be open to all religions, etc, I felt I couldn't say anything about what I believed in but I had to respect everyone else's religion and I began to think this is all swinging a bit too far. Tides were flowing in a way that neutral people were, mmm ... getting ... getting sort of sidelined and I think at the time there was also a big, at the time church schools that one had thought had stopped growing that were growing again, because Tony Blair^{xii}, the whole thing was getting, more religion was coming into it more, wasn't it, that we had politicians calling on God for going to war^{xiii} and a big increase in church schools and that's when I started to think, hang on a minute, that's what I don't believe, but actually I do believe things and I do have ethics and obviously a very strong sense of what is right, and it doesn't reside within religion.

Angela felt that religion was playing far too prominent a role in relations in her institution and she became subject, she said, to a number of negative and damaging remarks being made to her on a regular basis. Such a stressful atmosphere preyed on her health and eventually she took early retirement. Some time later, she decided to join a book group,

in the library locally to me, conversations, when we were discussing books, kept being stopped as in: But there's swearing in it. But you can't say that because the church ... and that's where I thought: Crumbs, I'm mid-60, I'm retired and this is, this is what I'm supposed to be and I thought I'll go and see if there are any other people out there who think like I do.

She described joining the BHA local group as 'a homecoming' and 'breath of fresh air'. Suddenly, she could talk 'about just about anything and religion doesn't have to get in the way'. Living in the country as she does, she has observed much of social life revolving round the church. 'And so if you don't, you know the social activities, if you don't go to the church, you either pretend or keep quiet and go along or you don't go along but then where do you find your social life?'

The role of emotions in the turn to atheism

As commentators quoted above have observed, various changing cultural factors have been at work in the lives of these women, even if they rejected religion before becoming conscious of other changes happening around them. Clarissa had rejected religion just after the Second World War, being unable to equate a god of love with what had happened in that period but then specifically remarks on the cultural and social changes that came somewhat later in the sixties and seventies. This period provided a new set of cultural symbols and social environment in which

already agnostic Clarissa could flourish as a fully committed humanist as Bagg and Voas (2010) comment on the late 1960s and early 1970s. Stephanie was quite clear she was a feminist but her turn to atheism seems to have started as a late teenager, as she reacted to the Catholic church's many demands on her mother, not least that of unrestricted childbearing, and the acute poverty five children born into an already poor family entailed. Hence, she refuses to attend the anti-abortion rally. As Riis and Woodhead (2010) claim, power plays are implicated in many emotional regimes. The power of the Catholic church to control the life of Stephanie's mother was something she determined would not control her. By rejecting her previous social environment and its cultural symbols, Stephanie was enabled to move into a new emotional regime where women are no longer subject to such unreasonable and life-draining demands. This regime is destabilised when she meets the Muslim woman who, for religious reasons, according to Stephanie, refuses to acknowledge her own daughter, suggesting the marginalisation of women which Stephanie roundly rejected as a much younger woman. She needs to set up the meeting with the mother of the boy who is living with her daughter to restabilise that regime, influenced, as she is here, by her deep emotional attachment to her daughter and the boy whom she welcomes under her roof.

Similarly, Angela's emotional regime is destabilised when she feels she must conceal her own atheist stance in the workplace, and where she feels her position as an atheist lecturer within her institution is undermined. She sees religion exerting a power within professional relationships that is unfair and biased and from which she can perceive no redress. Her only recourse, as she sees it, to free herself from this particular emotional regime by taking early retirement, only to be propelled into another within her village and hence her flight to the comforting environment of the BHA and an emotional regime with which she is finally at ease again.

Eve's case is rather different. Although sharing the atheist stance of her husband, and hence finding herself freed from the emotional and cultural regime in which she was raised and enjoying the benefit of a university education, Eve represents those women who have freed themselves from one oppressive emotional regime, only to be propelled into another upon marriage to an anti-feminist man. Turning to atheism is not the answer to ending all forms of female oppression, as Eve's case demonstrates.

Marie was brought up in a household where an absence of religion was unremarked and only comes to the fore after the shocking events of 9/11. Having established herself in an emotional regime as a free thinker, supported by the BHA and atheism's cultural symbols in the form of the work of the New Atheists, religion suddenly re-enters the frame, when she enters a love relationship with a practising Christian. Hence, she is thrust into a position between two competing emotional regimes, between her atheism on the one hand, and her affection for her partner on the other. So, one should not be too 'militantly' atheist, since to be so would undermine relations with her partner, although her mentors are the militant New Atheists. So Marie negotiates her way between the two competing regimes.

Carol's decision to give up on belief in God provokes a distinctly emotional response as she talks of 'panic attacks' when contemplating the enormity of what she has done as a twelve year old, since she is, in effect, rejecting the whole emotional regime in which she has been raised. Later in life, she, like Stephanie,

becomes aware of the burden placed on women by the Catholic church in forbidding artificial birth control and the hardships and tensions this has created in her family. So, in rejecting religion and bringing up her daughters differently, she enters a new more comfortable emotional regime. However, while thoroughly embracing the changes of the 1960s and 1970s as much as her straitened circumstances permitted, a mother's emotional bonds to her daughters and doing her best for them, even if this means sacrificing her atheist principles and sending her children to Church schools, 'trumps' her atheist stance during the period of their primary education. WE note, however, with McLeod (2007) that women continue to exercise power in the home during and after the cultural revolution, in that it is Carol who makes the decision as to where her children will be educated. Similarly, it was Clarissa who made the decision to withdraw her children from RE lessons.

Conclusion

These atheist women have experienced a number of the changes occurring in the 1960s and 1970s at some stage in their lives, but they had often given up on religion long before they became conscious of the feminist movement, or atheism or humanism as such and sometimes before they had completed their tertiary education (McLeod 2007: 201). A number rejected theism because of competing and/or unacceptably burdensome religious claims in the household which had affected them emotionally as they were growing up or because of competing religious/atheist clashes in the workplace. Most of the women were advocates of feminism but, as we saw, in the case of Eve, marrying an atheist is no guarantee one can live in a feminist-friendly environment.

The events of the 1960s almost certainly created a climate where free thought, sexual freedom and feminism could flourish and where increased affluence enabled women to enter higher education and/or earn better and therefore acquire greater financial independence. Such conditions almost certainly allowed atheism/humanism to flourish on a larger scale than ever before. However, key to these women becoming avowed atheists, rather than religiously indifferent, is the part played by the emotions. Where religion makes no impact on individuals, Bagg and Voas claim the default position is ambivalence, a stance maintained by about half the British population (2010: 97) but for these women, religion has made a profound emotional impact, impelling them towards a determined atheist stance and a new more comfortable emotional regime. We should also note that claims are being made as to religion's increasing importance in public discourse (Bullivant 2012; Davie 2015; Knott, Poole, and Taira 2013), but this in turn may see a rise in the number of atheists who react strongly against what they see as religion's unwarranted intrusion into public and private lives. Among their number will lie a proportion of women. Lois Lee^{xiv} has argued that nonreligion is a feature of everyday life in a way it was not 100 years ago. Nonreligious cultural movements, including atheism, can be seen as part of an on-going process of transformation, through which a new generation of unreligious Britons work out ways to understand and describe themselves in relation to life's big questions. She sees nonreligious movements also being used to help people build and articulate better senses of themselves as something other than religious and more than just nonreligious. These personal projects are helping people engage more actively with

religious friends and neighbours, she argues. She may be right. At all events it seems likely we shall hear more of these groups in the future.

ⁱ<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html> (accessed 21 July 2015)

ⁱⁱ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/uk/03/census_2001/html/religion.stm (accessed 4 August 2015)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.facebook.com/123483571055246/photos/a.281100885293513.62559.123483571055246/281100898626845/?type=1&theater>

^{iv} <https://humanism.org.uk/about/our-history-since-1896/>

^v An interesting contribution to this field can be found at <https://nsrn.net/2016/06/01/not-for-girls-gender-and-researching-nonreligion/> which includes a discussion on the possible gendered nature of atheism and nonreligion research.

^{vi} The British Religion in Numbers website, reporting on the Atheist Census online carried out by Atheist Alliance International, a global network of atheist and freethought groups and individuals, states that of 12,215 self-identified atheists in 2013, about a fifth were women, with more in the younger age groups, than over 65. <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2013/demographics-of-atheism/> (accessed 8 August 2015).

^{vii} see <https://humanism.org.uk/campaigns/equalities> (accessed 16 August 2015)

^{viii} <http://www.secularism.org.uk/> None of the women in this study belonged to this society although it, too, has been influential in forming more secular and atheist attitudes to such matters as what should be taught in publicly funded education.

^{ix} http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/14743.The_God_Delusion

^x <http://www.acgrayling.com/>

^{xi} The 1944 Education Act stated, 'If the parent of any pupil in attendance at any county school or any voluntary school requests that he be wholly or partly excused from attendance at religious worship in the school, or from attendance at religious instruction in the school, or from attendance at both religious worship and religious instruction in the school, then, until the request is withdrawn, the pupil shall be excused from such attendance accordingly' <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/section/25/enacted> (accessed 28 September 2015).

^{xii} The Prime Minister between 1997-2007 who became a Catholic on resigning his post. Prior to that he had tried to keep his faith a private matter as his party was not supposed 'to do God'. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1429109/Campbell-interrupted-Blair-as-he-spoke-of-his-faith-We-dont-do-God.html>

^{xiii} This is a reference to the Iraq War which Britain fought in alongside American troops committed by George W. Bush. See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/09/iraq-war-after-blair-and-bush-met-the-tempo-changed>

^{xiv} <http://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2015/02/11/no-religion-what-doesnt-kill-belief-will-only-make-it-stronger>

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