

# Atheism and Anthropology: Researching Atheism and Self-searching Belief and Experience

## Workshop

University College London,

Daryll Forde seminar room, 2nd floor, Taviton Street 14

21 September, 2011

Sponsored by the European Association of Social Anthropologists and EASA Anthropology of Religion Network

**Convenors:** Ruy Llera Blanes (Institute of Social Sciences, University of Lisbon), Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic (University College London)

Headline clashes between 'new atheists' such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins and various religious leaders have shown that strong convictions inform atheist and religious discourses, searching to convey their own propositional 'truths'. Some people argue that atheism has turned militant; others suggest religious education is a menace. Yet, what is atheism? How are subjectivities, ideas, embodied practices and material environments inflected with atheism? These matters are often neglected in anthropology for the simple reason that the discipline itself is an offspring of methodological atheism caught in an awkward relationship with theology and religious performances.

This workshop adopts a two-pronged approach to the research of atheism.

We have invited scholars who research atheism as historical, political, and cultural articulations of non-belief, atheistic critique, political and practical disinterestedness in matters of religions. Through our workshop, we will explore the definitions and manifestations of atheism through the comparison and analysis of a number of ethnographic case studies. Furthermore, we will address the questions of specifically religious reflexivity in anthropology by considering the ethical and methodological implications of conducting research as atheist anthropologists and representing religious traditions and ontologies in the secular language of anthropology. A few questions worth considering:

- Is an 'anthropology of atheism' possible, or necessary?
- Are atheism and religiosity competing, opposed 'regimes of truth'? Can atheism be researched as a form of belief? What are the additional dimensions of 'atheism' that are not covered by the concept of 'belief'?
- What does secularism tell us about atheism?
- Is atheism as awkward as theology for anthropology? Is anthropology an inevitably non-theistic discipline? Can you teach anthropological theories of religion to students of anthropology who take witchcraft seriously?

Keynote Lecture by Matthew Engelke (London School of Economics)

## **PROGRAMME:**

9:45 Welcome words by convenors

10:00: Keynote Lecture

Matthew Engelke: The Anthropology of After Religion

11:15: Break

11:30: Session 1: Researching Atheism

Jacob Copeman: Death and Atheism in India

Lorna Mumford: Discourses of Atheist and Humanist Identity in Britain

12:30: Lunch

13:45 Session 2: Atheism and Secularism

Sindre Bangstad: Which Road to Enlightenment? On The Impasses of Secularist Absolutism In Relation to Anthropology in Contemporary Norway

Ashley Lebner: Marxism, Christian eschatology and the secular in Brazil

Vlad Naumescu: Secular missionaries or phonies? Old Believers' moral dilemmas in (post)socialist Romania

Chair/discussant: Charles Stewart

15:30 Break

16:00 Session 3: Anthropological Atheism

Sonja Luehrmann: Antagonistic Insights: Evolving Soviet atheist critiques of religion and why they might matter for anthropology  
Tim Jenkins: The 'language ideologies' of a positivist sociological study and Evangelical Christianity compared  
Galina Oustinova-Stjepanovic: Confessional Anthropology

17:45 Final discussion and farewell