

## Social Identities between the Sacred and the Secular

Edited by Abby Day and Christopher R. Cotter

### Call for Papers

Many people may not identify strongly or consistently as religious, yet religion still matters for them at certain times and in certain contexts. Rather than dismiss those self-identifications as meaningless, incoherent or insignificant, we may find through in-depth research that they are meaningful, coherent and differently significant (Day 2011).

What is sometimes construed as empty space is filled with something – but what? One typology advanced by Day (2006; 2009; 2011) suggested Christian ‘nominalism’ is an important way to mark social identities she described as Christian ethnic nominalism; natal nominalism and aspirational nominalism. While her theory about Christian ethnic nominalism has been analysed cross-culturally and operationalized (see, for example, Storm 2009; Voas 2009) it is still limited by its Christian scope. Are there Muslim or Buddhist ‘nominalists’, for example? How can we best describe and understand such people who are neither, or are, perhaps, more fluidly, religious or secular? (Woodhead 2012)

Such explorations require innovative methods that do not force religious answers with religious questions and suggest new interpretations of what it may mean to be ‘non-religious’ (Cotter 2011). This under-explored domain between the secular and the sacred is a contested space that requires further investigation through innovative methods and fresh analytical thinking.

We are therefore delighted that we have been encouraged by the editors and publisher of the new Ashgate AHRC/ESRC Religion & Society series, edited by Prof. Linda Woodhead and Dr Rebecca Catto, to submit a full proposal for an edited collection: *Social Identities between the Sacred and the Secular*.

Our first priority has been to confirm the participation of key Religion & Society programme scholars. We are now extending our Call to the wider academic community. Publication dates will be negotiated but we will aim for chapter submission date by April 2012, assuming 12-14 chapters of 5,000 words each.

Below you will find a summary of the publication. If you would like to contribute, please let us know as soon as possible and provide a title and 100-word abstract by **October 31 2011**.

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## **Summary**

This collection of interdisciplinary chapters will present current empirical scholarship from local, national and international contexts.

Work will negotiate and advance knowledge and understanding of the important conceptual and lived spaces between the contested poles of the 'sacred' and the 'secular'.

Researchers finding themselves in this space often did not expect to be here. Many may have intended to study 'traditionally' religious or non-religious individuals, communities, and institutions, but found something else, something that was neither religious nor secular. It is that important work we aim to capture.

## **Book structure**

The collection will be divided into three sections. We are summarising these below with questions intended to stimulate rather than prescribe.

### 1. The methodological space:

What issues were encountered and innovations made when researching these contested spaces? How are scholars to conceptualise these spaces? What do they do to existing concepts of 'religion' and the 'secular'? How can existing methodological approaches be adapted to studying these spaces?

Do these spaces open up and demand new approaches? New vocabulary? How have those challenges been met?

### 2. The public space:

An exploration of these spaces can include, but are not limited to, the spatial, such as the university campus, the community centre, schools, prisons, urban streets, festivals, hospitals, or the football pitch. We are also concerned with the political space, dealing with issues such as legal definitions of what 'counts' as a religion, or foreign policy decisions and anti-terror laws. How is the in-between secular/sacred space described, mediated and discursively in media-related spaces? What are the 'effects' of our modern, globalised age upon the space between sacred and secular? What institutional manifestations of this in-between space defy easy emic or etic categorisation? How do people use different spaces in different contexts, perhaps even vicariously? (Davie 2007)

### 3. The social, identity-dominated space

How do individuals negotiate their identity when it falls into this in-between space? What are their personal pragmatic strategies? How is this space felt, embodied, sensed, articulated? What do terms and ideas like religious/secular belief, practice, or attitudes mean to people?

What is the sacred/secular space that arises through inter-subjective and inter-corporeal real lives?

## **The Editors**

Dr Abby Day is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Kent and a Principal Investigator at the University of Sussex. Her qualitative longitudinal research has expanded conventional views of belief and belonging through empirical research based initially in the UK and extended through cross-cultural comparisons. Her latest book, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press) is published in October 2011 by Oxford University press. She also edited the Ashgate collection, *Religion and the Individual*, 2008.

Christopher R. Cotter is a post-graduate student at the University of Edinburgh. His publications and research have centred on contemporary atheism and his recent MSc project concerned university students whose personal (non)religiosity challenged the reification of the religion-secular distinction. His future research work will continue the theme of 'non-religion'. He is co-founder and podcast co-host at The Religious Studies Project, and a web editor at the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network.

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