

Explaining Atheism: The Causal Origins of Individual and Societal Non-belief

Programme outline

Atheism, agnosticism, and other forms of non-belief in God or gods are widespread and growing, raising public debates about the personal and social impacts of non-belief and how to include such perspectives in legal frameworks, education, and public policy (Zuckerman 2007; Lee 2015; Smith & Cragun 2019). Further, the growth of non-belief, as well as its uneven distribution around the world, raises questions for the scientific study of religion and culture. If beliefs in God or gods are largely the products of evolved human psychology (Boyer 2001, Barret 2004), then how are we to explain the growth and distribution of atheism, agnosticism, and other forms of religious non-belief (Lee and Bullivant 2010; Lanman 2012a; Mercier, Kramer, and Shariff 2018)? What are the main causes of atheism?

With generous funding from the John Templeton Foundation, in collaboration with Queen's University Belfast, Brunel University, University of Kent, St Mary's University Twickenham, Coventry University, and University of Notre Dame Australia, the new Explaining Atheism research programme is the first major research initiative of its kind to examine the causes of atheism across disciplines and across cultures.

The programme has several components. Firstly, it involves grant competitions, to generate and fund research from across the human sciences, investigating the causes of atheism across demographic groups, cultural settings, and historical periods. Secondly, its core interdisciplinary research team will work across these areas to build a more integrated understanding of the causal origins of individual and societal non-belief through a central research project called Explaining Atheism: Across Disciplines, Across Cultures. Finally, the programme includes public engagement activities (including a high-profile closing conference to be held in Oxford in 2024), which aim to develop knowledge exchange between academic researchers in this field and wider publics. Together, these strategies aim to produce the most systematic scientific account of the causal origins of atheism, agnosticism, and other forms of non-belief to date.

In collaboration with the Explaining Atheism programme, Queen's University Belfast is providing two fully funded studentships to support doctoral research that will contribute to the programme's broad goals and participate in our core research projects.

The Studentships

Studentship 1: Quantitative

The recipient of the Quantitative studentship will work with the core team on the central cross-cultural survey project examining the causes of atheism and be invited to pursue additional research that reflects their own personal interest in the causes of atheism. The programme is a broad and ambitious one, and projects might focus on any region(s) of world, social grouping(s) or ways people become atheists. Additional project ideas may utilize anthropological, sociological, or psychological methods, but are expected to be empirical with a predominantly quantitative focus.

The appointed researcher will work with a supervisory team led by Dr Jonathan Lanman (Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queens University Belfast) and supported by Dr Aiyana Willard (Psychology, Brunel University London), and will be an active member of the Explaining Atheism programme team.

Applications for this studentship are welcome from anyone with a strong academic track record in a relevant discipline (e.g. sociology, anthropology, psychology) who is able to demonstrate a strong

interest in the programme theme as well as the range of skills necessary for this kind of collaborative project. A demonstrated knowledge of statistical analysis is required, and some experience with the statistical software R is preferred.

Studentship 2: Qualitative

The recipient of the Qualitative studentship will work with the core team to qualitatively and potentially quantitatively analyze hundreds of existing interviews from Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, Sweden, UK, and USA in order to examine how the causal factors identified elsewhere in the project manifest in individuals' lived experience, illustrate and deepen our understanding of those processes, and generate new theories about how people and societies become non-believing.

In addition, the recipient will be invited to pursue additional research that reflects their own personal interest in the causes of atheism. The programme is a broad and ambitious one, and projects might focus on any region(s) of world, social grouping(s) or ways people become atheists. Projects may utilize anthropological, sociological, or psychological methods, but are expected to be empirical with a predominantly qualitative focus.

The appointed researcher will work with a supervisory team led by Dr Jonathan Lanman (Institute of Cognition and Culture, Queens University Belfast) and supported by Dr Lois Lee (Religious Studies, University of Kent), and will be an active member of the Explaining Atheism programme team.

Applications for this studentship are welcome from anyone with a strong academic track record in a relevant discipline (e.g. sociology, anthropology, psychology, religious studies) who is able to demonstrate a strong interest in the programme theme as well as the range of skills necessary for this kind of collaborative project. Previous experience with fieldwork, interviews, and qualitative analytical software such as NVivo is desirable.

Supervisory and training support

The recipients of these awards will be based in the Institute of Cognition and Culture, within the School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen's University Belfast. The Institute of Cognition and Culture has internationally recognised expertise in the study of religion, atheism, and morality, and has a strong record of winning national and international funding to provide advanced training to doctoral and post-doctoral researchers. The successful award-holder would be expected to play an active role in the Institute's research events, which include lab meetings and guest lectures. Our strong training environment means that doctoral students from the Institute intending to go on to future academic work have a strong track record of securing post-doctoral positions after completion of their theses. For a partial list of alumni, please see <https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/InstituteofCognitionCulture/Alumni/>.

As well as doctoral research and training, the successful applicants will be core members of the Explaining Atheism programme team, participating in group meetings and research, and contributing to the successful delivery of the programme overall.

Eligibility

Both studentships are funded by the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (DfE) and are subject to the [residency and citizenship criteria of DfE awards](#).

Applicants must be UK residents if they are to receive a full award. Non-UK residents and international students may also apply to work on the project but, if successful, will be all or partially self-funded, as stipulated in the [eligibility criteria](#).

The studentships will run for three years (full-time equivalent) and include the cost of all relevant fees, an annual maintenance grant as well as a Research Training Support Grant. In total, the value of each studentship award exceeds £61,000. In addition to the funding from the studentship, each recipient will have additional financial support to attend programme meetings and conferences.

Selection process and person specification

The deadline for applications will be 5.00pm on **Friday, 18 February 2022**. Interviews for short-listed applicants will be held in early March, 2022.

HOW TO APPLY

Apply by using QUB's Postgraduate Applications Portal go.qub.ac.uk/pgapply and following the step-by-step instructions. You may also find [this advice page](#) useful in preparing your application.

In your proposal, you should provide the following:

- An explanation of why you are interested in this research programme and the core research project of Explaining Atheism: The Causal Origins of Individual and Societal Non-belief
- A brief additional research proposal of your choosing, outlining an additional research topic and methodology within the broad area of Explaining Atheism
- An explanation of how your previous academic training provides a strong basis for you to undertake research in this area (e.g. through the particular modules/courses or dissertation topics that you have pursued, or particular theoretical/methodological approaches that you have become interested in)
- An explanation of how you see this studentship project providing a basis for your future academic or professional work
- Contact details of two academic referees who would be able to comment on your suitability to undertake this research

It is expected that interviews for short-listed candidates will take place online (Microsoft Teams) in early March 2022. Short-listed candidates will also be asked to provide a sample of their written work prior to interview.

The following criteria will be used to assess applications:

Essential

- Evidence of strong previous academic performance in a relevant subject area (e.g., sociology, anthropology, religious studies). At a minimum, applicants will be expected to have an undergraduate degree at a high 2:1 and have received (or be in the process of) achieving a Masters' level qualification. In practice, however, previous experience of short-listing for awards of this type indicate the minimum threshold for consideration for short-listing is likely to be that candidates should have a first class honours degree and have received (or be in the process of receiving) a Masters qualification in the Distinction range.
- Clear evidence of an understanding of the focus of the Explaining Atheism programme

- An ability to work collegially and effectively in the context of a programme involving both academic and non-academic partners (e.g. excellent written and oral communication skills, strong inter-personal skills, evidence of management of academic/project work to clear deadlines)
- An ability to think in sophisticated and sensitive ways about the complexities of academic research in an area of public debate
- The motivation and interest to engage actively with the research environment in the Institute of Cognition and Culture and School of History, Anthropology, Philosophy and Politics at Queen's University Belfast, as well as to make constructive use of the interdisciplinary expertise across the Explaining Atheism programme

Desirable

- Evidence of previous study on a subject or approach directly relevant to this project (e.g. social scientific approaches to the study of religion, nonreligion, atheism, secularity or ethics and values)
- Demonstrable skills and experience pertaining to the project: For the Quantitative Studentship, demonstrable skills and experience in statistical analysis; for the Qualitative Studentship, demonstrable skills and experience in fieldwork and interviewing
- Previous experience of writing for non-academic audiences
- Previous familiarity with relevant software (e.g. R and SPSS for the Quantitative Studentship; NVivo for the Qualitative Studentship)

Further information

Applicants are encouraged to acquaint themselves with the results of the Understanding Unbelief (2017-2021) programme, especially the initial report, found [here](#). Further questions about the Understanding Unbelief programme can be discussed by emailing Dr Lois Lee at l.a.lee@kent.ac.uk

Further questions about the Explaining Atheism programme can be discussed by contacting Dr Jonathan Lanman at j.lanman@gub.ac.uk