

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

Request for Proposals – Information Sheet

Through a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, Queen’s University Belfast welcomes proposals contributing to the Explaining Atheism project. Over the next three years, this initiative will provide £850,000 for international, multidisciplinary research from the human sciences (including anthropology, cognitive science, psychology, political science, history, and sociology) to advance our understanding of the causal origins of atheism. We aim to fund 8 to 10 projects of up to 23 months in duration; individual researchers or project teams can apply for funding to a maximum project value of £200,000.

We are now inviting submission of Letters of Inquiry, following which we will invite a limited number of researchers and research teams to submit full proposals. This information sheet sets out the parameters of the sub-granting project and the evaluation criteria.

Overview

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. 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, then how are we to explain the growth and distribution of atheism, agnosticism, and other forms of religious non-belief? What are the main causes of atheism?

While a limited amount of research has examined the causal origins of atheism and other forms of non-belief, there has been no systematic, multi-disciplinary, cross-cultural attempt to establish the relative importance of the various causal factors hypothesised by researchers.

The central objectives of the Explaining Atheism programme are to:

- test the most widely held theories of the causes of atheism with large samples and across cultures
- combine and compare causal theories of atheism and ‘atheisation’ (Sheard, 2014) at individual and societal levels, and move towards the integration of distinct causal accounts (e.g. psychological, biological, sociological, and historical)
- make further advances in establishing the scientific study of atheism, agnosticism, and nonreligion in the academy
- facilitate future research into the effects of atheism and agnosticism on individuals and societies

- improve public understanding of the evidence for and against commonly held notions of the causes of atheism.

To meet these objectives, the Explaining Atheism programme must overcome a variety of challenges that have hindered progress towards satisfactory causal explanations of atheism. These include the following major challenges:

1. **Terminology:** The term ‘atheism,’ as well as related terms such as ‘agnosticism,’ ‘unbelief,’ ‘non-belief,’ and ‘irreligion,’ is used by scholars and social actors to denote different things and to different ends, with no objective procedure for determining a ‘correct’ definition. Consequently, past attempts to provide causal explanations for ‘atheism’ have worked with different phenomena and, in some cases, conflated distinct objects of analysis (Lanman, 2012; 2016). This limits the effectiveness of some studies, but more importantly makes it difficult to cross-analyse studies to build a more advanced understanding of the causes of atheism.
2. **Disciplinary Silos** While excellent work has been done in developing particular explanatory accounts of particular forms of atheism in different disciplines, this work has never been systemised and collectively evaluated. One significant challenge to systemizing and collectively evaluating this existing work is that it involves qualitatively distinct types of causal explanation. Much quantitative work aims to uncover general causal factors at work probabilistically across individual cases (e.g. individual differences in cognitive biases or the intensity of religious socialisation) while much qualitative work aims to uncover the particular or ‘actual’ (Hitchcock, 2018) causal factors involved in a particular historical movement (Ledrew, 2016) or personal event. Unfortunately, these different research agendas are often seen as competing with one another and it is common for scholars holding to one of these agendas to ignore the work of those holding the other. This harms both efforts.
3. **Inherent Obstacles to Causal Understanding:** In addition to the difficulties surrounding our general understanding of atheism, there are substantial epistemological and methodological challenges to developing a causal understanding of any human phenomena. One of the most relevant and obvious challenges is the difficulty of making principled causal inferences from observational data (i.e. you cannot infer causation from correlation). While some experimental work has been done in the scientific study of atheism (Shariff, Cohen, and Norenzayan, 2008), this has only been done on a limited number of causal factors, in a limited number of contexts and with questionable ecological validity. To improve our causal understanding of atheism, we need to employ principled methods of causal analysis and be wary of overinterpretation.

The aim of the Explaining Atheism programme is to advance our causal understanding of atheism through a research programme that addresses and overcomes each of these difficulties.

1. In response to the challenge of terminology, we encourage scholars to disentangle the distinct phenomena associated with ‘atheism’ using the meta-theoretical principle of fractionation employed in the cognitive science of religion (e.g. Boyer, 2010; Whitehouse & Lanman, 2014, Lanman, 2016). For example, one should note that not holding theistic beliefs, identifying as an ‘atheist’ and having a moralistic opposition to ‘religion’ are not the same thing and are likely to have different causal antecedents. Further, we would highlight work in sociology (Lee, 2015), religious studies (Taves, 2013), and even behavioural ecology (Sosis, 2009) suggesting that such fractionated elements or ‘building blocks’ are assembled into cultural packages and identities that guide individual lives (e.g. Humanism, Marxism, Transhumanism). Consequently, we encourage researchers to recognize the value of examining not only beliefs/non-beliefs in isolation, but also as part of wider worldviews. We would endorse moving away from any essentialized or supposed correct definition of ‘atheism’ and towards greater specificity in the precise phenomena to be explained. We provide details below of the particular forms of ‘atheism’ examined by this programme.
2. In response to the challenge of disciplinary silos, the Explaining Atheism programme embraces two principles. The first is that there are different legitimate causal questions and aims when discussing atheism. It is a valid scholarly question to ask if there are psychological, biological, or other general causal factors at work across individuals and societies that are influential in determining whether someone is a theist or atheist (Willard, Cingl, and Norenzayan, 2020). Likewise, it is a valid scholarly question to ask why a particular historical change occurred (e.g. the decline of church attendance in Britain in the 1960s (Brown, 2010) or why a particular individual either becomes or remains an atheist (Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale, 2016).

The second principle is that researchers working on each of these types of questions can learn from those working on the other. Researchers engaged in establishing general causal factors can learn much from engaging with individual case studies, as this may lead them to hypothesise new interaction effects (e.g. cognitive thinking style (Pennycook et al., 2012) may be a predicting factor of atheism but perhaps only in contexts in which there is a cultural tradition of opposing science & critical thinking with religion (Gervais et al, 2018; Farias et al, 2017)). Similarly, researchers engaged in explaining particular atheist movements or individual worldviews can learn much from engaging with more general causal research, as they can discover a plethora of causal mechanisms, some of which may be contributing to explaining their individual case studies, even in cases where they are directly unobservable. Consequently, we welcome proposals that address either/both question types and our programme activities are designed to foster cross-disciplinary collaboration.

3. In response to the challenge of causal analysis, we encourage researchers to be mindful of what their research methodologies permit in relation to causal claims and have prepared programme activities to discuss how causality is being conceptualised and empirically assessed across projects.

Key Information for Potential Applicants

I. What varieties of atheism and non-belief are we interested in explaining?

Researchers have persuasively argued that the terms ‘atheism,’ ‘unbelief,’ and ‘nonreligion,’ do not point to simple, unified objects of analysis. Rather, they are cover terms for a variety of distinct phenomena. For example, Lanman (2009; 2016) has made the case that beneath everyday discourse of ‘atheism’ may lie at least 3 causally relevant kinds:

- The absence of belief in the existence of a theistic God, or non-physical agents more generally.
- Moral judgements of the immorality of “religion.”
- Social identities that prominently feature the concept “atheism” or other forms of “nonreligion.”

Moreover, in the wider literature on secularism, atheism, and nonreligion, there are a number of distinct foci beyond belief and non-belief, such as religious affiliation and disaffiliation, nonreligious worldviews, and political ideologies.

While further research is warranted on all of these topics, the Explaining Atheism programme will focus its efforts on explaining non-belief in the existence of God, gods, and other supernatural phenomena. This narrow conceptualisation will allow for a shared focus across both core and funded projects and substantial scope for collaboration between research teams. While moral judgments of the immorality of religion and positive nonreligious worldviews and ideologies such as Humanism, Marxism or Transhumanism may be important to investigate as potential explanatory factors for non-belief in the existence of God or gods, they do not, themselves, constitute the explananda of the programme.

In relation to non-belief in God or gods, the Explaining Atheism programme will focus on improving our explanatory understanding of the following phenomena, as derived from research on Understanding Unbelief (Bullivant, Farias, Lanman, and Lee, 2019) and elsewhere:

1. **Non-theism:** non-belief in the existence of a theistic God
2. **Non-belief in other supernatural kinds.** While there are a large number of additional supernatural kinds, the Explaining Atheism programme is most interested in explaining non-belief in:
 - a. spirits, ghosts, ancestors and other culturally relevant supernatural agents

- b. a universal spirit or life force
 - c. underlying forces of good and evil
 - d. fate
3. **Metaphysical Naturalism:** non-belief in all supernatural phenomena

Beyond these forms of non-belief, the Explaining Atheism programme is also interested in explaining the following attitudes towards questions of the existence of God and other supernatural kinds.

- 4. **Strong Agnosticism:** the view that nothing is known or can be known about the existence of God, gods, or other supernatural kinds
- 5. **Supernatural Indifference:** Taking little interest in the question of the existence of God, gods, or other supernatural phenomena

Further, the Explaining Atheism programme is interested in explaining particular ‘types’ of atheism that emerge in particular countries by examining supernatural beliefs and a number of additional variables using latent class analysis. In Denmark, Finland, and the Netherlands for instance, research has indicated the existence of three atheist types (Lindeman et al., 2019):

- 6. **Spiritual Atheism:** Non-theism but with moderate to high levels of belief in other supernatural phenomena, less certainty in one’s views, and less negative evaluations of religious traditions.
- 7. **Analytical Atheism:** Non-theism with few, if any, supernatural beliefs, higher levels of confidence in one’s views, and generally negative evaluations of religious traditions.
- 8. **Uncertain Unbelief:** Non-theism but with ambivalent views of other supernatural phenomena and religious traditions.

II. What types of explanations do we aim to produce?

The Explaining Atheism programme aims to determine:

- The most powerful general predicting factors of non-theism and other forms of non-belief at the individual level. Determining these factors will allow us to better understand who is likely to become a theistic or supernatural believer and who is likely to become a non-theist or non-believer.
- The most powerful general predicting factors of levels of non-theism and other forms of non-belief at a societal or national level. Determining these factors will allow us to better answer the question of why some groups or countries have higher percentages of non-theists and non-believers than others.

- Well-evidenced causal accounts of how and why particular individuals became or remain non-theistic and/or non-believing.
- Well-evidenced causal accounts for how and why particular groups, populations, or nations developed high levels of non-theism or other forms of non-belief.

III. What theories are we particularly keen to see investigated?

Dozens of causal factors have been proposed for non-theism and other forms of non-belief at both individual and national levels. While the Explaining Atheism programme is open to projects investigating any of these, we are especially interested in research examining the following:

1) Individual level explanations

- Individual differences on cognitive and motivational variables as identified in the psychology and cognitive science of religion such as:
 - Anthropomorphism (Guthrie, 1995; Waytz et al., 2010)
 - Mentalizing (Norenzayan, Gervais, and Trzesniewski, 2012)
 - Promiscuous teleology (Kelemen & Rosset, 2009)
 - Mind-body dualism (Willard, Cingl, and Norenzayan, 2020)
 - Need for perceived control (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008)
 - Perceived need to control and moralize other's behavior (Jacquet et al., 2021)
 - Absorption (Lifshitz, van Elk, & Luhrmann, 2019; Luhrmann et al., 2021)
 - Cognitive Style (Pennycook et al., 2012)
 - Implicit Pattern Learning (Weinberger et al., 2020)
- Individual differences in religious socialisation such as:
 - Exposure to Credibility Enhancing Displays (Lanman & Buhrmester, 2017)
 - Religious and Nonreligious Emphasis (Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Sthran & Shillitoe, 2019)
 - Normative status of theism and other forms of supernatural belief in one's nation or social environment
- Commitment to worldviews and meaning systems featuring non-theism and other forms of non-belief such as:
 - Rationalism
 - Humanism
 - Marxism
 - Transhumanism
 - Postmodern scepticism
 - Secular nationalisms
 - Scientism
 - Subcultures (e.g. musical fandoms)

- Exposure to worldview pluralism (McLure, 2016; 2017; Bullivant, 2014)
- Internet use (Downey, 2014; Brown, 2014)
- Popular theories in the public sphere:
 - o Intelligence (Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall, 2013)
 - o Education (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007)
 - o Missing or dysfunctional families (Vitz, 2013; Dudley, 1978)
 - o Rebelliousness (Vitz, 2013)
 - o Selfishness (Vitz, 2013)

2) Societal & National Level Explanations:

- Existential security (Norris & Inglehart, 2004)
- Education (Mocan & Pogorelova, 2017)
- Secular Competition (Stolz, 2020)
- Religious Pluralism (Olson et al., 2020)
- Government Regulation (Fox and Tabory, 2008)
- Technological change/uptake (Taira, 2021)

IV. What topics are outside the scope of this project?

The scholarship surrounding atheism, secularity, and nonreligion is growing rapidly as researchers examine a number of important issues and questions. While we view all of the topics below as important for the continued development of the field, they fall outside the scope of this particular request for proposals. While applicants are welcome to address these topics if they deem them necessary to complete a project on the causes of atheism, projects focused primarily on these topics will not be eligible for funding.

- Explanations of religious disaffiliation
- Explanations of atheist self-identification
- Explanations of anti-religious campaigning
- The effects of atheism on individuals and societies
- The phenomenology of atheism and other forms of non-belief
- Discrimination against atheists and other non-believers
- Descriptive and interpretive accounts of different forms of atheism and non-belief
- Conceptual critiques of terms such as ‘atheism,’ ‘religion,’ and the ‘secular’

V. What methods and research strategies do we see as most productive?

Determining the most powerful causal factors in individual and societal non-belief is difficult. So too is determining the extent to which those factors are at work in causing particular individuals or groups to become non-believing or retain non-belief. Consequently, it is necessary for researchers to utilise the affordances of a number of research methods and strategies. Applicants are invited to pursue whatever methods they deem most appropriate for their particular research questions. We note that the following methods may be particularly useful.

- Natural or laboratory experiments (Willard & Cingl, 2017; Shariff, Cohen, and Norenzayan, 2008)
- Survey research (Norris & Inglehart, 2004; Gervais & Najle, 2019)
- Textual analysis of deconversion narratives (Sheard, 2014; Zuckerman, 2011)
- Longitudinal research using existing datasets (Mocan & Pogorelova, 2017; Fox and Tabory, 2008; Olson et al., 2020)
- Historical analysis (Smolkin, 2018; Turner, 1985)
- New fieldwork aiming to test causal theories in particular contexts or with particular individuals (Turpin, 2018)
- Emerging methods for exploring the ‘digital social’ and/or ‘digital religion’ (Possamai-Inesedy & Nixon, 2019; Campbell, 2017), especially those harnessing Big Data approaches (Balažka, Houtman, and Lepri, 2021).
- Computational modelling (Cragun et al., 2021)

VI. How will the programme’s activities help projects succeed?

A key objective of the Explaining Atheism grant competition is to create a diverse community of research practice, with members who learn from each other’s methodologies and findings and who share enough of a research vocabulary to collaborate on further research of mutual benefit. We are particularly keen to ensure that projects focused on establishing general causal factors and projects focused on establishing well-evidenced causal stories of particular people and groups are able to best learn from each other and to enrich the core Explaining Atheism research projects and that projects working in different geographical contexts can share methodologies and data for collaborative projects. Moreover, we are committed to ensuring that funded projects have as substantial of a public impact as possible.

Consequently, we have designed a series of programme activities to help encourage cross-programme collaboration and media engagement, including focused online workshops introducing individual projects, examining how different projects conceptualise and assess causality, considering the impacts of different operationalisations of key independent and dependent variables, and considering the public relevance of our findings. We will also provide presentation templates to help ensure clear and effective cross-project communication. Moreover, we will hold two programme wide conferences. We envision that the first will be

a workshop in Spring 2023, likely in Belfast, which will not only work to update project teams on each other's work but also to encourage teams to consider the potentials of wider collaboration with each other and with media professionals. The second will be a final project conference in Summer 2024, likely at Oxford's Museum of Natural History, where we will consider the accomplishments of the programme, the relevance of our findings for public debates about the nature of atheism and other forms of non-belief, and consider future research.

All project teams should be represented at these events. Accommodation and meals will be provided for at least one representative of each project team. Applicants may request funding for additional team members to participate in these events at LOI stage, but may be requested to find additional funding. Applicants should arrange their own travel, and may include this in their budget calculations if required.

VII. What are the criteria for evaluation?

Successful proposals should demonstrate:

- An awareness of the challenges of establishing causal accounts (e.g. correlation does not necessarily imply causation) and plans for addressing those challenges
- An awareness of the types of causal accounts they are investigating (e.g. general or singular causation; proximate or ultimate causation; psychological, biological, social, or historical causation) and how this type of causal account might fit with other types of explanations
- An awareness of the initial findings of the [Understanding Unbelief programme](#) indicating:
 - the sizeable minorities of atheists and agnostics who identify as religious,
 - that the majority of atheists do not choose to label themselves as 'atheists,'
 - that only a small minority of atheists and agnostics are total naturalists,
 - that the majority of atheists and agnostics believe in the objective existence of human rights and in the deep value of the natural world
 - that atheists and agnostics differ relatively little from general populations on their top values (e.g. Family, Freedom) and on moral relativism
 - that differences between the views of atheists/agnostics and general populations on the exclusive power of science to establish knowledge do not appear in China or Japan
- An awareness that some explanations may only be applicable in some contexts (e.g. WEIRD contexts (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010) but not others
- An awareness of and willingness to engage with rival explanatory theories to best move the field forward and improve the public understanding of the causal foundations of atheism
- A commitment to the [principles of Open science](#) and programme-wide collaboration

Proposals will be evaluated according to four main criteria:

- relevance to project objectives
- appropriateness of research context and methodology for the particular questions being addressed
- scientific excellence

- likelihood of contributing to new theory development.

Explaining Atheism: Timeline and Application Instructions

Letters of Inquiry are due Monday, 28 February 2022. All applicants will be contacted within 14 days, and successful applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal; additional support for preparing full proposals will be provided. Submissions of full proposals are due no later than 29 April 2022. Final award decisions will be issued by Friday, 3 June 2022. The earliest start date for research is 1 August 2022 and the latest end date is 30 June 2024. Proposals can be for projects of any duration within these dates (longest project length: 23 months).

Letter of Inquiry (LOI) Stage

Applicants are required to submit:

1. A complete curriculum vitae for the PI and for all major team members (if applicable). A single project leader for communication purposes must be specified. CVs should be attached as a separate document from the Letter of Inquiry.
2. A Letter of Inquiry that includes the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses the dimensions set out above, and a summary of the research design. Please ensure your letter specifies how you will conceptualise and assess causality. The letter should not exceed 1,000 words (references do not have to be counted in this total; please specify word count at top of letter).
3. The amount of funding requested. Only a rough budget breakdown is needed at this stage. The amount can be revised at the full proposal stage (plus or minus 20%). Applicants are advised that overheads may be included within the requested funds, but only to a maximum of 15% of direct costs.
4. Please include a short (1 paragraph) summary of your data management plan and commitment to open science practices. This should include the type of data you will collect or use, a statement about your intentions towards open-materials and open-data, or an explanation of why this may be restricted for your data. Applicants should also include any plans for pre-registering studies, and for open access publications.

Application materials should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to explainingatheism@qub.ac.uk. “LOI” should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and pdf. Questions about the application process can be sent to the same address. All LOI materials must be received no later than midnight (GMT) Monday, 28 February 2022. An acknowledgement email will be sent within two working days of receiving the materials.

Full Proposal Stage

Those applicants invited to submit full proposals will complete an application form that will be sent to semi-finalists, which includes:

1. A summary page, including the title of the project, amount requested, duration of the project, and information about team members.
2. An abstract of up to 500 words that explains the project and its significance to non-academics, and that could be published on the project website and possibly in Templeton materials, and included in publicity materials if the proposal is funded.
3. A description of proposed activities, including key objectives and a detailed programme of work (4 pages maximum for projects requesting funds of less than £50,000; and 10 pages maximum for projects requesting funds of over £50,000).
4. Particulars of costs, specifying how the funds will be spent. Overheads are strictly limited to 15%, and funds cannot be used for major equipment purchases. Necessary project-specific costs for lab/space use and administrative support may be included as direct costs but must be justified.
5. A project timeline
6. A full data management plan. This should include:
 - a) Plans for preregistering studies, or an explanation of why this is not possible
 - b) The number and types of datasets expected to be produced
 - c) A commitment to creating and sharing comprehensive metadata for all data sets (e.g. code-books, collection information, or anything else required to locate and understand data in the dataset or facilitate data re-use), and to working with our data manager to create a data dictionary, outlining how terms and constructs are defined and measured across projects
 - d) An outline for how to handle and store data and materials for the project during the project. We will provide a restricted-access storage facility through FigShare that applicants will be able to use to back up and share data among team members
 - e) Plans for open storage of data, metadata, and materials at the end of the project. We will have a central project page for distributing this information on FigShare. As part of this, applicants can store their data on FigShare, or use alternate repositories and share links to their data repositories on FigShare
 - f) Plans for open-access publishing. [An amount of up to £6,000 should be included in the proposed budget to help support this.]
 - g) ORCID iDs for all team members

CVs submitted at the LOI stage do not need to be resubmitted. Full proposals should be submitted, ideally by e-mail attachment, to explainingatheism@qub.ac.uk. The words 'Full Proposal' should appear in the email subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc and .pdf. Questions about full proposals can be sent to the same address. Full proposals will be accepted only from applicants who have been invited to submit by the Principal Investigators on the basis of the LOI phase. Full proposals must be received no later than midnight on 29 April 2022 (GMT). An acknowledgement email will be sent within two working days of receiving the materials.

Grant Eligibility

The PI must have a doctorate and be employed at an accredited college or university. Applicants from countries under US Sanctions are unfortunately not eligible for funding. All applications must be submitted in English and all payments will be made in British Pound Sterling.

Research can take place in any departmental setting, but only projects using empirical research methods from the human science disciplines (e.g. anthropology, sociology, history, biology, psychology) are eligible for funding.

Applicants of all stages of their career are encouraged to apply and may apply as sole researchers or with a team of collaborators; early career scholars are also encouraged to investigate Explaining Atheism's Early Career grant competition, which will follow this general grant competition.

The PI of a funded project must commit to the following: 1) Regular contact with at least one member of the Project Team; 2) Submission of final reports, as well as semi-annual and final expenditure reports; 3) Participation in both virtual and in-person workshops; 4) [Open science principles](#); 5) Cooperation with our Data Manager to ensure the success of the overall Explaining Atheism Data Management Plan.

Alternative funds will be available through a call specifically for early career researchers and for those engaged in public engagement strategies that will help bring new knowledge in this field to diverse audiences. Potential applicants should consider which of these funding streams best suit the contribution they might make to the overall project. Eligible candidates can apply for funding in more than one stream; applications in each stream will be evaluated independently of one another. Further information on Early Career and Public Engagement awards will be forthcoming.

Project Team

Principal Investigators

Dr Jonathan Lanman, Anthropology, Queen's University Belfast

Dr Lois Lee, Religious Studies, University of Kent

Dr. Aiyana Willard, Psychology, Brunel University

Co-Investigators

Prof. Stephen Bullivant, Religious Studies and Theology, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Dr Miguel Farias, Psychology, Coventry University

Please direct all queries to explainingatheism@qub.ac.uk

Explaining Atheism: Request for Proposals Works Cited

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