

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Espousing Apostasy and Feminism? Older and Younger British Female Apostates Compared

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It has been acknowledged that white western men are more likely to leave their former religion behind (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 1997, Zuckerman, 2012), or declare themselves of no religion (Brown and Lynch, 2012, Baker and Smith, 2009), than women (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007). But it has not been unknown for women, even in the past, both of the older and younger generations to do the same (Budd 1977; Schwarz 2010). This article, based on two small scale studies in the United Kingdom, considers a group of older and a group of younger women 'apostates', to determine what leads them to do this and examines whether developing a feminist orientation plays a role. Religious women in second wave feminism were often ignored, having been considered to have chosen patriarchy over feminism while there is some evidence that women with feminist attitudes are less likely to be religious (Redfern and Aune, 2013, 154, Furseth, 2010, 210).

Data were subjected to inductive thematic analysis to determine overarching themes, while the three-fold typology of apostasy developed by Zuckerman (2012) allowed the authors to examine similarities and differences between older and younger women who choose to leave religion behind. They conclude reasons for apostasy are various, certainly not solely attributable to developing a feminist orientation.

Introduction

It has been acknowledged that white Western politically liberal men are more likely to leave their former religion behind (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 1997, Zuckerman, 2012), or declare themselves of no religion (Brewster, 2013), than women. But it has not been unknown for women, even in the past, both of the older and younger generations to turn their back on religion (Budd, 1977, Mahlamäki, 2012, Schwartz, 2010), although Brown and Lynch (2012) and Baker and Smith (2009) point out that, in the UK and US respectively, women who leave their religion are generally younger and more educated. Yet, the significance of gender has remained an under-researched topic in the growing study of secularism and nonreligion. Recent findings from two small scale studies carried out in the UK (Catto and Eccles, 2013, Eccles, 2010) certainly found a group of younger, white, educated women who define themselves as having turned their back on religion, but also a small group of older, again white, middle class and educated women, including one aged 92, who had become 'apostates'.

This article traces comparisons between the two groups and finds a number of similarities, as well as differences. Given that feminists in the UK tend to be less religious,

although possibly more spiritual (Aune, 2011) than the wider population, and feminism, particularly of the second and third wave, is aligned with secularism and secularization, we seek to determine to what extent a feminist orientation influenced both the older and younger women's decision to leave religion behind. By feminist, we mean either 'the personal is political', anti-patriarchal feminism (Brown, 2001, Furseth, 2010, McLeod, 2007) of the second wave or the more individualised, personalised, almost taken for granted 'in the water' feminism (2000, Baumgardner and Richards, 2003, 2004, Redfern and Aune, 2013, 10–11, Woodward and Woodward, 2009) of the third wave.

Women in the UK and elsewhere still experience stereotyping and gender discrimination in the workplace and social policy (Smith et al., 2011, Walby, 2005), in the home (Asher, 2012, Hochschild, 2003) and, perhaps predictably, in various Christian spheres (Aune, 2008, Eccles, 2010, Edgardh, 2011, Page, 2013, Woodhead, 2007). Changing workplace and even domestic cultures overnight is unlikely (Feltey and Poloma, 1991) but one avenue which women might take to 'free' themselves from gender discrimination is to leave religion behind, which indeed Brown (2001, 2006, 2010) asserts they have done, following the cultural and sexual revolution of the sixties. Feltey and Paloma (1991), similarly, have argued that the negative influence of gender ideology on religiosity indicates that feminism or a belief in gender equality decreases the belief in an orthodox interpretation of the Bible and the personal importance of religion (see also

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2002, Aune, 2008). Given the traditionalism reflected in religious orthodoxy, they say, this finding is not surprising. But do all female apostates cite patriarchal religious structures and a desire for sexual freedom as the reason for their disaffection and consequent apostasy? In other words, is it feminism which has led them away? Changes within feminism over time as well as the associated broader social, cultural and political changes make comparison between generations of British women who have moved away from religion particularly instructive for drawing out the under-studied relationship between gender and apostasy.

Taking leave of religion

Leaving religion behind is described by Zuckerman (2012: 4–5) as ‘apostasy’ which derives from the Greek ‘apostasia’, meaning a ‘defection or revolt’. There have been a number of definitions (Beit-Hallahmi, 2007, Bromley, 1988, Caplovitz and Sherrow, 1977, Mauss, 1969) but we choose to work with Zuckerman’s (2012) definition because his work involved interviewing 87 formerly religious Americans between 2008 and 2010 who were once religious but are no longer. He included a range of people of ‘different ages and stages in life’ (12) and a variety of faiths, although largely Christianity of various stripes, and offers an analysis based on when, how deeply the rejection of religion goes and thirdly, how transformative such a withdrawal is. We prefer this definition because Zuckerman allows for the category of those who were not particularly religious in the first place, for whom relinquishing religion was not ‘all that big a deal’ and entailing ‘few personal consequences’ (7), and this is a useful category for some of our participants, given that the research took place in the relatively secularized UK, and included young people who are generally acknowledged to be less religious than previous generations (Brown and Lynch, 2012, Catto and Eccles, 2013).

Methods

Both the studies on which we report were interview-based, drawing on inductive thematic analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001, Braun and Clarke, 2006, Guest et al., 2012, Riessman, 2012), a method which involves systematically searching for themes that emerge from respondents’ answers to a set of (in this case, loosely structured) interview questions. Eccles asked questions about how the older women participants had arrived at their present stance, having been brought up Christian, what had motivated them to abandon all forms of Christianity and how they had arrived at their present worldview. These interviews were also supplemented by a long period of participant observation lasting six years. Themes which emerged, which are relevant to this article, are that religion is intellectually incredible (Altemeyer and Hunsberger, 1997, Hunsberger and Altemeyer, 2006, Smith, 2011, Vargas, 2012), hypocrisy among churchgoers (Altemeyer, 2010, Richter and Francis, 1998), a loving god is incompatible with the prevalence of evil in the world, and a desire to live life more honestly (Richter and Francis, 1998, Taylor,

1991, 2002), often based on more critical, rationalist principles, reinforced, in some cases, through marriage to a spouse who was either indifferent, humanist or atheist (Baker and Smith 2009).

The younger group, drawn from across England and Scotland, was studied by Catto and Eccles in an attempt to discover more about young self-identified atheists, a little researched set of younger people, male and female, in the UK. This study encompassed 37 participants in total, recruited entirely via social media, including 11 women, all university students or graduates, who were interviewed and on whom we report here, as well as 13 men, and a further 13 women and men who completed a personal profile online but were not interviewed. Both authors asked participants about their early history, education and how they had come to their present worldview.¹ Emerging themes within this group involved participants realising they were not religiously inclined, wanting to name this stance (Smith, 2011), experiencing struggles with those expressing strong Christian/Jewish or Muslim views, and a firm belief in the efficacy of science but generally a tolerance of and willingness to learn more about religion, although not espouse it.

Our samples are self-selected and small, hence our findings are illustrative rather than representative. They provide new data on under-researched populations and open up questions which might be answered in larger studies and which include more apostates from faiths other than Christianity. We compare and contrast eight older women aged between 45 and 92 (Eccles, 2010) and 11 younger women, aged between 19 and 26 (Catto and Eccles, 2013). All respondents are British-born. The older women, all based in one of the most northerly counties of England, formed part of Eccles’ PhD thesis, an ethnographic case study which determined the religious and value commitments of women who have lived through the cultural revolution of the sixties. From this a six-fold typology emerged (Eccles, 2012b), including a group of women Eccles identified as ‘secularists’, the women represented here. All of the older women (Group O) had been taken to church when younger; indeed, some had not long left at the time of interviews (2004–2006); others had left in childhood or late adolescence. None described themselves specifically as atheists: two were Humanists and the rest ‘stable nones’ (Lim et al., 2010), or indifferent, fitting the description afforded by Zuckerman, as having left religion behind.

The younger women (Group Y), perhaps unsurprisingly, were far less likely to have previously been churchgoers, although some had been and/or were studying religion or theology at university. Nonetheless, all these younger women, as the older ones, saw themselves as turning their back on religion, largely Christianity, and therefore also qualify for Zuckerman’s ‘apostate’ category (see table below for a list of participants and their present occupation). The older women have been given the same pseudonyms as in the original research while younger women have been given initials, also as in the original research (Table 1).

<i>Group O apostates</i>	<i>Group Y apostates</i>
1. Gwen careworker (mid-fifties, married with one daughter)	2. BJ Philosophy/politics student
3. Hannah retired teacher (mid-fifties, married with son and daughter)	4. GE Theology student
5. Imogen fulltime homemaker (early nineties, married with four grown up children)	6. 3. HA German & Philosophy student
7. Louise retired teacher (early fifties, married with two sons)	8. 4. HM History student
9. Nina retired teacher (late seventies, married)	10. 5. KC Environmental sciences student
11. Patsy secretary (mid-fifties, single)	12. 6. KS Linguistics student
13. Sally physiotherapist (forties, married with two children)	14. 7. LA Laboratory worker, degree in biological sciences
15. Wilma nurse/sheltered housing warden (early fifties, married with two children)	16. 8. PS History student
	17. RC German language student
	18. SE University administration worker- Religious Studies major for degree
	19. VJ Law student

Table 1: Group O and Group Y showing occupation at time of interview with ages and marital status for Group O. Group Y all fall in the 18–25 age group and none was married at time of interview. Group O were all resident in the north of England and Group Y across England and Scotland at time of interview.

A typology of apostasy

Zuckerman (2012) considers three dimensions of apostasy: first is timing, was it early or late? If it was early, individuals were raised in a religious home, were socialised into a religious identity without much of a conscious choice in the matter and then rejected religion as teenagers or young adults. They shed their religion once they were no longer under the influence of significant adults. Zuckerman links this form of apostasy to a general maturation process where a young person grows up, finds their own identity, fashions their own individuality and rebels against another's life or beliefs being imposed on them, a common phenomenon among those he describes as 'non-religious' (5) by their late teens, early twenties. Late apostasy refers to those who have made a conscious choice to be religious as adults and then abandon it later on, a form of apostasy not connected with the general maturation process but also quite rare (but see also LeDrew, 2013, 10).

The second strand of Zuckerman's typology concerns how deeply the apostate is affected by their change of heart. Shallow forms are found amongst those who abandon religion but not necessarily spirituality and are not 'wholly or completely secular' (6), also described by Lim, MacGregor and Putnam (2010), as 'liminal nones'. They attend a service once in a while, are uncomfortable calling themselves atheists, but are happy to think of themselves rather as ex-Catholic or ex-Mormon, for example. For deep apostates rejection is total and absolute, no longer considering themselves religious or spiritual in any shape or form, Lim, MacGregor and Putnam's 'stable nones'. Depth of rejection, argues Zuckerman (2012), varies considerably. Thirdly, there is the question of how transformative the process of rejecting religion is. If a subject is not particularly religious in the first place, no particular internal

turmoil or tension prompted the rejection of religion. Transformative apostasy, by contrast, entails a personal revolution, a life-altering transformation. It can also entail loss of close friendships, alienation from a strong bounded community and even contact with one's family.

Early or late apostates?

Of the eight older women, five were early apostates, having given up on religion at the latest by their mid-twenties if not before. The other three could be described as late, although not perhaps fitting Zuckerman's definition exactly. All three had been socialised into churchgoing, had attended somewhat half-heartedly in their teenage years and had taken up religion again somewhat later, having finally abandoned it by the time the study was carried out. One, a retired woman, had always found the need to make a full commitment to a faith community intimidating, particularly the more highly charged emotional evangelical forms with which she seems to have mostly come into contact. She enjoyed the social aspects of church life, involving herself in good works but she had married a man who was not religious. Once retired, their social life was usually shared; he showed no interest in anything religious, so she abandoned all her church-related activities (Baker and Smith, 2009) and found she did not miss them.

McLeod (2007) sees those churchgoers of the sixties of a more social activist rather than 'religious' bent, people like the woman described above, for example, for whom 'piety' is rather 'low key', as much in decline, giving way instead to the more charismatic-oriented forms of churchgoing which appeal to the white, prosperous middle classes. Interestingly, the sister-in-law of the aforementioned participant represents the latter and this participant, Louise, now a 'none', the former. A second participant had tried

attending sporadically with her daughter but had given up finally, finding Christian belief intellectually incredible. The third 'late apostate' had similarly attended with her children but had given up the minute they themselves rejected religion, again because she, too, had long considered it tedious, boring and irrational but had attended with her children to support her husband (a non-stipendiary minister).

McLeod notes that women have benefited from the increase in numbers of women admitted to higher education from the sixties onwards (McLeod, 2007) and, having examined their former beliefs and practices, have found them incompatible with rationalist views. We might argue, too, that these better educated women are also more likely to have entered the workforce, some have sought out full time professional careers (Furseth, 2010) and, as a result, have become more like (disbelieving) men.² They have also developed greater autonomy and seek their own forms, if any, of spiritual practices which favour women and their particular issues (Vincett et al., 2008, 10) or, in this case, choose to be 'nones'. Although these women do not appear to directly identify with feminism (Eccles, 2010), equal access to education and job opportunities for women, a goal advocated by second wave feminists (Redfern and Aune, 2013, 14), has contributed to women consciously thinking through their faith stance, and, for some, rejecting it. Group Y are much younger and so there are no late apostates among this group but they are unmarried, well educated, white university women, a group known to be less religious (Aune, 2008), and have also consciously thought through their faith stance.

Shallow or deep apostates?

Turning next to the question of whether these are shallow or deep apostates, we can apply this element of the typology across both groups. For the eight older women, apostasy was deep. Although pressed quite hard as to whether they might still consider themselves spiritual at least, all were adamant that they were neither religious nor spiritual, qualifying as Lim, MacGregor and Putnam's (2010) 'stable nones' category. This was not to say they had no belief system but that this system was not predicated on any type of religiosity. Two were members of the British Humanist Association (BHA). Nina, a participant in her seventies, outlined the beliefs of the local BHA group which she attends. These include the notion that morality is developed from experience, reason and knowledge, not from supernatural sources, and that human beings can lead happy, creative and fulfilling and meaningful lives in this world. According to Nina, the Humanism of the BHA postulates that our life here is the only one we have, that we must take responsibility for our conduct and the welfare of others and that the due processes of evolution account for how we are here. Nina remembers while still at primary school being taught by a master who questioned miracles in his Religious Education (RE) lessons, which 'sowed the seed and I began to start thinking then: is this really right?' On completion of her degree in biology she went into teaching and eventually was appointed to a deputy head position in the north of England, by

which time she had met and married a man who was a Humanist and she became a member of the BHA herself (Baker and Smith, 2009). The head of her previous school, she thinks, would have indicated to her new head that she would have some difficulty toeing the absolutely Christian line required by the school³ but her new head was understanding and she managed, throughout her career, to find something that both she could comfortably go along with, when conducting the morning assembly, and 'which made sense to the able students, who possibly were not religious either'. Rather less understanding was shown to her, however, by an Anglican friend when Nina's husband's funeral was conducted according to Humanist rites and this had caused her some anxiety.

As McLeod (2007, 87) remarks, airing one's doubts about Christianity publicly at a time when Britain was considered 'a Christian country' was not encouraged and had to be carefully managed. The other Humanist, Imogen, aged 92, had turned to Humanism on marriage to a man of like persuasion, as Nina. Unlike Nina, Imogen appears to have encountered no hostility and, contra Brown (2001, 183), was able, as a woman, just to 'drop religion' without its being significant. We might also note, however, that while Imogen moved in circles, through her husband's family (Baker and Smith, 2009), where this would not be considered unusual, it could be much more difficult for women who did not move in such circles.

Wilma, an early apostate in her fifties, mentioned hypocrisy among churchgoers as one of her chief reasons for leaving in the first place, but she had since become, through her nursing training, an ardent believer in the work of American psychologist Carl Rogers. She valued his 'unconditional positive regard' and his dictum that 'Neither the Bible nor the prophets- neither Freud nor research – neither the revelations of God nor man – can take precedence over my own direct experience' (Rogers, 1967, 24). As a devotee of Rogers, she is quite clear that the 'locus of control' is within herself. There is no transcendent 'other' for Wilma and there is no 'god' within, just Wilma's own ability to control her actions and make choices. She did not need 'a doctrine or a somebody to tell me how to live my life, I want to live it my way, and I think my way is quite hard sometimes because I've got high standards.'

Sally assumed an explicitly scientific rationalist stance. She explained, 'When you look at all the different religions, and I don't know a lot about them in great detail, but the one common denominator (is) that they all believe in some existence in some form after they die.' Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) point out that fear of death has been a potent force in maintaining religious belief since a belief in the afterlife can remove that fear to some extent. Sally takes her cue from consideration of animals who 'don't have the brain to think about things like that'. She sees their future as being in their offspring and carrying their genes forward through the birth of the next generation. Sally is clear that she tries to live her life by certain principles and morals, being kind and helpful, but not always certain she achieves it. Maybe, sometimes she is selfish but she can hardly think that if she does not 'believe' she

is 'going to hell'. If there is somebody making a judgement at the end of the day, they're surely not going to be 'that narrow-minded' whether a person went to church or not.

Patsy, another scientific rationalist, was the only older woman who wanted to acknowledge and speak about men's dominance in the Christian story. Eccles posed this question of patriarchal relations to some of the older women she spoke to, although it was not appropriate to introduce it into the conversation with all of them. However, no one apart from Patsy expressed any strong view on the subject.

Eccles: From the point of view of what I'm studying, and asking you as a woman now, do you think there are things in religion and in Christianity in particular, that are damaging to women?

Patsy: Well, I think Christianity is, particularly... when you read back through the bible, the woman is always a second citizen at the most and in fact, modern religion still has that ... that stigma, if you look at all that furore over women being ordained into the church ... erm...but then I've always thought the bible was written by man to rule man and I mean man. Yes, very much so, when I think about it.

However, she did not link her apostasy to this view specifically. A loving god seemed incompatible with losing her father when, only 19, she was a long way from home, living in residential care as a paraplegic (see also Gwen below).

Hannah, a third kind of deep apostate, has been surrounded for long periods in her life by those who are committed to a worshipping community. She is the participant mentioned above who married a man who became a non-stipendiary minister in a Free church. Hannah attended faithfully, taught in Sunday school and did her utmost to appear the dutiful minister's wife, although not, she made it clear, to be dutiful as such but because she loved her husband and wanted to support him. When the children left home and she no longer felt an obligation to encourage them to church she ceased attendance and resigned her membership. This also coincided with a serious breakdown in her health, as a result of which she was granted early retirement from her job as a teacher.

I was always influenced by what ... you know, John's (husband) persuasion, what he thought. You know, when you're married, you go along with it. I didn't have strong views, put it that way. *It was what you did*. You went to church, so that was what we did. And then we had the children and I continued to go and took them to church. But now I look back on this, why? I've no idea. Because, you know, some of the things we subjected them to, I wouldn't do it again (emphasis added).

Roberts (1995), as Brown (2001), draws attention to conventional social attitudes before the Second World War, rules being imposed without anyone questioning them,

and whole neighbourhoods being quick to point them out, should there be any serious backsliding. But Hannah was not born until 1948, in a Lancashire cotton town, where these 'rules' were still being imposed well into the sixties in some northern industrial towns and villages as other older participants indicated. McLeod (2007) also points to Lancashire as being an area of high levels of churchgoing into the seventies, quoting Brierley (ed.), *Prospects*, 74, with a level of 16% as against a national average of 11% in 1979.

Hannah agonised over the conflict between her own convictions and her loyalty to her husband and his family, who were keen church members and expected her to be the same.

I was working full time, the kids were small, John (husband) was doing this (ministerial training) and going to church just took too much time out of my life. What was the point? Sunday mornings were a battle with James (their son). 'I don't want to go.' 'Well, you know we have to go, cos Daddy is doing the training and it would look bad if we didn't go.' And then you start to examine it, don't you? Well, what are we doing it for? Are we doing it because it would look good to do it and because you're doing the 'right' thing? Or are you doing it because you want to worship? So, I went along with it.

After many years she finally stopped. 'I didn't (stop going to church) for a long time ... because it was too big a thing ... you know, I'd been to church all my life, 40 years, by then, so you know, to say that ... I resented going and it was boring ... tedious and that, yes quite a while before I admitted it.'

Gwen, another apostate in her mid-fifties when interviewed, had drifted in and out of religious commitment for a good many years, even sampling the Alpha course (a course developed by the Anglican Holy Trinity Church, Brompton, in London, to introduce the Christian faith). 'The first meeting I went ... I went down like a bomb ... I was very popular because I was a dissenting voice ... and of course, it does make for more lively argument if you've got somebody on the other side of things. So they were delighted I was there.' Difficulties arose on the next visit, however, when the course moved on to exorcism: '(A) girl in Australia for whom they'd had to call the devil out of her and I thought: What the poor girl really needs is a doctor and by that time I had decided: no way.'

Gwen has come to the conclusion that the Christian story

is just mythology and I can't think of it as anything else. Whether there is any sort of creator, intelligence on another planet we don't know about or whatever. People who study physics often feel there is some sort of higher power ... Now whether that's because they can't believe there can just be all this universe that's organised without there being a higher power. But I have to feel that personality or the soul ...we are the result of the reactions of our

brains. And when the brain dies I cannot really see how we can be anything except compost around or whatever. I know there are a lot of caring people in the world and I know that Christianity can inspire a lot of good as do other people, whether religious or humanitarian.

She also refers to the argument from evil (Overall, 2007). When people tell her that she has 'to accept that God has a higher purpose', she wonders how 'you explain that to the woman who is holding a starving child in her arms? It just doesn't wash with me.'

Of the eleven younger apostates, not all were as deep as the older women quoted above. This is possibly because they have been brought up in a more tolerant, more religiously and ethnically diverse, more pluralist society, often meeting people of different faiths and none at school and university. Christian Smith (2009) similarly remarks of the 'emerging adults' he interviewed in America that the present young generation is more open and accepting of different attitudes and lifestyles than their parents' generation. Young people in the UK are less likely to have been strongly socialised into a religion as they were growing up (Bagg and Voas, 2010) than Smith's respondents, although there are some exceptions. Christianity and perhaps religions in general for this generation in the UK are treated with much more indifference and even ignorance sometimes, depending on how well religious diversity has been tackled in RE lessons. This is a change from when the older women were growing up and so perhaps there is less likelihood that there will be the kind of vehement reaction we see from someone like Hannah, who was forced to confront her anti-religious feelings head-on.

As an example of tolerance, LA, who would style herself an ex-Mormon, as Zuckerman (2012) attests, now rejects Mormonism completely, but still feels that 'a lot of it is lovely, you know. It's a nice religion really and it's all about being good to people and tolerating people and living a good life'. And later on, she repeated, 'It didn't feel too whacky a religion, it was just a nice religion really' and 'I have still that side in me about respecting people's church because I grew up in one and also I'm a bit scared ... a politically correct person that doesn't like the idea of bashing any religions.' Although her parents were bitterly disappointed that LA had ceased to be a Mormon they are still a close knit family and 'they would want me to come to them with any concerns I had', a situation which runs counter to some of Zuckerman's apostates who had lost family and friends through their apostasy. On the other hand LA is quite clear that, 'Everything that's happened (in the natural world), it's just the laws of physics, matter, energy. There's no sentient force (behind the universe)'. She was quite clear that death was the end of everything: 'It's not very nice but that doesn't make me colour how I believe the way the world works.' She sees 'atheism as the ultimate inevitable conclusion of the quest for truth and honesty'.

Other younger apostates had attended Alpha courses with their friends, in *their* quest to find out more about

religion. Some helped their friends with events at their churches. One apostate, GE, had left the church she attended in childhood with her parents, also keen attendees, on account of coming out as a lesbian and feeling the church had nothing to say to her. However, she confessed that she had come out to her parents about her lesbianism but not her atheism, because this would be hurtful to them, and so attended with them when at home. Three women were taking either Religious Studies or Theology as part of their university degree and BJ, in similar vein to LA, quoted above, attested,

I definitely think it (the world) would be better without religion but again I'd want to make the differentiation between religion and faith because I think faith can be a really beautiful thing. It can be a really really important thing for people. My granddad when he was really really ill in hospital – and my grandma had already died, his wife – erm...when he was really ill in hospital he just seemed really relaxed because he knew, he said to me he knew he was going to go and see his wife and he was absolutely certain that that was going to happen and he was perfectly calm and in a really scary situation confronting death and he was like, I'll just see her and I think that's a really amazingly powerful thing. I don't think you need to be in an organised religion to have faith though.

HM, another younger atheist and president of her student Humanist society was very keen that her society present the 'softer' face of Humanism, and while she was certain student Humanists needed a 'safe space', she wanted the student society to be very much socially-oriented. A visit to their club evening, spent at the local student pub, in which Eccles participated, left the impression that Humanism certainly mattered to these young people, and they were critical of those who did not answer their religious questions 'honestly', including a visiting lecturer at the university. However, they also felt that nobody should take themselves too seriously. Another young atheist, brought up in a non-believing household, was one of the few participants who had found her atheism recognised and taken seriously at her school. She described her RE lessons in some detail and was proud of her religiously diverse circle of friends with whom she was still in touch since leaving school. As she expressed it, 'You know, if you want to be a religion, fine, but your religion tells you what to do, it doesn't mean you can tell other people what to do.' She and her friends appeared to be able to live very comfortably within these kinds of diversity and difference. As Zuckerman found, the depth of apostasy varies considerably. The young person who had attended the Alpha course with her friend, for example, had been deeply shocked when her boyfriend, with whom she lived, resorted to prayer in a difficult situation. If he were to repeat this on a regular basis, she said, they were unlikely to remain together. Depth can vary within a single individual, it seems, and this serves as a reminder that any

typology is a heuristic and cannot map onto lived experience exactly.

A transformative or casual experience?

Finally, we need to compare how transformative apostasy is for each group. To what extent has apostasy created a state of inner turmoil and deep anxiety among the different ages? To what extent has the turn from religion been a casual 'no big deal' affair? The older women, at the time of interview, reported no loss of friends or family members through their rejection of religion, although that is not to say there has not been inner turmoil for some, as we saw with Hannah, for example, above. Also, two years ago, after the research had officially finished, Eccles learned from Hannah's husband himself that he had left her and had gone to live with a woman whom he felt understood his own religious impulses better, leaving Hannah facing life alone, as Zuckerman (2012) notes of some of his apostates. Nina, the deputy head, had only comfortably managed her duty taking school assembly on account of a supportive head teacher. She had also endured considerable unpleasantness on account of choosing a Humanist funeral for her late husband. Among the younger group, it was clear that declaring her new identity for one young woman, VJ, had also created unpleasantness, this time within the family circle, even if it had not meant outright rejection.

Last year when I came back (home) for the Easter holidays my auntie (by marriage) informed me I shouldn't be back for the holidays because I didn't believe in god and therefore I shouldn't come back for the holidays, I should stay at the university. Which....I was taken aback when she said that, the tone of voice when she called me an atheist; I was kind of a piece of dirt on the bottom of her shoe. I went home and cried afterwards. I was really upset about that.

She is also 'reluctant' to bring up the subject with her grandmother 'because the last thing I want is to have an argument with my gran'. The young lesbian atheist (GE), quoted above, has not found unpleasantness but is certainly keen to avoid conflict with her churchgoing parents just as VJ with her grandmother.

Yes ... this project [...] and I said, 'cos she (her mother) said, 'Where are you going tomorrow?' I'm like: 'It's just this project thing and I'm going to be interviewed' and I'm not sure whether she's fully registered the implications of what this is. I think she might think I'm a nice Christian test case or something. I'm really not sure and it's an awkward conversation and I'm not looking forward to. But certainly I do remember her telling me that it was important I was brought up in a religion and then I can decide but I've got to get the ground, morals in my life. So, I don't think it's going to be as bad as I've made it out but the fact that we've never had that conversation ... I've studied theology for three

years now and I have come out as gay a couple of years ago ... it's just blown up into this big thing but I am going to have to properly tell them at some point but ... my dad might know ... my mum ... I don't know ... she knows I like playing devil's advocate, I don't know, it's just this thing, going against what they believe. I've never done that on anything else, really.

LA, the young former Mormon had certainly struggled for a long time during her teenage years, she told Eccles

I came last (youngest of five children) really in the falling away from it (Mormonism). So I was: 'I will never leave the church' because I never intended to. I was always a very good girl, if you know what I mean, and wanted to make them happy and ... did not want to leave the church, had no plans to. No temptations to be a rebel either, to be with rules, I wanted to be with the rules, so then I felt a bit bad after saying all that when I was 11, 12, 13. And then deciding: I don't believe in this. So they (parents) weren't happy. I think they acknowledged that I tried (most of the time) (said in low voice) but erm ... pretty certain I should have tried more (also in low tone).

SE took Religious Studies as a principal subject in her education degree and found herself surrounded by students of either Christian or Muslim persuasion.

From the start I ... everyone would talk, automatically and I would think, Gosh! I'm ... and I felt like I had better not say anything 'cos everyone is religious and having this conversation and obviously I'm not part of it and I would just stay quiet. It was strange because in the real world, not in the real, but in reality, if I wasn't at uni, my views were in the majority, it was normal, my views. When I was in the class, I was in the minority, having, and I knew when I was talking about faith schools that quite a lot of people don't agree with faith schools, so I knew my view wasn't stupid, so it was a good view that I could put forward but I didn't like having the experience of being on my own against everyone.

KS came from a Jewish family whose immediate members were non-practising but whose more distant kin living in Israel were seen to be oppressive to women in their orthodox practices. Interestingly, she was the only participant explicitly linking feminism to her rejection of religion.

I see all religion as a threat, somewhat. I think that any way of ... anything that tells you how to live, that you must live your life in a certain way or basically be condemned for the rest of your life is a threat. So as a human being I think Islam is oppressive for women in the way Christianity is

oppressive to women. All religions are oppressive to women. And like, I'm a massive feminist and I think that a lot of my atheism comes from the fact that I see a lot of women being treated incredibly poorly across the world and a lot of that is down to religion. Like in America, again, abortion rights, a lot of the time, no killing, killing babies is a sin, so, you know, and yes, that's where a lot of it comes from.

Overall (2007) contends that women are likely to turn to atheism as a result of the suffering they endure at the hands of those (largely men) promulgating the monotheistic faiths.⁴ GE identified as an atheist specifically on account of the church's inability to accept her own personal gender orientation (Redfern and Aune, 2013, 161).

RC was brought up in a fiercely sectarian city where even atheists are either 'Protestant atheists' or 'Catholic atheists'. Her parents were in a mixed marriage but had not imposed any kind of religious belief on her. Nonetheless, having seen the damage done by sectarian divides and politicians who bring their religious views into their decision-making, RC had opted to join the Humanists as a positive affirmation of a belief system rather than as a negative rejection of religion (Furseth, 2010, LeDrew, 2013, Pasquale, 2010).

I got on to the sort of British Humanist website and started reading about that, that really did, it almost kind of gave me licence to go and: Do you know what? This is not me not believing in anything, this is me believing in something. And this is ... it was really affirmative ... and positive and I like that because as I said it's so easy to view atheism as a negative thing because it's ... I think I just, I find it really interesting. I think it is something I do define myself as actively, you know, not out there with a placard but if I'm asked that's definitely how I see myself. And I like the fact that there is now a movement. It can be seen as an affirmative, positive thing rather than just a lack of belief. And any studies on it, I think, is a good thing because it's giving the movement more momentum, I think, and it does make up such a big part of the population but it's often not got much of a voice so anything that adds to that.

For HA, there was no particular struggle, either, but, again, more positively, a welcome recognition of who she was, not noted by many of our participants. She explained,

Well, my first, in year 7, my first year of secondary school we did all year the project of learning about five or six major world faiths. And I really enjoyed that finding out about all the, you know, creation stories, really enjoyed it. Erm ... but I think at the same time, having that, seeing loads of different ones, even more, makes you think: Well, if there's so many different ones how can one be right, if one

is right? Where have all the others come from? All that sort of thing. And then the next year I had a teacher and she was an atheist but that year we were doing more sort of, it was less focused on a specific religion more on sort of the ideas surrounding it, I suppose. I remember she was doing something and sort of said: 'If you do believe in god, go over there, if you don't, go over there and if you're not sure, go in the middle' and then there was me and one other girl (she laughs) in the don't believe bit and erm ... I think that sort of ... might have prompted her to say: 'It's fine if you do but it's fine if you don't.'

Similarities and differences

Whether the older women had been early or late apostates varied somewhat with the individual. All the younger women were, by definition, early apostates. The older women were also, generally speaking, deep apostates. They had all had religious experiences at some stage in their lives. Some had even abandoned religion and then returned, only to abandon it for good. Some had abandoned it early and never revisited it. The younger women generally seemed to be more shallow apostates, even the ex-Mormon being prepared to say the faith she had left behind 'was just a nice religion really'. KS is the most vehement in her rejection, and for a reason that was seldom mentioned by the older women: 'All religions are oppressive to women', despite their having lived through the cultural revolution of the sixties and being exposed to more secularist second-wave feminism (Redfern and Aune, 2013). Also, GE had left religion behind on account of its failure to accept her as a lesbian, so religion had been damaging for this apostate too, but she still attended church when at home with her parents.

On graduating SE had wanted to go into primary school teaching but all the schools in the area in which she wanted to work were Christian. She felt she had failed to find a job because she was unable to give a reference from a clergy person as requested on the application, even though, having taken Religious Studies as a major, she was well qualified to teach about religion(s). However it was not a question of never engaging with religion again as with the older apostates.

Smith (2009) notes that irreligious American emerging adults (male and female) adopt sceptical attitudes towards religion and make critical arguments against it, generally rejecting the idea of personal faith. They have already decided against religion and faith in favour of some version of secularism. Some are angry towards religion, others simply mystified that anyone could believe or have any interest in things religious. Anger and mystification are expressed by some of these young women but there is also a degree of tolerance and a desire to understand more. As Smith avers of his irreligious category, these young people have also paid attention to intellectual and existential questions about religion. Perhaps some might claim they know more than the religious as Cragun (2013) postulates in his latest work.

In terms of apostasy being a transformative experience, unlike Zuckerman's (2012) apostates, none of our participants had risked losing family and all their friends through leaving a certain religious community or simply a certain worldview behind, perhaps with the exception of Hannah. This reflects the 'Christian, secular and religiously plural' (Weller, 2005, 73) society, perhaps, which is modern Britain, and also points up the need to treat forms of apostasy in their particular social and cultural context. The United Kingdom, England, Scotland, and Wales in particular, already have their fair share of indifferents (Bagg and Voas, 2010), atheists, H/humanists and secularists as Zuckerman notes of other parts of Europe (Zuckerman, 2012, 171). For former Christians to turn their back on religion is commonplace.⁵ Nonetheless, both younger and older women in our study experienced *some* struggles in affirming their own atheist identity; others had maybe not struggled but had not necessarily been affirmed either during their schooldays.

Zuckerman (2012) is of the view that apostasy is always culture bound and thus varies across societies, depending on the strength of religion found in that particular society. He remarks of the United States that being an apostate is an act of defiance, the assertion of individuality and agency, and that it can bring very great costs. We could not argue that for most of our apostates, young or old, there has been any great cost involved, although it has sometimes required an assertion of individuality and agency. Sometimes there have been some costs, as we have seen, largely because of the strength of the religious feelings encountered against which this particular form of apostasy is an equally strong reaction.

Finally, to what extent has religion's perceived damaging effects on women influenced the decision of these women? The answer seems to be more indirectly than directly for all but two of them. No older women mentioned overbearing patriarchal behaviours or beliefs as influencing their apostasy, nor was the feeling they were second class citizens in the religious pecking order expressed, except by the two younger atheist and feminist women and Patsy. By and large religion is abandoned because it does not bear the scrutiny of the critical, sceptical, rationalist eye, it may be practised by hypocritical people and a loving god is incompatible with evil being visited on innocent people. As HA expressed it, what is physically in the sky is infinitely more exciting than the 'sky fairy'. Religious pluralism, especially for the younger women, makes it impossible to determine if any religion is right and they could all be wrong, although that does not preclude learning about religion and having friends who are religious. As free thinking individualist consumers: 'Your religion tells you what to do. It doesn't mean you can tell other people what to do' (HA).

For the older women, their attitudes have been acquired, at least in part, through women's higher levels of education and (for some of those represented here) their participation in the workforce, exposing them possibly to more traditional masculinist/individualist/rationalist views of the world, as Marler (2008) suggests, drawing on DeVaus

and McAllister (1987). Similarly, for the younger women, some of their parents were already indifferent, atheist or religious liberals (Redfern and Aune, 2013, 160), a secular upbringing constituting a 'rich seedbed for agnosticism and atheism' (Altemeyer, 2010). Moreover, these women had possibly been exposed to gender egalitarian practices in the home, too, as they grew up.

Collett and Lizardo (2009) argue, from their research on socialisation practices, that the religiosity gap among brothers and sisters more likely to be exposed to gender egalitarian values and socialisation practices while growing up is smaller than that which exists among those more likely to have been raised according to more traditional gender scripts. Their research also demonstrates that the effect of having been exposed to gender-egalitarian values narrows the gender gap by rendering women exposed to these values less religious than other women and closer to men in their religious behaviour and beliefs. So, it is possibly the younger women's mothers who, having been influenced by second-wave feminism, have brought up their children with more gender equal norms. Two younger apostates did want to claim a feminist identity, one, SK, explicitly in her interview. The second, GE, spoke enthusiastically to us about her extensive feminist zine distribution and her campaigns on LGBTQI issues, as a lesbian feminist. However, despite these two exceptions, the younger women possibly take gender equality more for granted, it is 'in the water' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000). Religion's treatment of women has probably not even impinged on the thinking of the younger women, except for GE and KS, so it is not an issue.

Western atheists have tended to be white, male, educated, politically liberal, middle class and in dominant social positions. Perhaps as some Western women, now better educated, acquire greater financial and legal independence and see themselves more empowered, they will be more likely to choose to be stable nones, indifferents or atheists. But a further point needs to be made here, specifically with reference to the older women: practical issues related to paid and domestic labour patterns affect religious participation. Eccles' research showed that a number of older women in paid work had given up on attending church simply because they did not have the time or energy (Eccles, 2010), rather as Hannah indicates above. Some of Eccles' participants became 'explicit/implicit believers' (Eccles, 2012a), or what Lim, MacGregor and Putnam (2010) style 'liminal nones', not forsaking all religious behaviours and belongings entirely. But for more and more women, finding themselves pressed for time, now working, as many do, long hours both outside *and* in the home (Banyard, 2010, Eccles, 2010, Hochschild, 2003), ceasing attendance is likely. Once that happens, other religious behaviours, belief and belonging, might well disappear as people drop out of supportive religious/social networks (Hirst, 2002), and it may hardly be remarked upon in the UK (Bagg and Voas, 2010). If, added to that, one's partner or spouse is indifferent or atheist, leaving religion behind seems quite a likely option (Baker

and Smith, 2009). For the younger women interviewed challenges in relation to employment, domestic labour, life partners and/or children generally remained ahead. Given their early apostasy and the increasingly gender-equal national context in which they were raised, we would expect their journey navigating these to be different and it to have far less impact upon their (lack of) religious participation.

Conclusion

Both older and younger women can be early apostates. Both older and younger women can be deep apostates, but the older participants whose views and experiences have been presented in this article are more likely to be early and deep apostates than the younger, for the possible reasons discussed. Apostasy is culture bound (Zuckerman 2012) and is less likely to involve total transformation in a relatively secularized UK, compared with Zuckerman's American apostates. These women have largely left religion because of its intellectual incredibility, sometimes accompanied by marriage to a nonreligious spouse (older women), and possibly (also for older women) the restrictions on their available time, rather than its perceived damaging effects on them as women. The older and younger women have left because they can, without incurring too much in the way of hostility or rejection from kith and kin. This is one area where they can exercise their autonomy as women (Refern and Aune, 2010, 160), far more easily, say, than some can in the domestic sphere or in their paid working life (Asher, 2012, Banyard, 2010, Perrons, 2005). Our two studies were small scale and only included lapsed Christians and one Jew. Larger studies and further research looking at forms of apostasy, for both women and men, in other religions would also add greatly to our understandings of the culture bound and gendered nature of those who leave religion behind and the relationship, or lack thereof, between feminism and non-religion.

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Notes

¹ We specifically did not ask a question about feminism as such in either study because we wanted to see if it figured as an internalised aspect of women respondents' thinking, i.e. if they themselves would bring it up spontaneously.

² Devaus, D. & Mcallister, I. 1987. Gender Differences in Religion: A Test of the Structural Location Theory. *American Sociological Review*, 52, 472–481. Marler, P. L. 2008. Religious Change in the West: Watch the Women. In: K. Aune, S. Sharma & G. Vincett (eds.), *Women and Secularization in the West: Challenging Secularization*. Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, pp. 23–56.

³ Nina taught at a state-funded Christian school.

⁴ However, see <http://skeptchick.org/2011/07/the-privilege-delusion/> which would suggest that misogynist sentiments are alive and well within the non-religious community. (Accessed October 2011)

⁵ It is arguably more difficult for some of other faiths. See, for example, <http://hackneycitizen.co.uk/2012/11/13/young-atheists-handbook-alom-shaha-interview/> (Accessed December 2012)

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