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On learning from the margins: Jewish nonreligious grammars within a secular-Protestant landscape¹

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Abstract

This contribution to the special issue draws on ethnographic fieldwork exploring pluralities of Jewish life across adjacent urban neighbourhoods in London in order to engage with the conceptual questions and empirical omissions that are currently of concern to scholars of nonreligion. Learning from some illustrative moments in my fieldwork in which articulations of non-belief in God serendipitously arose, I first consider how marginal Jewish perspectives trouble the conceptual framing of ‘religion / nonreligion’ within (post)Protestant cultures. I then show how an ethnographic approach focused on the specific contexts in which piety or belief in God is othered can deepen understanding of the heterogeneous formations of ‘nonreligion’, even within relatively well-researched settings such as contemporary London.

¹ This is the accepted pre-copy-edited version of this article, which is forthcoming in *Secularism and Nonreligion*.

Introduction

This contribution to the special issue has been born out of my ethnographic study engaging with pluralities of Jewish life across two London neighbourhoods: one widely represented as exemplifying liberal cosmopolitanism (Wessendorf 2014), and an adjacent strictly orthodox Jewish ‘enclave’, home to the largest Haredi Jewish population in Europe (Laguerre 2008).¹ Initially framed as a study of lived ‘religious’ ethics, with the development of my fieldwork, something unexpected emerged. My ethnographic exploration of Jewish monotheistic ethics became saturated with expressions of non-belief in God, and with gestures that ‘othered’ (Lee 2015) Jewish observance and piety, articulations which traversed seemingly ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ settings. Let me begin with three illustrative scenes:

1. Liberal discomfort

It was a cold November evening and I was gathered with five members of a Liberal Jewish synagogue located in the heart of the gentrified, cosmopolitan area of my fieldsite. Upon first attending this community, I had registered surprise that its home was situated in the community rooms of an imposing Parish church. Over the course of subsequent months, other members would occasionally also register unease at the power relations implied in this arrangement, while individuals associated with a nearby Orthodox synagogue would hint that this spatial proximity to a Christian landlord might also be mirrored in a deferential and overly familiar theological relation. Gradually, as I began to participate more in this Liberal community, I met many people who were (like myself) carrying complex Jewish - Christian histories. I learned how, for example, this synagogue was home to people of mixed Jewish

and Christian parentage, and those of patrilineal Jewish descent (Orthodox Judaism defines Jewish identity as matrilineal), how it welcomed couples in mixed Jewish / non-Jewish relationships, and supported people who were in a relationship with a Jewish partner and were converting to Judaism. I encountered members drawn to the synagogue after leaving Orthodox Jewish communities or the converse, those who had grown up in atheist, communist, assertively or attenuated non-practicing homes. Talking about her work in leading the community, the Rabbi described how much of a struggle it could be for different members with such varied needs, to participate in services – in all kinds of senses; the different and at times contradictory ways in which the liturgy and rituals (conducted in both Hebrew and English) could alienate and exclude.

Arriving for an adult education class on the evening in question, I bumped into a fellow member, also running late; ‘Jewish time’ he joked and I smiled as his light-touch evocation of a shared Jewish temporality that seemed to elude the ‘religious / secular’ divide. We settled around a table as the Rabbi introduced the aims of this session: to develop communal resources that we could draw on in difficult times, beginning with reading Psalm 130 together (‘Out of the depths’) from a source sheet including Hebrew and English translations. Then the Rabbi introduced our task for the evening. She would like us, she explained gently, to try to write a psalm for ourselves, using the language of God, even if this felt uncomfortable. Left alone with this task, I found myself struggling precisely with the alienating quality of the English word ‘God’. And when we came back together to share what we had written, it turned out that I was not alone in this. For some in our group, speaking of ‘God’ in English rather than Hebrew felt somehow too ‘Christian’, evoking memories of hymns sung in (implicitly Anglican) mainstream English schools. It was also alienating and ‘church-like’ for those who had grown up in orthodox Jewish communities, familiar with the harmonics of the Hebrew liturgy, a context in which the sonic and material quality of Hebraic

language can be *more* important than its constative meaning.² For Carlos³, in a relationship with a Jewish partner and converting to Judaism, speaking of ‘God’ in English brought up a tension with his atheism, an experience which did not arise when he used the more intimate Hebrew term ‘Hashem’. And yet, as the Rabbi also pointed out, Hebrew could itself be an obstacle to Jewish belonging for those who had grown up without any Hebraic literacy, while for people from more assertively ‘secular’ Jewish backgrounds the ritual expression of commitment to ‘God’, in *any* language, felt like empty words. Reflecting on the deep ambiguity that references to God provoked for our group, I found myself recalling a very different situation; a visit with members of this community to the open day of a nearby mosque, which had been publicly attacked as a harbinger of ‘extremism’ and ‘intolerance’. In that context we had gathered around the Rabbi as she confidently mobilised this language for the very different end of engendering solidarity with other marginalised minorities: pronouncing that, as Jews and Muslims, we have ‘more in common’; for after all, ‘we all worship one God’.

2. Mainstream resistance

In December 2015, I paid my first visit to a well-known Jewish day care centre, prominently located on Stamford Hill’s busy main road and something of an anomaly within this predominantly Haredi neighbourhood. According to its members, the building first opened in the 1950s at a time when Stamford Hill was becoming a key destination for upwardly mobile working-class Jews from Whitechapel. As a cultural centre, this institution catered for the needs of this loosely observant East-End Jewish community, hosting a wealth of activities which could not be easily categorised as ‘religious’ or ‘secular’: a literary collective, crafts and cooking workshops, Yiddish singing groups, talks on Jewish history, the Holocaust,

Anglo-Jewish life, Israeli culture and politics, as well as celebrations of Jewish festivals.

However, in more recent decades, the fortunes of the centre have declined as the character of Stamford Hill has dramatically shifted. The children of this declining generation of East End Jewish residents have migrated to more suburban and affluent neighbourhoods while the Haredi Jewish population has grown rapidly, bolstered by waves of immigration and a high birth rate (Laguerre 2008).

Arriving at the centre for the first time in order to attend their Chanukah party, I was struck by a stark contrast with the pious atmosphere of a nearby Haredi children's centre. Upon entering the basement 'hub', I was met by a woman wearing a Hijab carrying a heaped platter of potato latkes (traditional Chanukah food). I was surprised to find myself amidst a raucous gathering of elderly Jewish women dressed in trousers, and men, only one of whom was wearing a Kippah (Jewish male head covering).⁴ I listened as they irreverently interrupted the rabbi's speech on the 'Chanukah story' to engage in a heated dispute over the alleged Jewish identity of the American politician, Joe Biden. Over the following months, on my weekly visits, I would join the members' topical discussion group. There, alongside an eclectic array of topics, one theme remained constant: the story of the changing demographics and topography of the neighbourhood, the growth of the 'frummers', (a complex vernacular term for highly observant Jews, see Kasstan 2016) at the expense of *this* Jewish community.

On one such occasion, I had arrived a little early, and chatted with a volunteer who told me how the centre had lost its kosher food licence. It was too costly to sustain, she explained, given that it seemed unimportant to the current members, whose Jewish tastes in food (chicken soup, lokshen noodles, chopped liver...) did not extend to strict observance of kosher food laws. We moved together into the music room, where a lively conversation gave way to expressions of anger at the 'frummers'. The sense of exclusion and marginalisation was visceral, from the story of a relative forced to move out of an orthodox neighbourhood in

Jerusalem, to memories of how local Haredim had rejected an invitation to join the (mixed sex) singing group at the centre and refused to eat in the ‘non-kosher’ dining room. The discussion culminated in a passionate defence of their own form of Jewishness, as the members’ expressed their anger at these ‘frummers’ taking over ‘our’ neighbourhood: ‘They make such a deal about living a certain way and they make you feel that you have too.’ ‘That is it; they make you feel ashamed’.

3. Orthodox agnosticism

A few weeks before the Jewish festival of Shavuot, I visited Rachel, a Haredi woman in her sixties, who had invited me for a meal. When I arrived at her home, on a street that lay in the grey zone between the two neighbourhoods, she opened the door, smiling warmly at me with expressive eyes slightly concealed by the fringe of her sheitel.⁵ We chatted as she finished preparing a chick-pea stew, and then she invited me to join her in the ritual washing of hands before eating. Seated at the table, she began to narrate a little of her story. Rachel and her husband were ‘baal teshuva’, ‘secular’ Jews who had ‘returned’ to strictly Orthodox Judaism. Her parents were Czech Jewish refugees, who, like my own grandparents, arrived in Britain to escape the Holocaust. Rachel described her mother as ‘very anti-religion’, while her father was ‘atheist but more sympathetic to religion at least’; for many years they kept a Christmas tree at home. And as we talked, I began to sense the complex ways in which Rachel actively engaged what she referred to as the ‘secular’ world while piously observing Jewish law in her everyday practices, moving between these seemingly incommensurable spheres with a kind of ambivalence that also manifested in our encounter. Talking about the similarities in our assimilated upbringings, she gently encouraged me to try keeping just one of the mitzvot (Jewish laws that govern everyday life). And yet when I asked if she would be interested in

studying a biblical text together, in preparation for the upcoming festival, she confessed to having little patience for biblical study, preferring to read ‘secular’ novels and non-fiction.

We had been talking about Israel, and her passionately felt Zionism, when she turned to the question of God: ‘I don’t know whether I believe in God as such – but I do believe that Jewish people were made to feel uncomfortable, that it is in our nature, God intended it, however you put it. We will always feel like outsiders.’ And then, barely missing a beat, she continued to embody her paradoxical and ambiguous form of Jewish observance, preparing tea in her strictly kosher and (in contrast to the carnivorous culinary orthodoxy of her Haredi neighbours) vegetarian kitchen to conclude the meal.

In what follows, I want to begin from these three singular scenes ‘in which religion is... conspicuously othered’ (Lee 2015:3) in order to develop the methodological claim that there are significant gains to be made by approaching the study of nonreligion and unbelief via a substantive focus on apparently marginal perspectives within relatively well-researched contexts (Lee et al, this volume). Drawing on these illustrative vignettes, I aim to show how contextualised and relational research in such settings can make a significant contribution to the complex conceptual debates and empirical omissions currently preoccupying scholars of nonreligion.

Interrogating ‘unbelief’: Jewish genealogical interventions

Within the social scientific study of religion and secularism, research on Judaism has long occupied an ambiguous position. In recent decades, scholars of Judaism have related this disciplinary othering to the implicitly Protestant genealogies of the categories of the religious and the secular within post-Enlightenment modernity (see, for example, Anidjar 2003, 2008; Batnitzky 2011; Boyarin 2018; Boyarin 1991). Influenced by the approach termed ‘critical

secular studies' (Lee 2015), a number of critical genealogical studies have analysed how European Christendom's differentiation of 'chosen' religion from 'ascribed' categories of ethnicity and race has shaped what it means to be Jewish across different historical and geographical contexts (Anidjar 2008; ; Arkin 2014; Batnitzky 2011; Boyarin 2018; Levitt 2008). In relation to the study of belief / unbelief, one critical claim is that in premodern contexts individual belief [in God] was not a defining aspect of Judaism and that, in this sense, the notion of Judaism as a 'religion' is a Christian invention (Batnitzky 2011; Boyarin 2018). Yet this is not just a historical point. Rather social scientists have highlighted how the study of contemporary Judaism is distorted by the uncritical application of binary oppositions (e.g. between belief / unbelief, transcendence / immanence, sacred / mundane, spiritual / material, religion / culture) internal to the modern, implicitly Christian grammars of the 'religious' and the 'secular' (Brink-Danan 2008; Levitt 2017; Silverman, Johnson and Cohen 2016).

This genealogical work has offered important critical insights for the study of nonreligion, highlighting how dominant categories of thought have marginalized Jewish perspectives, which do not fit its terms. However, this critical discursive focus can also risk reproducing a decontextualized, dehistoricized account of Jewish identity and practice. Significantly, this can mirror a similarly reified account of the 'Protestant' framing of religion-as-belief and conversely of nonreligion as non-belief (Lee 2015; Strhan 2015). To put this simply, my ethnography shows that, unsurprisingly, the terminology of the 'secular', '(un)belief' and related words *do* have purchase within the self-descriptions of British Jews, including for myself as a Jewish ethnographer shaped within an assimilatory secular-Protestant culture. At the same time my research also highlights the presence of Jewish vernacular grammars, such as the term 'frum', that relate to, but do not neatly map on to, assumed categories of the religious and nonreligious. In this sense, as Strhan (2012) helpfully

discusses, genealogical analysis is only part of the methodological story, for these historically contingent concepts of the secular or nonreligious also circulate in people's everyday lives, mediating relationships, and evolving within specific historical, theological, cultural and (micro) geographical contexts. Beginning from this observation therefore opens up ethnographic questions: how do languages of nonreligion (e.g. the expression of non-belief in God or the 'frum' / 'not-frum' distinction) come to be an element in Jewish self-articulations? What genealogies, histories, social and psychic relations shape expressions of Jewish nonreligion and non-belief? And what does it mean when Jewish people articulate, for example, 'lack of belief in God' at particular moments? Or, put differently, how do such expressions come to 'make sense', what do these words do, within specific relational settings?⁶

Addressing such questions requires research that builds on ethnographic studies showing diverse articulations of Jewish identities in different geographical contexts, in order to challenge the dominant concepts and distinctions circulating in the social scientific study of religion and nonreligion (see, for example, Arkin (2014); Brink-Danan (2011); Buckser (2003); Cohen and Eisen 2000; Kasstan 2016).⁷ Such micro-level ethnographic analysis can then open up the broader comparative question of how we can describe the complex and plural formations of Jewish non-belief, nonreligion and secularism within a post-Protestant conjuncture such as contemporary London.

Ethnographic openings: context and comparison

As numerous researchers have highlighted, religion and nonreligion are not stable, unitary formations but contingent, relational articulations (e.g. Lee 2015; Hutchings, this volume;

Strhan 2012). Let me now return to my opening vignettes to exemplify how ethnographic work at the ‘margins’ can deepen this general insight.

Attending to the first scene from my fieldwork, we can see how the struggles Liberal Jews experienced in praying to and naming ‘God’ were bound up with this community’s complex and variable relationships with (at times secularized) Protestant institutions, concepts of religion and circulating political theologies. Unpacking these exchanges reveals how an apparently straightforward articulation of Jewish nonreligion (discomfort with the language of God) was not univocal or static. Rather, varied experiences of theological language, and sources of discomfort, amongst our group were shaped by diverse personal histories. Furthermore, while in one context the speech-act of naming God was inflected with ambivalence, this was transformed when put in the service of affirming relationships, and forging solidarities with a marginalized Muslim community also inhabiting this at times aggressively secular landscape. In contrast, moving to the second ethnographic scene prompts us to engage Jewish nonreligion from a different spatial and generational perspective: a fading community of East-End Jews, light-touch in their Jewish observance, inhabiting an increasingly pious Jewish neighbourhood. Here, we see how angry rejections of the ‘frummers’ and assertions of non-observance were shaped by intra-Jewish demographic, intergenerational, place-based tensions; such opposition to pious forms of Judaism’ constituted a response to what was experienced as the loss, and even supersession of, a distinctive geographically-rooted form of Jewish life. Attending, again, to specific speech-acts, such as the vernacular Yiddish-derived distinction between ‘frum / not-frum’, also opens up a complex grammar of intra-Jewish distinction, which does not rest on an assumed opposition between ‘religion’ and ‘culture’.⁸ Turning finally to the third scene of my encounter with Rachel reveals a context in which paradoxical expressions of agnosticism, ‘non-belief’ in God and ‘secular’ tastes were articulated alongside a strict yet esoteric

commitment to orthodox Jewish law. Somehow Rachel's particular articulation of uncertainty about God's existence made sense within the context of our shared interstitial biographical and geographical location. Reflecting on the ambiguous texture of her relationship to 'the secular' thus opens up a sense of how such articulations might be shaped by the legacies of histories, including the Holocaust, communism, and British assimilatory culture, which continue to threaten the survival of Jewish meaning within contemporary London.

The scenes presented here are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the ways in which nonreligion has found expression in my fieldwork, nor are they 'typical'. Rather they are illustrative of the complex forms of nonreligion and non-belief that have emerged from an ethnographic study of relatively small yet plural Jewish communities within the micro-geographical settings of urban neighbourhoods in London.⁹ Attending to such material opens up a broad range of conceptual and comparative questions about the meanings of articulations that might be termed 'nonreligious' as well as around their historical formations. For example, this empirical analysis opens up questions about contrasting understandings of the relationship between individual belief in God, communal practice and belonging across and within Orthodox, Liberal or attenuated Jewish communities. Such an analysis must of course be historicized, related as Batnitzky (2011) describes to struggles between Jewish movements in response to the European Enlightenment, antisemitism and the Holocaust, which have taken particular forms within the British national context. Yet a contextualised ethnographic approach also highlights the centrality of attuning to socio-spatial contexts. It can, for example, explore how articulations of Jewish non-belief and non-observance emerge out of the differential location of more or less observant Jewish communities in relation to each other, the secular-Protestant British landscape and the variegated urban settings of contemporary London. It can raise questions, for example, about how the social relations between distinctive Jewish communities in a local area may also be

at stake in articulations of religiosity, nonreligion or secularity, and how these can be a way of marking intra-Jewish boundaries, which also express intergenerational struggles.

In addition, attention to this marginalized Jewish perspective reveals the critical import of questions of language and translation for the study of nonreligion and unbelief. It shows, for example, how Jewish people have different experiences of expressing ‘belief in God’ in Hebrew rather than English, how the very nature of the interrelation between sacred language, (non-)belief and meaning can vary both between Protestant and Jewish, and also intra-Jewish settings, and how vernacular Jewish distinctions can throw the genealogies of our ‘conventional Western notions of religion’ (Lee 2015: 158) into relief.

Overall, this kind of disaggregated analysis can foreground the contingent nature of a national and local ‘Protestant-secular’, multicultural landscape. It can show how Jewish interrelations with the ‘dominant’ Protestant / secular culture in Britain vary at the communal and biographical level. Exploring these complex constellations of nonreligion and unbelief through an ethnographically grounded empirical approach, which is attentive to specific formations of Jewish life, can thus helpfully challenge the reification both of Judaism and Protestantism, inviting us instead to attend to the complex inter- and intra-communal relationships that are at stake in specific contexts.

Conclusion

In the introduction to this volume, Lee et al write that, even within relatively well-researched North American and European contexts, ‘we do not yet have extensive understanding of how demographic factors – class, gender, ethnicity, religious background and so on – shape and are shaped by nonreligion. Particular groups are over-represented in existing studies and the comparative work needed to show how nonreligious beliefs take form as a result of different demographic positions and experiences is lacking.’ Furthermore, as the authors acknowledge,

finding shared terminology and concepts continues to be a key challenge for scholars of nonreligion. In this contribution, I have drawn on an apparently marginal case in order to address these empirical and conceptual issues. In addition to highlighting the epistemic and political question of how Jewish experiences may be distorted by the substantive category of ‘religion’ upon which this field depends, I have drawn on this Jewish case in order to develop three broader methodological points. First, there is a need for empirical interrogations of claims about nonreligious cultures as Protestant / post-Protestant, especially through attention to intersections between nonreligion and minority traditions and communities. Second, the future of the field depends on knowledge generated via qualitative and ethnographic methods in order to deepen understanding of the relationship between a specific religious landscape, the socio-cultural location of actors, and the meanings and effects of their expressions of nonreligion and unbelief. Third, alongside the important emphasis on developing cross-cultural comparative studies, attention to intra-communal variation can challenge the reification of traditions and communities, enabling greater engagement with the nuances of ‘nonreligious’ articulations in everyday life.

Finally, although this is a methodologically-focused article, I would like to conclude by considering the more substantive implications emerging from this material. In recent years, leading figures in the field of nonreligion have reframed a long-standing concern within the sociology of religion, of how people find meaning under conditions of absence or negation, in terms of the study of ‘existential cultures’ (Lee 2015). Here, a key rhetorical move has been to push back against the assumption that nonreligious meanings are defined by the loss of religious or theistic belief. As discussed, my research grounds this question in relation to the particular histories of loss, assimilation and othering that shape contemporary Jewish experiences in London. One emerging insight is how paradoxical efforts to make meaning can be, when they occur under deracinated conditions that shape ambivalent feelings

towards precarious cultural forms. As such, attending to such repressed experiences of deracination in Europe can deepen our understandings of the dialectics of presence and loss within the existential cultures of Western 'secular' modernity. Given that this is a field increasingly aware of the need to attend to its Protestant and postcolonial formation, perhaps it is worth considering how such interventions from the margins are not only intellectually, but also ethically, significant.

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² See Boyarin (1991) for a discussion of how an implicitly Christian hermeneutics and the associated picture of language, which dominates contemporary social theory, contrasts with Jewish textual traditions. Specifically, Boyarin argues that the dominant idea of an arbitrary splitting between sign and signifier, or between the materiality and meaning of language, does not make sense within orthodox Judaism.

³ Pseudonyms have been used throughout this article

⁴ Wearing a long skirt is a key signifier of Haredi feminine identity. Thus within the context of this orthodox neighbourhood, the trousers worn by women in the Brenner Centre emerged as a banal material expression (Lee 2015: 91) of their non-‘frum’ identity.

⁵ A wig worn by married strictly orthodox women.

⁶ My emphasis on the importance of paying close attention to the variable use of nominally identical words in specific contexts draws on the work of the late Wittgenstein and his reception amongst anthropologists concerned with the epistemological limitations of abstract theories of religion (see Das 2015; Boyarin 2018).

⁷ The relatively limited body of qualitative scholarship exploring British-Jewish identities includes Ray and Deimling's (2014) research in a 'non-Metropolitan' area and Kasstan's (2016) ethnographic study of Haredi Jews in Manchester. Kranz's (2011) small-scale research into social group formation amongst young Jews emphasized the specificity of the national British and local London context for addressing these concerns. My research develops her contextual emphasis by encompassing different Jewish communities and focusing on how the micro-geographies of urban London neighbourhoods shape articulations of Jewishness.

⁸ Discussing the mobilization of this term by those who positively self-identify as 'frum', Kasstan (2016) describes how this indexes complex meanings that are not limited to observance of Jewish law, but rather a whole range of social norms and expectations. See also Batnitsky (2011: 183) who describes ultra-Orthodox ('frum') Judaism "as a wholesale *rejection* of all these modern attempts to divide human life into different spheres, and thereby as a refusal to engage the question of whether Judaism is or is not a religion."

⁹ A more in-depth analysis, conducted as part of a research project supported by the Understanding Unbelief programme, will situate these encounters within the broader historical, theological and socio-cultural context of contemporary London.