

Understanding Unbelief

Early Career Awards

Call for Proposals – Information Sheet

Through a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the University of Kent welcomes applications to an Early Career Awards scheme, as part of the Understanding Unbelief research programme. Over the next three years, Understanding Unbelief will provide £1.12m for international research from across the human sciences (e.g. anthropology, cognitive science, psychology, political science, history, and sociology) to advance our empirical understanding of the array of phenomena commonly labelled ‘unbelief’. Within this, the Early Career Awards initiative will provide £120,000 specifically to support contributions from early career researchers to this task. We aim to fund approximately 8 projects of around £15,000 for research activities lasting up to 18 months. Research activities of shorter duration are also welcomed, as are proposals requesting smaller amounts of funding.

We are now inviting full proposals for Early Career Awards (**deadline 1 June 2017**).

Early Career Awards will be made for projects contributing to the Understanding Unbelief research programme, and will need to demonstrate the nature of this contribution. This information sheet sets out the parameters of the overall programme and the evaluation criteria. Applicants should particularly note the two different dimensions involved in this research – investigating types and dimensions of ‘unbelief’ itself, and how these types vary across demographic and cultural contexts – in order to show how their research activities engage with one or both of these dimensions.

Overview

The rapid rise of the religious ‘nones’, the flourishing of secularist activism, nonreligious movements such as ‘New Atheism’, and policy debates around nonreligious inclusion have all fuelled interest in and debate about so-called ‘unbelief’ – broadly conceived as unbelief in ‘religious’ phenomena/areas such as God or gods, the afterlife, and the ultimate purpose of life. While research is growing, there is still a substantial lack of knowledge about the precise nature of such ‘unbelief’ – of what phenomena the loose notion of unbelief entails, the alternative worldviews and existential beliefs (e.g. humanism) that can ground unbeliefs (Lee 2015), and whether and how all of these ‘unbeliefs’ vary across contexts and cultures. Without this foundational knowledge, future research on the causes and effects of unbelief will be severely limited.

Progress in our scientific understanding in this area has been hampered by several obstacles, including the use of such vague terms as ‘unbelief’, ‘atheism’, and ‘secularism’, all of which mean different things to different people and originate from the conceptual schemes of social actors, not social scientists. Since these terms likewise arise out of religious traditions and suggest that it is normal to be religious and/or theist, their ability to describe ‘unbelief’ in other settings (e.g. where atheism, agnosticism or other positions are the norm) is limited. This imprecision calls into question the scientific value of large-scale surveys that employ these terms. In order to move forward, we need to know: What distinct cognitive and social processes and concepts are being grouped together

under such labels? What is the nature of such phenomena and how might they relate to each other?

The scientific study of religion has faced similar obstacles, leading some to reject ‘religion’ and ‘belief’ as legitimate objects of scientific analysis (e.g. Fitzgerald 2000; Asad 2003; Taves 2009). Yet, while cross-cultural and critical research unmask parochial conceptualizations of ‘religion’ and ‘belief’, other work has ‘reverse-engineered’ (Taves 2015) and ‘fractionated’ (Whitehouse & Lanman 2014) these categories into a diverse array of productive objects of analysis (e.g. explicit and implicit beliefs, worldviews, existential culture). (The Understanding Unbelief website provides further details of this work; see especially www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/background.) Scholars have made progress in understanding religion by examining these phenomena as distinct objects of analysis, and by conducting systematic cross-cultural research to avoid hasty generalizations of their properties.

The aim of the Understanding Unbelief programme is to facilitate similar progress in our understanding of the diverse phenomena commonly labelled as ‘unbelief’, ‘atheism’, and ‘secularism’. To that end, Understanding Unbelief is offering £1.12m for researchers to investigate ‘unbelief’ across two significant dimensions, outlined below. In our first funding round, advertised in late 2016, we offered £1m for large research projects. We now are offering £120k of funding ring-fenced for Early Career scholars to undertake smaller-scale projects that contribute to the overall aims of the project and help advance their own research careers.

Dimension 1: The Nature of Unbelief

As it is defined in the new *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*, (definition also available at www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/resources/concepts/glossary/) unbelief is a category that arises out of Western and Christian settings, and is typically (but not only) applied to those who do not believe in God(s), either in the strong or positive sense (belief that there is no such being or beings) or, perhaps most often, in the weak or negative sense (lack of belief therein). These core meanings are compatible with a broad and heterogeneous set of other beliefs, practices, identities, and moral commitments, including positions such as agnosticism, or more ambivalent forms of ‘positive atheism’ or non-theism. Furthermore, the concept of unbelief alone does not help us to understand this array of perspectives in more nuanced terms – e.g. the particularities of these various unbeliefs in terms of content, form, coherence and significance, the complex beliefs that unbelievers have *about* theism and religion, and the diverse nonreligious and areligious existential beliefs (often thought of in terms of a handful of recognised systems of thought (humanism, naturalism)) that sometimes associated with unbelief. Nor does it help us understand the way in which all of these phenomena differ across cultures and demographic categories.

A more scientifically and empirically robust understanding of ‘unbelief’ requires consideration of both the *absence* of theistic or supernatural beliefs, as well as the *presence* of alternative beliefs, cultures, practices and identities that are associated with this absence. ‘Absence’ takes many forms: it may be the absence of explicit and/or implicit beliefs in nonphysical agents, the afterlife, magical causation, and an ultimate purpose to life or particular life events; and this absence may be contingent and changing. ‘Presence’, too, can come in many forms: it may entail diverse metaphysical, moral, and/or

existential beliefs and values, which may or may not make explicit reference to ‘religion’ and ‘religious beliefs’. As well as uncertainty about the precise nature of both, it remains unclear what the relationship between, and relative significance of, this ‘absence’ and ‘presence’ is: is unbelief mainly a matter of such ‘religious’ beliefs (and cultural formations, practices, identities) being absent altogether or are unbeliefs sometimes or typically a manifestation of alternative beliefs (etc.) of this sort?

In short, we have many questions about the nature of so-called ‘unbelief’, and a need for a better, empirically grounded scientific language to describe and understand it. This RFP therefore calls for projects and other research activities addressing this need through the following target questions: What are the different psychological forms of unbelief (e.g. disinterest, positive rejection, doubt, etc.)? Does a lack of explicit belief in an afterlife entail a lack of implicit belief as well? How are different unbeliefs shaped by moral commitments and existential meaning systems and cultures? What is the relationship between different commonly recognised unbeliefs? For example, does a lack of explicit belief in the existence of non-physical agents entail a lack of explicit belief in an ultimate purpose to the universe? To what extent are the phenomena we measure as ‘unbeliefs’ manifestations of alternative beliefs and cultures? Are some unbeliefs, such as a lack of explicit belief in an ultimate purpose to life or in magical causation, more or less difficult to sustain over time or under stress than other unbeliefs? To what extent do distinct unbeliefs vary in their coherence, salience and stability in individual minds? What are the processes involved in these different forms of ‘unbelieving’? And in what bodily, symbolic, social and other forms do unbeliefs manifest in, besides the intellectual and cognitive?

Dimension 2: Unbelief across Contexts and Cultures

Unbelief and the various phenomena underlying it are manifest in people’s lives across lines of gender, class, age, religious upbringing, ethnicity, etc.. They are also found in diverse social and cultural contexts, including: theocratic and anti-religious contexts as well as secular ones; post-industrial economies as well as hunter-gatherer, horticulturalist and many others; and contexts in which religion is an established, even formally recognised category as well as those that have no word for ‘religion’.

This RFP also calls for projects and other research activities that contribute to our understanding of how the different types of ‘unbelief’ discussed in Dimension 1 differ across lines of class, age, gender, ethnicity, educational background, religious background, and other demographic groupings. Does the often-discussed gender gap in religion and nonreligion exist across all types of ‘unbelief’ or only some; in all cultural contexts or only some? Are the emotional and moral components of unbelief different for particular individuals or groups, e.g. ethnic minorities, or for individuals under 30? How do various types of unbelief appear and function in contexts in which there is either no word for ‘religion’ or contexts in which the meaning of ‘religion’ is quite different from Western norms? Does unbelief look and function in the same way in a predominantly Muslim country as it does a predominantly Buddhist one, or as it does in the Northern European countries in which a majority of individuals identify as nonreligious? Does unbelief look and function in the same way for people of Protestant, Jewish, nonreligious or other backgrounds? Are unbeliefs unique to those commonly labelled as unbelievers, or do their unbeliefs have important commonalities with the unbeliefs of those who describe themselves as Christian, for example? How does

‘unbelief’ interact with or inform other cultural positions that individuals, groups or communities may identify with?

Proposed project and research activities should work across one or both of these dimensions. For research projects, methodologies are likely to have a comparative aspect, though this is not required and may take one of several forms, including:

- Comparative methodologies: Research designs involving two or more groups to compare particular elements of unbelief across demographic or cultural lines;
- Intersectional studies, which investigate the relationship between variables – whether and how different contextual factors shaping unbelief may be contingent upon one another;
- Comparison through secondary analysis, e.g. replication of past studies in new, empirically and/or theoretically significant cultural contexts to enable comparisons with existing data, and,
- Comparison-enabling: Research working with neglected populations, the study of which might be either theoretically or methodologically significant, e.g. studies with/of groups that are little understood in relation to unbelief.

Such methodologies should aim to improve our understanding of the phenomena commonly labelled as ‘unbelief’ as they exist outside of the limited settings that have dominated research to date and allow us to discover important variations for further study. Moreover, we hope that they will generate insights to test the limits of existing typologies and theories and enable better justified generalizations about the nature of – or beyond – ‘unbelief’.

As well as conducting new research, Early Career Awards can also fund other activities which will further knowledge in the field and/or the careers of researchers working in the field, including (but not limited to) further dissemination of existing research (including translation of published material) and seed funding for the development of future research projects. (More information on legitimate expenses can be found in the Grant Eligibility section below.)

Criteria for Evaluation

Proposals will be evaluated according to four main criteria: 1) relevance to the programme themes and questions; 2) appropriateness of research context and methodology for the particular project questions being addressed; 3) research excellence; 4) feasibility within time/resource constraints.

Proposals should clearly state why their particular psychological, demographic, or socio-cultural focus provides a good way to address more general questions about the nature and variety of ‘unbelief’. Further, proposals should be clear about how the applicant(s)’ experience, expertise, and resources will converge to produce rigorous, high-quality outputs.

Because proposals will be evaluated according to their fit with the Understanding Unbelief research themes, it may be helpful for researchers to consider the following in determining whether their interests or project designs are appropriate for this call:

- The Understanding Unbelief research programme seeks to understand the nature and diversity of ‘unbelief’ as a *necessarily preliminary* to (re)engaging with explanatory questions about, for example, the causes of unbelief and its various outcomes and implications. Consequently, research *focusing* on those explanatory questions of how unbelief comes about or its implications for individuals and societies is not eligible for funding within this initial call (though research may touch on these topics, should they reveal something about the nature and variety of unbelief itself).
- The Understanding Unbelief research programme is concerned with both the *absence* of beliefs identified (by analysts or others) as religious and the *presence* of beliefs, meaning systems and practices that ‘unbeliefs’ can be a manifestation of. Its primary interest is not, therefore, the organized forms of nonreligion (e.g. the US Secular Movement, Humanist Associations, university Atheist societies, Sunday Assembly, and so on) in and of themselves. There may be important empirical, theoretical and/or methodological reasons to conduct ethnographic fieldwork with these organizations (e.g. for cross-cultural comparison), but, because these organizations are not the focus of this project, any such reasons should be clearly stated in applications.
- Whilst researchers can profitably learn from critical approaches (e.g. critical secular studies and critical religion studies), the Understanding Unbelief research programme will only fund activities that are primarily empirical. Proposed projects should always centre on unbelief and should not merely engage with nonreligiosity or secularity as a generalized context in which people and beliefs exist.
- Similarly, though identity may be relevant to some methodologies (e.g. for the purposes of identifying research subjects, or where the relationship between identity and unbelief is significant for understanding unbelief itself), the Understanding Unbelief programme will not fund projects focused *primarily* on identity. Methodologies working with identity should therefore be clear about how this approach will help us understand some dimension or aspect of unbelief.
- Finally, please note that the concept of ‘belief’ in Understanding Unbelief can be interpreted broadly. Whilst the study of articulated, propositional, and explicit beliefs is an important focus of this project, so too are other forms of belief, including implicit beliefs that manifest through reasoning, practice, and social relations. Methodologies that shed light on unbelief by exploring tacit knowledge, emotions, practices, rituals, material and symbolic forms, and so on have an important contribution to make to this programme and are eligible for funding. Applications including such foci should be explicit concerning what such studies reveal about the nature and/or variety of ‘unbelief’.

Applicants should also make use of methodological resources provided through the Understanding Unbelief website (www.understanding-unbelief.net), including its glossary of key terms (www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/resources/concepts/glossary/) and the project background (www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/background/), and should reference these materials in their proposals.

The Understanding Unbelief programme also involves a central research project called Understanding Unbelief: Across Disciplines, Across Cultures (ADAC): see www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/core-research-ADAC/. We welcome research activities that engage with ADAC in their methodologies, including proposals to conduct all or part of ADAC’s qualitative and quantitative interview

questionnaire in a geographic setting not already targeted through ADAC. However, diverse approaches and methodologies are needed to advance our scientific and empirical understanding of unbelief and incorporating ADAC's methodology will not in itself improve chances of a proposal being successful.

UU Early Career Awards: Timeline and Application Instructions

Applications should be made by full proposals of no more than 4 pages. Proposals are due on or before Thursday, 1 June 2017. Final award decisions will be issued in July. The earliest start date for research is 1 October 2017; the latest end date is 30 June 2019. Projects can be any length of time up to a maximum of 18 months, so long as they start and finish within these dates.

Applicants are required to submit:

1. A complete curriculum vitae, attached as a separate document from the Proposal.
2. A research proposal describing the central questions involved in the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses a key question relating to or dimension of unbelief, and a summary of the research activities, including the project timeline. The letter should not exceed 4 pages (references do not have to be counted in this total; please specify word count at top of letter).
3. The amount of funding requested and a full project budget. For contribution to salary costs, please note that overheads are strictly limited to 15% of the overall budget.

Application materials should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to info@understanding-unbelief.net. "ECA Application" should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc, .docx and pdf. Questions about the application process can be sent to the same address. All application materials must be received no later than midnight Thursday 1 June 2017. An acknowledgement email will be sent within two working days of receiving the materials.

Grant Eligibility

Applicants must demonstrate that they either i) are close to completing their doctorates, or ii) successfully defended their doctorate (or equivalent qualification) no more than seven years before the application date, i.e. no earlier than 1 June 2010, not including leaves of absence (e.g. parental leave, or for serious illness). For leaves of absence, the time period is extended according to the duration of leave; e.g. if an applicant has taken 9 months of parental leave since receiving their PhD, they are eligible for funding if they successfully defended their doctorate no earlier than 1 September 2009. Leaves of absence should be demonstrated through appropriate documentation. Please be in touch with the Programme Team if you have any queries about leaves of absence or the documentation required. Applicants yet to receive their doctorate or equivalent qualification should provide a letter from their research supervisor confirming that they will have done so before the proposed project start date. Note that any awards made to applicants yet to defend their PhD (or equivalent) will be conditional, and funding may

be withdrawn if the PhD has not been defended before the project start date.

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

Applicants from any country are welcome to apply. All applications must be submitted in English and all payments will be made in British Pound Sterling.

Applicants will normally apply as sole researchers, though applications from small collaborative teams will be considered so long as it can be shown that early career researchers (as specified above) are the main beneficiaries of the funding. Funding may cover an array of research activities, including but not limited to the following:

- salary buy-out costs for a period of research or writing-up
- data collection or other fieldwork costs (including travel) for new research addressing questions of the Understanding Unbelief programme
- seed funding for a broader research project, to support pilot studies and grant application development
- translation costs for published research into another language (the scientific significance of translating this work into the chosen language must be set out)

Travel grants for conference attendance (except for the two project events, see below) are not included within the scheme.

Awards-holders must commit to the following: 1) regular contact with at least one member of the Programme Team; 2) submission of a final report (2 page max.) detailing the outcomes of the funded project, and a mid-term and final expenditure report (1 page max.) outlining expenditures and their contribution to the project outcomes. In addition, the award holder must attend the two meetings specified below.

Required Cross-project Collaboration

The objective of the Understanding Unbeliefs grant competition is to produce the diverse insights needed to build a systematic, cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural understanding of so-called unbelief. Successful applicants will therefore be required to present their proposed research activities to fellow grantees at a project workshop to be held in Canterbury in July 2018, as well as at the closing conference of the Understanding Unbelief project to be held in Rome in June 2019.

For these events, accommodation and meals will be provided. Applicants should arrange their own travel, and may include this cost in their budget calculations if required.

These meetings will also give award-holders the opportunity to collaborate with journalists, documentary makers, curators and other recipients of funding from the programme's Public Engagement activities in order to develop and disseminate their findings.

Programme Team

Principal Investigators

Dr Lois Lee, Religious Studies, University of Kent (programme lead)

Prof. Stephen Bullivant, Theology and the Sociology of Religion, St Mary's University, Twickenham

Dr Miguel Farias, Psychology, Coventry University

Dr Jonathan Lanman, Anthropology, Queen's University Belfast

Please direct all queries to info@understanding-unbelief.net.