

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Kent		
Unit of Assessment: 31: Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Increasing the Recognition of Nonreligious Beliefs and Worldviews in Public Policy, Teaching, and Public Understanding		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1/01/2017 – 31/12/ 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Lois Lee	Senior Lecturer	1/01/2017-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 1 January 2017 – 31 December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Lee's research on the complex forms of nonreligious beliefs and worldviews has had a significant impact on public policy, religious education, and public understanding of nonreligion. Expert witness submissions by Lee underpinned a High Court ruling in July 2020 that has paved the way for the legal recognition of humanist weddings in England and Wales, which, it is estimated, will be taken up by 55,000 couples in England and Wales annually. Lee has played a central role in the development of new concepts for religious education in schools, as well as teaching materials on nonreligion estimated to have been used by up to 300,000 secondary-school students. Her research has been a primary point of reference for understanding nonreligion by media professionals in the United Kingdom, with the total media audience reach for coverage of her research calculated to be in excess of 33 million people.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>Lee's pioneering social-scientific research into the nature and significance of nonreligious identity, worldview, and experience provides detailed insight into nonreligion and atheism, and challenges problematic understandings of both. Traditionally, nonreligiosity and atheism were thought mainly to involve the absence of significant forms of practice and belief, and to be insignificant in themselves. At the same time, these positions were associated in research and the popular imagination with a number of beliefs and dispositions, e.g. being more disposed to analytic thinking and science, nihilism, and moral relativism.</p> <p>First, Lee's theoretical and methodological research has reframed these claims as open, empirical questions [R2, G1], and shown how to address them through radically different, large-scale, and interdisciplinary work [R2, R3, G1]. She has developed this research agenda through a landmark programme of research around religious non-belief [R4, G1] – 'Understanding Unbelief' (UU) (2017-21, £2.3 million), the largest international interdisciplinary research programme to date on the nature and diversity of 'unbelief' (i.e. atheism and agnosticism). Led by Lee, the core programme research team have theorised new ways of thinking about religious 'unbelief' as psychological, social, and cultural phenomena [R4], and Lee has developed new arguments about reimagining 'religion' as 'existential culture' or 'worldview' [R2]. Secondly, UU also represents a significant scaling-up of research and ethnographic knowledge about the world's fourth largest 'religious' population [G1]. At its core is the largest ever international comparative study of nonreligious values and beliefs: working across six countries (Brazil, China, Denmark, Japan, UK, and the USA), Lee has led the development of this study and its innovative interdisciplinary and cross-cultural methodology, which included a survey with a representative sample of 6,600 participants, covering over 200 variables, 180 in-depth interviews, and cutting-edge 'free-listing' research methods.</p>		

Significant findings from Lee's Understanding Unbelief research that underpin the impact include:

- Nonreligious systems of meaning are complex, and do not conform to stereotypes of being scientific, rationalist, purposeless, or amoral. Atheist attitudes towards science take far more diverse forms than those associated with the high-profile 'new atheism' of writers such as Richard Dawkins [R1, R3].
- The majority of 'unbelievers' believe strongly in an ultimate meaning to the universe, the objective reality of human rights, and the natural world holding 'deep' value. They are not typically moral relativists. Their values are not substantially different from, or diametrically opposed to, those held by many religious believers, suggesting that simple binary distinctions between religious and nonreligious values are unhelpful [R1, R2].
- Nonreligious systems of meaning are not simply structured around propositional nonreligious beliefs, but emotion and embodied dispositions in which ritual (including weddings) and acts analogous to 'worship' play a significant part. Shared nonreligious beliefs are often seen as a significant basis for relationships with life partners [R1, R2].
- These complex forms of nonreligion are better understood through concepts such as 'worldview' or 'existentiality' (a phrase coined by Lee), which emphasise how nonreligion constitutes a fuller sense of self and the world, rather than simply being structured around propositional beliefs about the non-existence of God [R2, R4].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Research outputs

[R1] Bullivant, Stephen, Farias, Miguel, Lanman, Jonathan, and Lee, Lois (2019). *Understanding Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics Around the World*. Twickenham: St Mary's University. Public report presenting findings from the UU international study of nonreligion.

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/id/eprint/78815>

[R2] Lee, Lois (2019). 'Observing the Atheist at Worship: Ways of Seeing the Secular Body'. In Scheer, Monique, Schepelern Johansen, Brigitte, and Fadil, Nadia (eds), *Secular Bodies, Affects, and Emotions*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 43-60. ISBN 978-1-350-06523-9. Peer-reviewed edited collection. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/id/eprint/80951>

[R3] Lee, Lois (2019). 'Feeling Rational: Affinity and Affinity Narratives in British Science–Non-religion Relations'. In Jones, Stephen, Kaden, Tom, and Catto, Rebecca (eds), *Science, Belief and Society: International Perspectives on Religion, Non-religion and the Public Understanding of Science*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, pp. 173-196. ISBN 978-1-5292-0694-4. Peer-reviewed edited collection. <https://kar.kent.ac.uk/id/eprint/80952>

[R4] Lee, Lois, Bullivant, Stephen, Farias, Miguel, and Lanman, Jonathan (2017). 'Understanding Unbelief: Background'. Online briefing paper on the research contest and contribution of the Understanding Unbelief programme.

<https://research.kent.ac.uk/understandingunbelief/about/background/>

Grants

[G1] In 2017, Lois Lee was awarded £2,170,735 by the John Templeton Foundation's grant programme for the project 'Understanding Unbelief' (grant number 60624). This funding enabled Lee to launch the largest programme of collaborative research into atheism and agnosticism, ultimately involving 28 project teams covering 25 countries, and to investigate and document the beliefs of 'unbelievers' around the world through core research.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)**Influencing the legal recognition of humanist weddings in England and Wales**

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, has commented that ‘Lois Lee’s contribution to the increasing recognition of nonreligious beliefs in law, by means of her contributions to legal cases as an expert witness, providing briefings to parliamentarians or to others in public life has been second to none; it has been extremely important. As humanists, we can go on [...] talking about the salience of our beliefs [and] the people who share them, but the external perspective that academic research brings to our existence is priceless in terms of getting people to understand and to recognise the importance of those issues’ [b].

A key example of this impact has been the influence of Lee’s research on a landmark ruling in the High Court concerning the legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales. In this case, which concluded in July 2020, the claimants had argued that this lack of recognition was discriminatory. In response, the UK Government, through the Secretary of State for Justice, sought to defend the current legal position by arguing that humanism was not a system of meaning and values equivalent to religion, and that marriage had no special significance in relation to humanist belief. Lee contributed two expert witness statements on behalf of the claimants [a], which drew on her research to demonstrate that humanism is indeed a system of meaning and values analogous to religious ones, that these beliefs can include a strong commitment to key lifecycle ceremonies (including marriage), and that humanists often place a high value on the solemnisation of a relationship with a life-partner with whom they share these humanist beliefs and values. High Court judge Mrs Justice Eady accepted this view in her judgment, and rejected the Government’s defence, ruling that ‘the present law gives rise to [...] discrimination’. Humanists UK (HUK), who supported the claimants’ case, state that Lee’s witness statement greatly contributed to their being granted a favourable permission order to allow this case to proceed to a full hearing at the High Court in 2020 [j]. Lee’s statement was also discussed at length in the hearing itself, and referred to by Justice Eady in her final ruling [a]. This judgment has made legal recognition of humanist weddings – currently the subject of a Government review – inevitable, as failure to do so would now constitute a breach of the Government’s obligations under equalities and human rights legislation. With the campaign to give legal recognition to humanist weddings receiving widespread cross-party support, this High Court ruling has been recognised by MPs as providing the legal basis on which such recognition will now proceed and establishing legal provision for humanist marriage as a ‘human right’ [i].

Legal recognition of humanist weddings will transform the provision of marriages in England and Wales. It is expected that around 55,000 recognised humanist weddings will take place each year in England and Wales once recognition is finally granted, according to data from the Office for National Statistics. This will constitute around 20% of all marriages conducted annually in England and Wales. Public interest in this case – and its implications for the public recognition of the legal equivalence of humanist worldviews to religious ones – was extensive. Coverage about this case was given by 165 broadcast and print media outlets, including news bulletins on BBC1 and BBC Radio 4 and 5, and across the national press (including in the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, and *Daily Mail*).

Education policy and practice

In the context of ongoing policy and professional discussions about the provision of religious education in England and Wales, Lee has made a substantial contribution to the development of new concepts for framing the content of religious education, as well as more nuanced and better-evidenced teaching of nonreligious lives. Her advocacy for the use of the terms ‘worldview’ and ‘existential culture’ as more inclusive than ‘religion’ [R2] has been taken up and referenced by both Andrew Copson (Chief Executive of HUK) and Rudolph Lockhart (as Chief Executive of the Religious Education Council [REC], the lead national body representing professional bodies and faith communities with an interest in religious education) [b]. Lee has been a significant influence on a consultation process led by the REC that has sought to develop a consensus amongst national stakeholders on new concepts that can shape the content of teaching in religious education in the future. Her work [R2] is cited extensively in a REC introduction to worldview [c], and Lee served as

an expert contributor for a REC-led review into the concept of 'worldview' and its use in schools [c]. This process involved a series of workshops based on expert position papers (including one by Lee, setting out the critical understanding of worldview in her work, and the benefits, challenges, and most fruitful approaches for using the term in education), with Lee also leading the workshop specifically on nonreligious worldviews. The REC has published discussion papers [c] developed from this process, with its emphasis on the 'affective, embodied, existential and practical dimensions' of worldview alongside intellectual dimensions reflecting Lee's research and consultation contributions, as does its critique of a 'rigid binary between religious and nonreligious worldviews'. This publication has been circulated to REC members (65 member organisations, comprising the leading RE organisations in the country), and is the basis of in-process curriculum development and further REC lobbying to central Government on reform of national frameworks for religious education.

Lee has also shaped the content of religious education on nonreligion in schools across the UK, responding to recurrent observations by teaching professionals about the limited availability of teaching materials on nonreligion, and, where available, their simplistic, stereotypical, and divisive content. She contributed a chapter to the book *Examining Religion and Belief: Atheists*, published by Religious Education Today Services (RE Today), providing content based on Understanding Unbelief's research and methodology for use by teachers in their classroom teaching material [R4], explaining that nonreligious worldviews take a wider array of forms than the 'new atheism' and humanism, providing examples of these and activities for classroom teaching [d]. This book was circulated freely to 1,250 members of the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education, and is estimated to have been used with up to 300,000 students at Key-Stages 3 and 4 [e]. RE Today are also developing new teaching materials, incorporating both research findings and research methods from Understanding Unbelief [R1, G1] for use in the classroom, and, to date, 288 teachers have received the training they provide to use these resources. Feedback from teachers attending these sessions has emphasised both the workshop's value in deepening teachers' understanding of the 'diversity of secular views and not to stereotype atheism/humanists', and the value of using research methods developed in the UU programme (e.g. its free-listing method) as pedagogic tools to stimulate students' discussions of their beliefs and values; overall, attendees said they were likely 'to utilise the information provided in the presentation and wider UU programme in [their] teaching' [f]. Lee's research has also been incorporated into RE PGCE training (e.g. at UCL's Institute of Education). To illustrate how this has impacted on day-to-day teaching, one secondary teacher has reported: 'I'm currently writing lessons based on this research' for year 7 in which students survey local people using Understanding Unbelief methods and discuss UU findings. The importance of Lee's work as a basis for classroom teaching on nonreligion has been nationally recognised. Rudolph Lockhart (as REC Chief Executive) has noted that it is increasingly important that schools provide effective education on nonreligious worldviews, and commented that Lee's work has challenged the misconception 'that it's just too difficult to study nonreligious worldviews, that it's too amorphous'. 'Her work is held in extremely high esteem,' he has noted, and 'is really well timed' in terms of its significance for educators [b].

Journalistic approaches to nonreligion and atheism

Lee's work has expanded the evidence base of journalistic coverage of nonreligion and atheism, and improved the accuracy of media coverage in this area. Lee is now widely recognised as one of the key international researchers shaping public understanding of nonreligion through the media. Graham Lawton, a staff writer for the *New Scientist*, has commented that Lee's work has been far more valuable in providing insights into nonreligious lives than 'celebrity' new atheists that dominated previous coverage, and that Lee and her research collaborators are 'the world's experts on this stuff [...], they're the go-to people' [b]. Lee has been interviewed and had her work referenced by media outlets including the BBC World Service, BBC Radio 4, *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Der Spiegel*, *Der Standard*, and the *New Scientist*. Since March 2017, her research has been referred to in more than 300 articles published by newspapers and news websites, with audience reach in excess of 33 million (based on KANTAR data) [g]. Recurrent themes in this coverage are the research findings that nonreligious people 'do not lack morality', as well as the complex forms of nonreligion beyond the stereotype associated with 'new atheist' writers

such as Richard Dawkins. Her work has also led to greater recognition of, and engagement with, nonreligion in the work of the Religion Media Centre (RMC), an independent, impartial body helping journalists and other media professionals cover world religions and belief, and the leading organisation of its kind in the UK. RMC Director, Ruth Peacock, says that, from 'our discussions with Dr Lee [...] we have a deeper understanding of nonreligion [...] and this is reflected in our work with journalists'. She estimates that 1,600 of the RMC's media professional and other users have improved their understanding of nonreligion through Lee's direct contributions to RMC activities alone [h]. Key national think tanks and research bodies have also invited Lee to talk about her work, including Chatham House, NatCen, and Theos. Elizabeth Oldfield, Director of Theos, the leading national think tank on religion and public life, has commented: 'Lois's work and the wider Understanding Unbelief programme have been immensely helpful for our work at Theos, helping frame our work on The Sacred podcast and influencing numerous research reports' [h].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[a] Legal papers from *Harrison vs Secretary of State*. Includes Lee's expert witness statements (2019, 2020) for the Crown's submission to the Secretary of State and full transcript of High Court judgment (2020), for the case regarding legal status of humanist weddings.

[b] Documentary film by KMTV with testimonials from Chief Executive of Humanists UK and President of Humanists International, Chief Executive Officer of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, and a Staff Writer at *New Scientist*. Describes the impact of Lee's research on humanist legal campaigns, religious education, and journalism.

[c] Reports published by Religion Education Council for England and Wales and Theology Religious Studies UK (i. *Worldview: A Multidisciplinary Report* [2000]; ii. *The Worldview Project: Draft Discussion Papers* [2000]). These reports make recommendations for religious education practitioners based on, and citing, Lee's published research and expert contributions to the REC workshop on the future of religious education.

[d] Book published by RE Today (*Examining Religion and Belief: Atheists* [d]: see p. 5). Free resource for teachers, including a chapter co-authored by Lee summarising Understanding Unbelief research and methods, and providing activities for the classroom.

[e] Statistics provided by RE Today describing the readership and reach of *Examining Religion and Belief: Atheists* [d], the reach of RE Today training workshops, and the use of teaching resources based on the UU project.

[f] Testimonials from 49 RE teachers attending training by a National RE Adviser from RE Today at StrictlyRE2020 (2019) in teaching materials developed from UU findings and methods. Shows impact of training on teachers and classroom activities.

[g] Media coverage (2017-20) of Lee's research provided by the University of Kent.

[h] Testimonials from the Director of the Religion Media Centre, showing how Lee's research has changed RMC and journalist approaches to coverage of atheism and nonreligion, and giving statistics on audience reach for Lee's contributions to RMC activities; and from the Director of Theos, stating the significance of Lee's research to Theos' communications and research activities.

[i] Social media post from Crispin Blunt MP, illustrating political engagement with the judgment in *Harrison vs Secretary of State* [a].

[j] Email from the Director of Public Affairs and Policy at Humanists UK, stating that Lee's witness statement made a crucial contribution to *Harrison vs Secretary of State* [a] being granted a favourable permission order to proceed to a full hearing at the High Court.