

# Understanding Unbelief

## Call for Proposals – Information Sheet

Through a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, the University of Kent welcomes proposals contributing to the Understanding Unbelief project. Over the next three years, this initiative will provide £1m 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 as ‘unbelief’. We aim to fund a minimum of 8 projects of up to 24 months in duration; individual researchers or project teams can apply for funding to a maximum project value of £300,000. We are now inviting submission of Letters of Inquiry (**deadline 14 October 2016**), following which we will invite a limited number of researchers and research teams to submit full proposals.

This information sheet sets out the parameters of the programme and the evaluation criteria.

### 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](http://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, the Understanding Unbelief competition offers £1m for researchers to investigate ‘unbelief’ across two significant dimensions:

### **Dimension 1: The Nature of Unbelief**

As it is defined in the forthcoming *Oxford Dictionary of Atheism*, (also available at [www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/resources/concepts/glossary/](http://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 no 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 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 that investigate 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 projects should work across one or both of these dimensions. 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’.

## 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) likelihood of contributing to new theory development.

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 research.

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](http://www.understanding-unbelief.net)), including its glossary of key terms ([www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/resources/concepts/glossary/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/resources/concepts/glossary/)) and the project background ([www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/background/](http://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/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/core-research-ADAC/). We welcome research project proposals 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 unbelief and incorporating ADAC’s methodology will not in itself improve chances of a proposal being successful.

## **Understanding Unbelief: Timeline and Application Instructions**

Letters of Inquiry are due Friday 14 October 2016. All applicants will be contacted within 14 days, and successful applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal; additional support

for preparing full proposals will be provided. Submissions of full proposals are due no later than 3 February 2017. Final award decisions will be issued by Friday 14 April 2017. The earliest start date for research is 1 July 2017; the latest end date is 30 June 2019; and proposals can be for projects of any duration within these dates (longest project length: 24 months).

### **Letter of Inquiry (LOI) Stage**

Applicants are required to submit:

1. A complete curriculum vitae for the PI and for all major team members (if applicable). A single project leader for communication purposes must be specified. CVs should be attached as a separate document from the Letter of Inquiry.
2. A Letter of Inquiry that includes the central questions of the project, the background and significance of the questions, the way in which the project addresses the dimensions set out above, and a summary of the research design. The letter should not exceed 1,000 words (references do not have to be counted in this total; please specify word count at top of letter).
3. The amount of funding requested. Only a rough budget breakdown is needed at this stage. The amount can be revised at the full proposal stage (plus or minus 20%). Applicants are advised that overheads may be included within the requested funds, but only to a maximum of 15% of direct costs.

Application materials should be submitted by e-mail attachment, if possible, to [info@understanding-unbelief.net](mailto:info@understanding-unbelief.net). "LOI" 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 LOI materials must be received no later than midnight Friday 14 October 2016. An acknowledgement email will be sent within two days of receiving the materials.

### **Full Proposal Stage**

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

1. A summary page, including the title of the project, amount requested, duration of the project, and information about team members.
2. An abstract of up to 500 words that explains the project and its significance to non-academics, and that could be published on the project website and possibly in Templeton materials, and included in publicity materials if the proposal is funded.
3. A description of proposed activities, including key objectives and a detailed programme of work (5 pages maximum for projects requesting funds of less than £100,000; and 10 pages maximum for projects requesting funds of over £100,000).

4. Particulars of costs, specifying how the funds will be spent. Overheads are strictly limited to 15%, and funds cannot be used for major equipment purchases. Necessary project-specific costs for lab/space use and administrative support may be included as direct costs but must be justified.

## **5. A project timeline**

CVs submitted at the LOI stage do not need to be resubmitted. Full proposals should be submitted, ideally by e-mail attachment, to [info@understanding-unbelief.net](mailto:info@understanding-unbelief.net). The words 'Full Proposal' should appear in the e-mail subject line. The only acceptable file formats are .doc, .docx and .pdf. Questions about full proposals can be sent to the same address. Full proposals will be accepted only from applicants who have been invited to submit by the Principal Investigators on the basis of the LOI phase. Full proposals must be received no later than midnight on 3 February 2017. An acknowledgement email will be sent within two days of receiving the materials.

## **Grant Eligibility**

The PI must have a doctorate and be employed at an accredited college or university for the duration of their research. 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.

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

Applicants of all stages of their career are encouraged to apply and may apply as sole researchers or with a team of collaborators; early career scholars are also encouraged to investigate Understanding Unbelief's Early Career funding stream at [www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/grant-competitions/RFP2/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/grant-competitions/RFP2/).

The PI of a funded project must commit to the following: 1) Regular contact with at least one member of the Project Team; 2) Submission of final reports, as well as semi-annual and final expenditure reports following a template provided to grantees. In addition, all project teams must be represented at the two meetings specified below.

Alternative funds will be available through a scheme for early career researchers and for those engaged in public engagement strategies that will help bring new knowledge in this field to diverse audiences. Potential applicants should consider which of these funding streams best suit the contribution they might make to the overall project. Eligible candidates can apply for funding in more than one stream; applications in each stream will be evaluated independently of one another. Further information on Early Career awards can be found on our website at [www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/grant-competitions/RFP2/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/grant-competitions/RFP2/). Further information on Public Engagement awards can be found [www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/grant-competitions/RFP3/](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/non-religious-belief/understanding-unbelief/grant-competitions/RFP3/).

## **Required Cross-project Collaboration**

The objective of the Understanding Unbelief grant competition is to produce the diverse insights needed to build a systematic, cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural understanding of the diverse phenomena commonly labelled as ‘unbelief’. Successful applicants will therefore be required to share their research plans and initial findings with fellow grantees at a project workshop to be held in the Canterbury in July 2018, as well as at the closing conference of the project to be held in Europe in June 2019 (full details forthcoming).

For these events, accommodation and meals will be provided for at least one representative of the project team and do not need to be included in project budgets. Applicants may request funding for additional team members to participate in these events at LOI stage, but may be requested to find additional funding. Applicants should arrange their own travel, and may include this in their budget calculations if required.

Grantees will also be given the opportunity to collaborate with journalists, documentary makers, curators and other recipients of funding from the Public Engagement stream in order to develop and disseminate their findings.

## **Project Team**

### **Principal Investigators**

Dr Lois Lee, Religious Studies, University of Kent

Dr Stephen Bullivant, Religious Studies and Theology, St Mary’s University, Twickenham

Dr Miguel Farias, Psychology, Coventry University

Dr Jonathan Lanman, Anthropology, Queen’s University Belfast

### **Core Researchers**

Dr Jonathan Jong, Psychology, Coventry University