

Religious Disbelief and the Emotions Conference

Zoom conference hosted by Macquarie University, 23rd and 24th January 2023

There will be one Zoom link for all sessions:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86808537181>

Meeting ID: 868 0853 7181

Times of day:

Sydney/Melbourne/Canberra—6pm to 10pm

London—7am to 11am

Athens—9am to 1pm

20 minutes will be allotted for each talk (except keynotes) and 10 minutes for questions. It is appreciated if all speakers work within these time constraints. Participants should attend as many talks as possible.

Abstracts are provided below the schedule. Speakers will be able to share screen for presentations on PowerPoint or equivalent. You can present without a presentation if you prefer.

Schedule, Monday 23rd January, 2023

6pm: Welcome and announcements, Dr Keagan Brewer (Macquarie University).

6:10pm to 7:10pm: Keynote Talk, Tim Whitmarsh (University of Cambridge), ‘Ancient Greek Atheism, Anger and Group Formation’.

7:10pm to 7:20pm: Break

7:20pm to 8:20pm: Session 1

- Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides (Macquarie University), “‘To have an impious and cowardly love of life’” (*Str.* 4.4.16.3): The Disease of Atheism and Religious Extremism in Plato and Clement of Alexandria’.
- Natalie Mylonas (Macquarie University), ‘Jesus the Scatophiliac Sorcerer: The Role of Disgust and Humiliation in Generating Humour as Nonviolent Resistance in *Toledot Yeshu*’.

8:20pm to 8:30pm: Break

8:30pm to 10:00pm: Session 2

- Lola Sharon Davidson (Sydney Medieval and Renaissance Group), ‘Heretic or Hysteric? The Case of Aude Fauré’.
- Jack Hanrahan-Shirley (Macquarie University), ‘Eucharistic Heresy and Unbelief in the 11th Century: Deoduinus’ *Epistola contra Brunonem et Berengarium*’.
- Keagan Brewer (Macquarie University), ‘Emotion and Argumentation in Medieval Theologians’ Rejections of Atheism’.

Schedule, Tuesday 24th January, 2023

6pm to 7:30pm: Session 3

- Patrick S. McGhee (University of Durham), ‘Atheism, the Emotions, and the Body in the Protestant Atlantic World c. 1650–1720’.
- Bill Shafer (Independent Scholar), ‘Passions of the Soul: Belief, Disbelief and Emotion in Descartes’ Correspondence with Elizabeth of Bohemia’.
- Leah Ingram (Monash University), ‘Inner Agonies and the Art of Despair in Post-Reformation Elizabethan Literature’.

7:30pm to 7:40pm: Break

7:40pm to 8:40pm: Session 4

- Sakellariou Alexandros (Hellenic Open University), ‘Orthodox Christianity and Religious Disbelief in 18th-century Pre-revolutionary Greece: The Construction and Expression of Emotions’.
- David Newheiser (Australian Catholic University), ‘The History of Atheism as a Holistic Phenomenon: Ethics and Emotion, Beyond Unbelief’.

8:40pm to 9:40pm: Keynote Talk, Alec Ryrie (University of Durham), “‘Is there no God? Let’s put it to the vote’”: The Atheism Crisis in 1640s England’.

9:40pm to 10:00pm: Open discussion, thank you, and wrap-up.

Abstracts

- Tim Whitmarsh (University of Cambridge), ‘Ancient Greek Atheism, Anger and Group Formation’.

The word “atheist” derives from ancient Greek, and there is plenty of examples of intellectual positions in antiquity that are similar to modern atheistic ideas. There is, however, very little evidence for atheism as a coherent movement, or indeed for self-identifying groups of atheists. Did ancient Greek atheists consider themselves unified by their beliefs? This paper considers the role of anger in the formation and maintenance of group identity.

- Eva Anagnostou-Laoutides (Macquarie University), “‘To have an impious and cowardly love of life” (*Str.* 4.4.16.3): The Disease of Atheism and Religious Extremism in Plato and Clement of Alexandria’.

The paper examines the construction of atheism and impiety in early Christianity under the influence of Plato. Clement of Alexandria employs the adjectives godless (*atheos*) and impious (*asebēs*) frequently in his writings both as accusations against pagan philosophers and heretics but also in his defence of the Christians against the very charge of atheism on account of their rejection of the pagan gods (*Str.* 7.1; cf. *Tert. Apol.* 10). Taking start from Plato’s famous discussion of atheism in book 10 of the *Laws* (884aff.), the paper argues that Clement is inspired by Plato not only in adopting an apophatic appreciation of God – in line with Numenius’ Middle Platonic arguments, but crucially to promoting an ascetic lifestyle as the only path of defending true spiritual experience. With his emphasis on impassibility, also fostered under the influence of his teacher, the

Stoic Pantaeus, Clement is acknowledged as an early proponent of Christian asceticism (Bucur 2006). However, the Platonic roots of associating disbelief with excessive confidence in fleshly pleasure, and thus intellectual clouding (*Laws* 888a), deserves further examination as it seems to lie at the heart of the dualism that distinguishes the world of the gods from the material world.

Accordingly, denying the gods becomes a heinous crime that lawgivers must eliminate from the ideal society. The paper argues that Clement relies on Plato to promote an early discourse that associates pagans with violence and the Church with peace (Van Nuffelen 2020; Drake 2011), thus prefiguring the rise of religious violence in the fourth century when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

- Natalie Mylonas (Macquarie University), ‘Jesus the Scatophilic Sorcerer: The Role of Disgust and Humiliation in Generating Humour as Nonviolent Resistance in *Toledot Yeshu*’.

Humour has long been used as a powerful tool of nonviolent resistance in the face of the terror of persecution. Humour has the potential to empower, uplift, and give voice to religious minorities under threat of annihilation through forced conversion, assimilation, or genocide. As such, humour and the emotions that give rise to humour play an important role in strengthening the resilience of religious “disbelievers” in times of crisis. This paper examines the role of disgust and humiliation in creating humour in *Toledot Yeshu* (“The Generations of Jesus”) – a polemical Jewish parody of the life and death of Jesus. Boasting hundreds of surviving manuscripts and a rich textual tradition, *Toledot Yeshu* is one of the most popular (and irreverent!) pieces of Jewish literature to circulate in the medieval period. *Toledot Yeshu* provides an invaluable window into the use of humour by medieval Jewish communities in resistance to Christian antisemitism and illuminates the ways that humour cultivates emotional resilience in religious minority groups. Disgust and sexual humiliation are key emotions that generate humour throughout the narrative and feature heavily in the portrayal of Jesus as impure. Jesus is cast as a scatophilic sorcerer who is the result of the rape of a menstruating woman. After being defeated by Judas Iscariot in an aerial battle, Jesus is sodomised by Judas in public, and finally ends his career crucified on a cabbage stalk. Through the use of humour evoked by disgust and humiliation, *Toledot Yeshu* provides a counter-narrative to the gospel portrayals of Jesus as the pinnacle of holiness and re-casts the Christian “believers” as fools and the Jewish “disbelievers” as wise.

- Lola Sharon Davidson (Sydney Medieval and Renaissance Group), ‘Heretic or Hysteric? The Case of Aude Fauré’.

While committed heretics might choose to go defiant to the stake, convinced of the justice and truth of their opposition to a corrupt, immoral and murderous Church, for others the realisation that they could not believe in the central tenets of their society’s religion was emotionally devastating. It pushed the eleventh-century monk Otloh of St Emmeram to the verge of madness. For the fourteenth-century Southern Frenchwoman Aude Fauré, her situation provoked both anguish for her and consternation for those surrounding her. While Aude’s problem might appear hysterical from a modern perspective, it needs to be understood within the wider context of scepticism regarding the doctrine of transubstantiation. Miracle stories written by the clergy to counter such scepticism typically ascribed the disbelief to women rather than men. Conversion to orthodox belief occurred following the doubter’s vision of the Host as either a baby boy or as bleeding flesh. Rejection of the reality of transubstantiation was a fundamental tenet of most medieval heresy continuing into the Reformation. Aude Fauré lived in a time and region deeply imbued with the dualist Catharist heresy whose separation of spirit and matter entailed complete rejection of the Eucharist. This paper

examines the emotions surrounding Aude's slides into disbelief and her eventual return to conformity within their wider social context.

- Jack Hanrahan-Shirley (Macquarie University), 'Eucharistic Heresy and Unbelief in the 11th Century: Deoduinus' *Epistola contra Brunonem et Berengarium*'.

This paper will examine the ways in which heretics were identified and described in ways that presented them as non-believers within Christendom during the Medieval period. Specifically, I will focus on the Eucharistic controversy (sometimes known as the Stercoranian Controversy) that befell the Latin West from approximately 1050 to 1088. This controversy centred on the question of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine. Attention will be focused on the text of the *Epistola Contra Brunonem et Berengarium* (Letter Against Bruno and Berengar), written by Deoduinus the bishop of Liège to Henry I, the third Capetian king of France. There already exists a body of scholarship dealing with this 11th century controversy, such as *Berengar and the Reform of Sacramental Doctrine* (1977) by A. J. Macdonald and more recently *Theology, Rhetoric, and Politics in the Eucharistic Controversy, 1078–1079: Alberic of Monte Cassino Against Berengar of Tours* (2002) by C. M. Radding and F. Newton. However, to my knowledge no work has been done that explicitly seeks to examine the heresiological literature composed during the Stercoranian Controversy and how authors, such as Deoduinus, presented their theological opponents as non-believers within the Church. In my view the study of Deoduinus' *Epistola Contra Brunonem et Berengarium* will enable a greater understanding the development of medieval Latin heresiology during the 11th century. This work also provides a challenge to the narrative that major doctrinal issues, such as those of the Eucharist, were settled during the period of the 4th to 8th centuries and did not arise until the Cathars in the late 12th and 13th centuries then later the Reformation.

- Keagan Brewer (Macquarie University), 'Emotion and Argumentation in Medieval Theologians' Rejections of Atheism'.

While it is difficult to attribute the label 'atheist' to specific medieval people, many theologians took great pains to discuss and repudiate the notion that the Christian God did not exist. Scholastic culture, with its meticulous probing of difficult questions, demanded it, but even so, explicit discussions of atheism are not always present in theological compendia. In this paper, I explore a number of theological discussions of atheism—some known, some new to scholarship—to argue that theologians' emotions are embedded in their forms and styles of argumentation. In reports of real medieval disbelievers expressing themselves, orthodox Christians react with horror, and I argue this horror is also embedded in theologians' argumentation against atheism. It manifests in the use of vituperative ad-hominem arguments, thought-terminating clichés (often based on Psalm 13/52: 'the fool says in his heart "there is no God"'), and the (to us) paradoxical association between atheism and Jews.

- Patrick S. McGhee (University of Durham), 'Atheism, the Emotions, and the Body in the Protestant Atlantic World c. 1650–1720'.

This paper begins from the premise that English Protestants conceived of atheism as a partly physical affliction. It explores how this idea intersected with religious and scientific change in the Atlantic world by focusing on the printed and manuscript writing of Cotton Mather (1663-1728), a leading Congregationalist minister in Boston, Massachusetts and, eventually, a member of the

Royal Society. In works of practical divinity and sermon notes, Mather wrote that atheism was a physical intrusion triggered by satanic manipulation. This was an idea that i.) intersected with his effort to expose the diabolical threat of witchcraft, ii.) resonated with his conviction that the conversion of non-European peoples was a divine imperative, and iii.) prefigured his support for inoculation as a viable medical procedure. Channelling long-held religious and medical assumptions about the unruly passions and the corruption of the affections, he argued that believers had to identify the bodily signs of atheism and build resistance to the physical assaults of the Devil, diligently shielding themselves against atheistic thoughts and emotions. Invoking postlapsarian and predestinarian theology, these ideas responded to the Hobbesian repudiation of supernatural phenomena embedded within the materialist philosophy, which itself appeared atheistic to Mather. Consequently, the physicality of atheism galvanised Protestant efforts to reassert doctrine in medicine and science, a process that both benefitted from and sustained complicity in enslavement and empire. At the same time, locating the causes and characteristics of atheism in the body encouraged Protestants to classify aspects of biological difference through a religious lens. Anatomising atheism thus played a pivotal role in the development of post-Reformation ideas about colonial expansion, evangelism and socio-political order, illuminating the ways in which the religious regulation of bodily experiences shaped emerging notions of race, gender, and sexuality.

- Bill Shafer (Independent Scholar), 'Passions of the Soul: Belief, Disbelief and Emotion in Descartes' Correspondence with Elizabeth of Bohemia'.

Emotions play a decisive role in reconciling belief and disbelief in the development of Descartes' Metaphysics, which seeks to reconcile the disenchanted vision of nature assumed by science with continuing belief in a loving God. In the *Mediations*, Descartes set out to recover belief through a process of radical disbelief conducted purely at the level of reason. The certainty that a non-deceiving God must exist is seen to depend upon thought's own inescapable certainty that it is thinking, while the body is relegated to the level of mere mechanics. Immaterial souls and material bodies seem to be left separate for eternity. In a famous and fascinating correspondence with Descartes, Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia subsequently communicated her inability to believe that an immaterial soul could ever enter into relationship with a material body. In his last work, *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes subsequently focussed on the question of how soul and body interact through emotion, each profoundly affecting the other in an ongoing dynamic uniquely characteristic of human life. The emphasis here shifts from separation to the effective unity of body and soul, which alone can account for our human experience of emotions. Recent re-readings of this text by Luce Irigaray and other scholars have led to a reconsideration of Descartes as providing a basis for the affirmation of difference and embodiment, particularly in relation to the 'primary emotion' of *wonderment*, rather than as the exemplary champion of an isolated and 'hypermasculine' subjectivity. This paper will review these developments in the interest of articulating the author's own perspective on the role played by Descartes' relationship with Princess Elizabeth in the development of his understanding of emotion, disbelief, and bodies.

- Leah Ingram (Monash University), 'Inner Agonies and the Art of Despair in Post-Reformation Elizabethan Literature'.

The sweeping religious changes brought about by the Reformation in early modern England, most notably the introduction of the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination, resulted in increased anxiety about loss of faith, reprobation and the accompanying complexity of emotion springing from despair. For the early modern English congregation, not only was despair an emotion, but a

religious state, and one which the church during the late seventeenth-century transformed from a disturbing condition to be avoided to one which could be highly efficacious for the righteously elect. This paper will investigate and discuss early modern notions of despair and its associated emotions in Elizabethan literature. While despair could be viewed as one means by which God ‘spoke’ to the early modern Anglican, it was up to each individual to interpret their own emotional state and to ascribe meaning. Each lay person had the responsibility of differentiating the type of despair they were experiencing: whether it was true reprobation, leading to damnation, or ‘holy sorrow’, the testing of one’s faith leading to a renewal of grace. The passivity of the individual in a state of despair was countered by the agency of the interpretation of their emotional condition; what one said about one’s own emotional state determined their spiritual health, often in strong contradiction to those around who sought to offer comfort. The ways in which this contradiction was navigated in Elizabethan literature will be explored.

- Sakellariou Alexandros (Hellenic Open University), ‘Orthodox Christianity and Religious Disbelief in 18th-century Pre-revolutionary Greece: The Construction and Expression of Emotions’.

The study of religion and the study of emotions are closely related when it comes to religious rituals and the formation of people’s religious identity. Orthodox religion was always considered a key-element of Greek people’s ethno-religious identity since the times of the Ottoman Empire and any criticism or disbelief used to cause -and still does- emotional turmoil and reactions from the part of religious authorities, religious figures and believers. At a time when freethought and criticism of religion started to be on the rise in the West during the Enlightenment, Greece was not yet recognised as an independent nation-state being under the Ottoman rule for almost 400 years until the Revolution of 1821. The then new radical ideas of religious criticism and political independence hesitantly arrived in the region through original or translated books, treatises, and periodicals and were introduced by Greek merchants and scholarly men who have traveled, lived, worked and studied in the West. As it was expected religious authorities and scholars reacted against them in their effort to protect the status and role of the Orthodox religion and Church. The purpose of this presentation is to delve into the extended Greek 18th century (1700-1821) in order to document the construction and expression of emotions of religious authorities and scholars towards those who criticised the Orthodox Church, the clergy and in some cases Orthodox dogmas and practices as well as any responses from the part of religious critics and disbelievers. Through the analysis of a number of published texts of the said time period (books, pamphlets, encyclical letters, etc.) this presentation will try to cast light on a neglected research topic in the Greek academia, since history and sociology of emotions only recently started to attract academic attention.

- David Newheiser (Australian Catholic University), ‘The History of Atheism as a Holistic Phenomenon: Ethics and Emotion, Beyond Unbelief’.

Atheism today is widely associated with the New Atheists, a group of commentators who claim that religion is irrational, unscientific, and morally corrosive. In order to justify the view that religion and science are opposed, the New Atheists define theism and atheism as incompatible hypotheses about the world. Although professional philosophers tend to take a less polemical tone, most of them share the assumption that atheism and theism are competing theories, each of which centres on a belief concerning the existence of a divine being. In response, this presentation will argue that defining atheism narrowly in terms of belief makes it into an abstraction that misrepresents atheism as it actually exists. To this end, I will develop a brief genealogy of atheism - from the premodern

period into the present - which indicates that atheism has encompassed ethical commitments, political aims, and emotional experiences. Rather than focusing solely on the cognitive dimension of atheism, this history indicates that atheism has been motivated by a complex network of affects and attitudes: anxiety, anger, defiance, delight, scepticism, sympathy, and more. These motivations and the critiques they engender invariably reflect the particularities of context, whether that context is European or otherwise (as atheism grows increasingly global). In conclusion, I will suggest that atheism is best understood as an assemblage that stands in complex tension with religious traditions.

- Alec Ryrie (University of Durham), “‘Is there no God? Let’s put it to the vote’”: The Atheism Crisis in 1640s England’

This paper will consider the emotional power of ‘atheism’ during the era of England’s Civil Wars, considered both as a highly emotive accusation used by all sides during these bitter conflicts, and also as a burgeoning experience of religious doubt during those turbulent times, both for those who did not welcome it and for those who called themselves ‘seekers’ and saw their unbelief as a hard road to religious purity. As well as surveying how the war acted as an accelerant of unbelief in various forms, the paper will also consider the emotional strategies used, with some success, by those confronting unbelief in others and in themselves.