Unbelief Across Borders

In recent years, scholars have highlighted the need to understand religious 'unbelief', nonreligion and secularity in settings beyond the boundaries of the region that generated these concepts and discourses, namely, the West. Yet there is also a wider need to understand how 'unbeliefs' and experiences of 'unbelieving' are regionally contingent, within the West as well as beyond. Atheism, and other forms of so-called unbelief in the West itself vary intra-nationally by region, as well as by country. As noted in the call for papers for this conference, the negotiation between different religious lifeworlds, worldviews, constructs and dogmas takes place across perceived borders, whether real or imagined. Thus, the content, style and social experience of 'unbelieving' is likely to vary according to context. It might vary, for example, according to the prevalence and prominence of inherited systems of supernatural belief in the local context, which might impact the integrity of the 'sacred canopy'; or according to the nature of the local religious tradition(s) (whether Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox Christian; Sunni or Shi'a Muslim, or combination of traditions, etc.). The social experience of being an atheist or agnostic in rural Poland (with a relatively homogeneous and politicised Catholic culture) is likely to be different to that in Poland's urban centres, as well as from an unbeliever in, say, the Netherlands (with its mixed, Catholic-Protestant heritage, advanced secularisation, history of pillarization etc.). This double panel explores the regional contingencies of being and articulating 'unbelief' of various kinds. It also investigates the potential of comparative approaches to generate new knowledge and (much needed) new theory in the study of unbelief, nonreligion and secularity, and provides an opportunity to explore the limits and margins, centres and peripheries of 'unbelief' in comparative local and international perspective.

Panel 1
Chair: Christopher R. Cotter

Understanding the intra–regionality of children's unbeliefs
Anna Strhan and Rachael Shillitoe, University of York

This paper presents preliminary findings from an ethnographic project exploring how, when, where, and with whom children learn to be unbelieving, and how they experience and work out their unbeliefs across everyday school and family life. Drawing on comparative fieldwork across three contrasting geographical 'microclimates' of religion and nonreligion in the UK, our project explores the everyday lived realities of children's unbelief, and how these are experienced, performed and negotiated across different geographical settings. Our paper will focus particular attention on the extent to which regional contingencies shape children's unbeliefs, values, and worldviews across the project's three field sites located in urban, suburban and rural areas of the south west, north and north-west of England. Reflecting on the relative clustering of religious and nonreligious groups in these contrasting parts of UK while also attentive to the significance of gender, social class, and ethnicity in these locations, this paper will consider how these intraregional differences distinctively contribute to children's formation as unbelieving.

Unbelief in 'Glocal' Perspective
Lois Lee, University of Kent

This paper presents initial findings from Understanding Unbelief, Across Disciplines, Across Cultures (ADAC), the central research project of the Understanding Unbelief research programme. ADAC offers a mixed method and cross-cultural perspective on the outlooks and worldviews of atheists and other religious 'unbelievers', providing a comparative analysis of Brazil, Denmark, Japan, the UK and the US. One aspect of this methodology is in-depth interviews with an array of 'unbelievers' in each of these settings (n 30), and each national sample is split across three distinctive local settings (n10 in each locale). This paper focuses on the UK interviews, examining the ways in which local 'microclimates' impact upon the outlooks and narratives emerging in these discussions. It also discusses this British experience of intra-national regionality in relation to types and patterns of local variation in Brazil, Denmark, Japan and the US, exploring whether and how regional effects need themselves to be understood in national and global context.

Between belief and unbelief: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of five British Hindus
James Murphy, Canterbury Christ Church University

This study examines the relationship between the religious experiences and existential meaning systems of five British Hindus. Semi-structured interviews with the participants were analyzed inductively and iteratively using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to produce a rich and idiographic understanding of their beliefs and experiences. The participants' accounts suggested that they neither fully believed nor disbelieved in many aspects of the religious tradition with which they continued to identify. They described complex entanglements of personal beliefs, practices and unbeliefs that were inclusive but had a distinctly Hindu influence. Their existential beliefs were primarily agnostic and subjectivist. The participants were comfortable with their lack of certainty about transcendental questions and their lives had an anthropocentric focus that emphasized living a good life in this world. By exploring the lived experience of a group that exists on the boundary of belief and unbelief, and that has previously received insufficient attention from psychologists of religion and scholars of secularization, this study demonstrates the complexity of lived (non)religious experience and practice. It supports the utility of Lee's conceptual framework of overlapping 'existential cultures' and provides a reminder of the problematic nature of labels when studying (non)religion and culture.

Panel 2
Chair: Lois Lee

Approaching 'Unbelief' beyond the city in Scotland and Northern Ireland
Christopher R. Cotter, University of Edinburgh

Scotland and Northern Ireland are constituent regions of the UK that are closely linked by centuries of migration across the North Channel; by problematic entanglements

between various forms of Christianity and the state; and by their peripheral position in relation to the locus of UK power. This marginalized position is reflected in the sociological study of religion with many 'assuming that 'British society' is a meaningful and cohesive unity, when, strictly speaking, it has never been that' (McCrone 2017). Each polity is distinct and multifaceted, yet their historical, social, cultural and religious links, and their shared 'Celtic fringe' status, combine to build a strong case for treating them as fruitful sites for the comparative study of 'unbelief'— 'used in a wide sense, implying a generalized lack of belief in a God or gods' (Lee and Bullivant 2016). In this paper, I introduce my current project which conceptualizes 'unbelief' as both discursive and political and includes fieldwork in four sites: a village and provincial town in each region. I will focus upon the methodological hurdles involved in approaching 'unbelief' beyond metropolitan centres and argue that contestations surrounding 'sacred' values (Knott 2013) can be productive sites for the empirical study of 'un/belief'.

Moralised Unbelief in Contemporary Dublin
Hugh Turpin, Queen's University Belfast

This paper will draw on a nationally representative survey of baptised Catholics and a year-long period of fieldwork in two Dublin parishes to describe contemporary Irish ex-Catholicism, focussing in particular on its moral dimension. Free-list data generated as part of the survey demonstrated that for ex-Catholics, the Catholic Church is primarily associated with basic immorality and unpalatable conservativism. Ethnographic fieldwork and interviews suggested that this moral stance is best understood as a reaction to the intertwining forces of religious scandal, the institutional Church's residual influence in certain key areas, and 'cultural Catholicism', a 'passive' and 'complicit' force perceived to perpetuate this influence. For some ex-Catholics, cultural Catholics – those who do not hold to Catholic dogmas in any form but who retain a Catholic affiliation - are thus people who ought to be 'woken' into disaffiliation so that the project of full institutional secularisation can be more swiftly achieved. This ambition, however, is complicated by the existence of unbelieving cultural Catholic micro-cultures predicated on an ethic of harmony which prioritises local bonds while privatising personal unbelief. The presentation will examine the tensions between these two stances and the particular inflection they lend unbelief in a contemporary Irish context.

Reaching for a New Sense of Connection? The Diversity of Unbelief in Northern and Central Europe — An Early Analysis
David Herbert and Josh Bullock, University of Kingston, London

Surveys shows that unbelievers have a distinctive profile compared to the general population on several indicators related to sociality, collective identity and cultural transmission. For example, they tend to rank family as less important, to identify less with people for whom tradition is important, and to be less willing to fight for their country; but more likely to rate friendship as very important. This evidence suggests a distinctive, less (or differently) embedded, sociality, and lower social conformity, compared to believers.

This paper presents early analysis from our Templeton funded Understanding Unbelief project. Reaching for a New Sense of Connection contributes to mapping the diversity of unbelief in Northern and Central Europe by using survey, social media and interview data across six countries (UK, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Norway, and Romania). These countries offer diverse (non-) religious backgrounds including post-Communist societies, (eastern Germany, Poland, Romania), environments with strong pressures to religious conformity, (both in the majority culture and minority subcultures); in strong welfare state environments and in less secure contexts; in mixed Christian heritage environments, and with different majority religious heritages (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox). The sample includes environments which have experienced rapid (Netherlands) and gradual (UK) secularization, in cosmopolitan and parochial environments (big cities and small towns), and in environments that have high and low levels of unbelief.