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Atheist Identities - Spaces and Social Contexts

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Boundaries of Religious Freedom: Regulating Religion in Diverse Societies

Volume 2

Series Editors

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Processes of globalization have resulted in increasingly culturally and religiously diverse societies. In addition, religion is occupying a more prominent place in the public sphere at the turn of the 21st Century, despite predictions of religious decline. The rise in religious diversity, and in the salience of religious identity, is posing both challenges and opportunities pertaining to issues of governance. Indeed, a series of tensions have arisen between state and religious actors regarding a variety of matters including burial rites, religious education and gender equality. Many of these debates have focused on the need for, and limits of, religious freedom especially in situations where certain religious practices risk impinging upon the freedom of others. Moreover, different responses to religious pluralism are often informed by the relationship between religion and state in each society. Due to the changing nature of societies, most have needed to define, or redefine, the boundaries of religious freedom reflected in laws, policies and the design and use of public spaces. These boundaries, however, continue to be contested, debated and reviewed, at local, national and global levels of governance.

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Editors

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Steven Tomlins and Lori G. Beaman

Religious nones come in many varieties: they may self-identify as agnostic, atheist, agnostic-atheist, apathetic, anti-theist, bright, freethinker, humanist, irreligious, materialist, naturalist, rationalist, sceptic, secularist, a mix of these descriptors, or something else altogether. Some may find the use of a term for not-believing in God or a god to be counter-productive, others want to re-claim atheism from its historically negative connotations related to accusation and make it positive, and others embrace new terms, such as 'bright', as a means of describing their lack of religious belief. Others adopt negative labels that have been thrust on them by their religious neighbors, such as Apostates of Islam, Heretics Society, Internet Infidels, Norwegian Heathen Society, and Godless Americans Political Action Committee. Some disbelievers wish to maintain at least some of the cultural aspects of their religions without embracing a belief in a monotheistic god. To this extent there are groups such as Atheists for Jesus, the Institute for the Secularization of Islamic

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Society, and the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and some atheists have turned to Buddhist practices. Most recently, in his posthumously published book, *Religion Without God*, Ronald Dworkin argues that there should be a new category which he calls the "religious atheist" (Dworkin 2013).[1]

In addition to self-labeling, there are multiple ways atheism can be described to reflect various ways of not believing in a god, such as explicit atheism, implicit atheism, negative atheism, positive atheism, practical atheism, pragmatic atheism, strong atheism, weak atheism, and so on.

While 'religious nones'—a category used by statisticians to denote those who simply profess no religion and which includes atheism—have until recently been overlooked as marginal, they are increasingly being recognized as an important social category in many global contexts. According to the United States of America Central Intelligence Agency (2012), 9.66 % of the world's population are non-religious and 2.91 % are atheists. A worldwide poll, however, conducted by Switzerland-based Worldwide Independent Network of Market Researchers (WIN)-Gallup International and released in 2012, found that, "59% of the world said that they think of themselves as religious person [sic], 23% think of themselves as not religious whereas 13% think of themselves as convinced atheists" (WIN-Gallup 2012, 2). This poll, published in "The Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism," found the least religious nation to be China, with 30 % of responders identifying as "Not a religious person" and 47 % identifying as "A convinced atheist," followed by: Japan (31 %/31 %, respectively), the Czech Republic (48 %/30 %); France (34 %/29 %); South Korea (31 %/15 %); Germany (33 %/15 %); Netherlands (42 %/14 %); Austria (43 %/10 %); Iceland (31 %/10 %); Australia (48 %/10 %); and Ireland (44 %/10 %). Additionally, a poll conducted by Pew Research and published in late 2012 found that "One-in-six people around the globe (1.1 billion, or 16 %) have no religious affiliation," making "the unaffiliated the third-largest religious group worldwide, behind Christians and Muslims, and about equal in size to the world's Catholic population" (Pew Research 2012b). Narrowing this category (or categories) down from the global to the North Atlantic, which is the focus of this volume, in the United States one in five Americans is "religiously unaffiliated" (Pew Research 2012a); in Canada "religious nones" represent one in four individuals (Statistics Canada 2013); and in the United Kingdom two-thirds of those surveyed in a 2011 poll answered "no" to the question "Are you religious" (BBC News 2011). This increasingly prevalent body of non-believers has implications for a variety of interests, from the religious (what does this mean for the future of thinning religious

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[1]In the first chapter of this book Dworkin writes: "So the phrase 'religious atheism', however surprising, is not an oxymoron; religion is not restricted to theism just as a matter of what words mean. But the phrase might still be thought confusing. Would it not be better, for the sake of clarity, to reserve 'religion' for theism and then to say that Einstein, Shelley, and the others are 'sensitive' or 'spiritual' atheists? But on a second look, expanding the territory of religion improves clarity by making plain the importance of what is shared across that territory" (Dworkin 2013, 5).

denominations?), to the political (if religiously affiliated individuals and groups are presently courted by some political parties; will some political parties eventually court those who are affiliated with expressly non-religious groups?). A constant increase in the area of non-belief also raises the interest of academics from a variety of disciplines, and it is to the work being done in this area, with a geographically pragmatic focus on atheism and the North Atlantic context, that the concept for this volume has its origins.

With so much variety amongst those who do not identify as religious, we decided to hold a workshop on how the identity of "religious nones" and atheists are constructed. In November 2012, we held a three day workshop, "Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts," at the University of Ottawa. Our goal was to bring together a group of international researchers to discuss recent research on atheism. Our concern was to showcase empirical research about this under-researched group of religious nones from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, including sociology, religious studies, anthropology and law. Although we came with pre-written papers, we sought to learn from each other and to integrate what we learned into the pages of an edited collection. The result of this collaboration is this volume.

Atheist Identities Spaces and Social Contexts is a collected volume of essays that explores how individuals construct personal atheist, or non-religious, identities (what Peter Beyer calls "lived atheism", this volume), how they construct community, and how identity factors into atheist interaction at the societal or institutional levels (what Beyer refers to as "systemic atheism", this volume). The intent of this book is to provide academics and the interested public with a collection of essays that explore the variety of atheist expression and experience while also taking into account how local, national, and international settings may contribute to the shaping of atheist identities. For practical purposes, the workshop, and subsequently this volume, is primarily engaged with the North Atlantic context. Invitees came from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to share their national or regionally-based research. This provided us with a sufficiently narrow focus to engage in constructive comparative discourse, while also providing enough contextual variation to raise further questions about the role national peculiarities have in shaping atheist identities and engagements. It is our hope that this volume will prove useful for understanding how atheism is being studied, how atheisms are appropriated in different contexts, and that it will provide material for future comparisons between atheisms in other settings.

For purposes of clarity, a brief explanation of our use of key terms is in order. The focus of this volume is atheism, but since atheism is a sub-set of non-religion or religious nones in general, these larger categories are also addressed where appropriate, particularly with regard to self-identification and group affiliation. By non-religion we are referring to Lois Lee's definition: "Non-religion is anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion" (Lee 2012, 131, emphasis in original). Non-religion is thus an umbrella term which includes atheism, agnosticism, and a variety of the related terms previously mentioned. It is important to keep in mind that while atheists (with some exceptions such as Atheist Buddhists) are often non-religious, it is not necessarily the case that those who are

non-religious are also atheist. Likewise, related identifiers such as "secularist" and "humanist" are also addressed in some of the chapters, and it is certainly the case that many secularists and humanists are also theists, but the principle focus of the volume remains atheism and the varieties of atheist identification. According to Michael Martin, there are two main types of atheism: negative and positive. Negative atheism is the position of holding *no belief* "in the existence of a God or gods," whereas positive atheism is the position of *believing* "that there is no God or gods" (Martin 2007, 1). In terms of this volume, since the negative atheism position can be difficult to distinguish from agnosticism, the atheisms addressed in this book, unless otherwise noted, refer to positive atheism, that is, we define atheism as *the belief* that there is no God, no gods, no Goddess, and no goddesses. Simply put, atheism is the position that belief in theism in any form is a false belief. It is also worth keeping in mind that this volume primarily focuses on those who self-identify as atheists and are actively involved in specifically atheist pursuits; it does not engage specifically with atheists who do not openly identify as such nor those who are not actively engaged with matters pertaining to atheism. While the percentages for the latter focus are presumably larger than the former, it is through studying those who openly identify as atheist that more accurate profiles can be achieved than those based on the speculation required to analyse a 'silent majority'.

Our workshop was organized around the following questions:

- What is the social context of atheism in Canada and other Western countries, and how do these contexts compare?
- How do atheist identities shift based on different contexts?
- Does multiculturalism include atheist identities?
- Who represents atheism for political and legislative purposes?
- Does the framework of 'reasonable accommodation' work for atheists?

Although we addressed these questions, we encouraged an organic flow to the workshop that yielded some interesting results, including the emergence of gender equality and feminism as pressing issues of contention for atheist organizations; the challenge of moving away from negative identities (who we are not), to a more positive (who we are), conceptualization and self-identification by atheists; and the difficulties for social scientists posed by trying to measure and explore the social phenomenon of atheism, both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Our guiding questions as well as these emerging issues were shared by the country specific case studies (Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States) represented in our discussions. In each case, one confronts the basic question of how to make a place for religious identity alongside non-religious identity within a national framework, in a manner that is fair and that helps to minimize conflict. For instance, the model of multiculturalism that Canada claims as its invention was largely designed to address the situations of national minorities and immigrant communities. An important question that arises with regard to atheism is whether, how, and to what extent, 'religious nones' can or should be included within commitments to the 'multiculturalism' model. How does atheism fit into other models, such as the 'melting pot' of the United States and how does this work

to decrease or increase tensions? As Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith point out, "'Freethinkers,' including both atheists and secular humanists, have always been a minority in American society—and not a very popular one. There are still laws in several states preventing non-theists from holding office" (Cimino and Smith 2007, 407). In fact, a national survey has shown that atheists are less likely to be accepted in the United States than any other minority (Edgell et al. 2006, 211). Is a similar lack of acceptance evidenced in Canada and the United Kingdom, and if not, what are some of the varying cultural underpinnings influencing these realities? These questions formed the initial scope of the workshop, and they are addressed throughout this collection of 11 essays which explore different contexts of atheist identity. The differences of atheisms are just as important to understand as the similarities that expressions of atheism share across borders. By focusing on both the differences and similarities, this book provides a sense of how research findings do not necessarily apply to a cross-cultural spectrum of atheism, but rather, tell a specific narrative from a particular context. Nonetheless, the comparison raises fruitful points of discussion and allowed each of us to gain more insight into our own particular cases. A defining difference remains between the more hostile atmosphere toward atheists in the United States and the much more indifferent/accepting climate in Canada and the United Kingdom. This difference is key to framing atheist experiences.

Atheists of all types have been publicly grappling with issues of identity on social and online news media, with some arguing that atheism should simply be considered a disbelief in God, and others arguing that atheism, as a social movement, denotes a larger set of beliefs and that some 'bad' atheists are giving the 'good' atheists a bad name. This is particularly relevant with regard to recent discussions on so-called "New Atheism." New Atheism is a media-dubbed neologism given to a body of literature, its authors and its followers which gained traction in 2006 with the publication of best-selling books that argued against religion and in favour of skepticism, rationality, and science. The most commonly cited New Atheists are Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Although all three, but especially Harris and Dawkins, have been harshly criticized even from by other atheists,[2] they nonetheless retain influence and continue to shape present-day atheism as figures of both emulation and derision. Their writings have given rise to questions about who speaks for atheists (if anyone), and which atheists belong to, or should be excluded from, atheist communities. Sam Harris, for example, has been accused by atheists, non-believers, and believers alike of being Islamophobic and racist.[3] His defenders say he is neither, that Islamophobia does not exist, that attacking an ideology has nothing to do with race, and that other atheists are being soft on dangerous and threatening religions, Islam in particular. After some controversial comments downplaying a popular female atheist blogger's accusations of being objectified by an atheist-conference-attending-male in an elevator, Dawkins

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[2]See Blackford (2012), Brown (2013), Hobson (2013), and Mastracci (2013).

[3]See Harris (2013) and Greenwald (2013).

has been accused by other atheists of being sexist, misogynistic, and/or insensitive.[4] This incident, while ostensibly about Dawkins' character, sheds light on a schism between atheists in terms of what role feminism should play in atheist circles, with some arguing for it to play a prominent role and others arguing that it can be unnecessarily divisive. Hitchens' well-known support of the Iraq War, for which he has received criticism, also raises an important question about organized atheism: if there is an atheist movement afoot, is it politically right-wing, left-wing, centrist, willfully ignorant, or all of the above under the same umbrella? Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens have also been criticized by other atheists and non-believers as being polemic but not academic, displaying a simplistic view of religion as bad without acknowledging any (or much) of the good (Bailey 2013). This latter accusation has recently made headlines when Dawkins made a proud admission that, although he is a loud critic of Islam, he has never fully read the Quran (Taylor 2013). Unpacking each of the accusations leveled at these three prominent atheists reveal elements of divisions between atheists and the complexity of this group. Disagreement and division between those who often self-describe as skeptics and freethinkers is not surprising, but it does serve to highlight the nuance of non-belief: When someone says she is an atheist, what does this label reveal about identity other than a disbelief in gods or goddesses? It would be easy to say nothing, although the fact that atheists are increasingly socializing in specifically atheist, humanist, and/or non-religious organizations does hint at sharing more than that one identity trait. The essays in this volume explore some of the possibilities.

As Steve LeDrew argues in his chapter, since the late Enlightenment there have been at least two ways in which atheist group identity has been expressed: scientific atheism, which sees religion primarily in terms of its explanative function, and humanistic atheism, which views religion as a social phenomenon. Atheism is, after all, a response to religion, and some of the larger issues related to contemporary atheism and identity are informed by one's views and opinions on religion, a fact most immediately illustrated for us by the fact that our workshop was organized in the context of the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa. The contemporary approach favoured by the New Atheists is to see religion as outdated and dangerous, and they respond accordingly by offering atheism and scientific materialism as the cure. Another approach that appears to be gaining traction is that favoured by Alain de Botton, which is to see some positive aspects in religion, and to argue accordingly that atheists can learn from religion, and even emulate some of its beneficial qualities.[5] Decisions on how to approach religion are not made in a vacuum, of course, but are undertaken in the backdrop of perception, and much of how religion is perceived in any given society is directly related to how it is treated by local and national governments.

During the course of our discussions and our reading of the chapters, a number of themes emerged. These are woven throughout the chapters, partly as

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[4] See The Atlantic Wire (2011) and Band (2011).

[5] See de Botton (2012).

a result of the conversations the authors had, but also because they are currently defining the field. One theme that stood out is broadly conceptualized as identity formation. A number of dimensions are articulated by the authors, including: Social Identities (Interactions in the Public Sphere), Group Identities (As Co-operative), and Individual Identities (As Personal). This theme emerged as a result of our initial questions in conjunction with the workshop discussions, and by considering the chapters in light of these three dimensions we are able to provide further context for atheism, the study of atheism, and the study of religious identity.

1.1 Social Identities

One major factor that contributes to both similarities and differences between atheism in Western countries (and any county for that matter) is how religion is regulated by the state. As Richard Moon explains, "[s]tate laws support some religious values and practices and interfere with others. And, from the other side, religious beliefs often inform or shape state laws" (Moon 2008, 1). This is true of every state, regardless of whether or not the separation of church and state is or is not a part of a country's constitution. It is particularly evident when looking at a specific issue, such as the wearing of burkas by some Muslims, or polygamy by some Mormons. Both of these issues involve the state setting boundaries around religious expression. Here we can see differences in how the state regulates religion—in France, for example, burkas are banned in public, whereas in the United States everyone is free to dress as he or she wishes in public. In the case of polygamy in Canada, it could be argued that a cultural vestigial religiosity still informs how the courts address the issue when it arises. In some cases, such as England, there is an official state religion, but how that informs the states regulation of religion, particularly minority religions, is a larger question layered with intricate variables, including immigration policy and assimilation. With regard to atheism, the fact that the regulation of religion shifts according to state law means that religions not only differ by degrees of culture, but also by degrees of public acceptance and engagement. Since religions differ according to time and space, so too does atheism, since atheism is a response to theistic religion. In other words, how religion is understood by atheists will contribute to how their atheism is to be understood, and how individuals, groups, and societies understand religion is related to how religion is regulated by the state. It is important to keep this in mind when examining how atheist identities may differ, and how they may be similar, in different cultural settings, even amongst liberal democratic countries.

Atheist identities are also positioned in relation to the historical and contemporary roles of religion. To this extent a careful exploration of the contentious notion of 'secularization' is useful. William A. Stahl's chapter, "The Church on the Margins: The Religious Context of the New Atheism," addresses the decline in church membership through an analysis of the Canadian situation, and by extension, how three narratives have been used to address the decline in church membership

amongst Western countries. Stahl examines the secularization thesis, a narrative of renewal (religions fluctuate between decline and renewal), and Charles Taylor's work on the changes in the nature of social solidarity in the contemporary world. While Stahl argues that previously hegemonic Canadian churches (largely Catholic in Québec and Protestant in the rest of Canada), have been placed on the margins of society, which he considers to be symptomatic of the end of Christendom, this is not to suggest that atheism or non-religion has become the normative narrative, it does, however, highlight the growth of 'religious nones' and how Western societies have been, and continue to be, in flux. By looking at how atheism is addressed in the courtroom it is clear that atheism is far from the overarching narrative, especially in the United States, but also in Canada and Europe.

In her chapter, "Freedom of and Freedom from Religion: Atheist Involvement in Legal Cases," Lori G. Beaman presents her reflections on the various claims made by atheists in the legal arena, such as the objection to prayers in municipal council meetings, and the placement of religious symbols in public spaces. Her work has often explored the exercise of religious freedom in courts, but as she began paying more attention to cases involving atheists she noticed that atheists were often being negatively caricaturized in both media and the courtroom, and religious symbols pertaining to Christianity were often countered as being cultural as opposed to religious, which in effect paints atheist complainants as being anti-cultural. Beaman's chapter contextualizes atheism in the legal arena, as well as how legal cases involving atheists have been reported.

The reasons for why, where, and when atheists decide to become actively involved with state issues pertaining to religion, from local campaigns to national courts, derive in a large part from how atheists view religion. LeDrew's chapter, "Atheism Versus Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics," addresses the different ways religion is understood in atheist circles by offering a historiography of two predominant branches of atheism: scientific atheism and humanistic atheism. He describes scientific atheism as originating in Enlightenment-era rationalism and the natural sciences, explaining that scientific atheists see religion in terms of its explanative function. Humanistic atheism, on the other hand, derives from the social sciences and humanistic atheists understand religion as a social phenomenon. LeDrew explores how these two ways of understanding the nature of religion has given rise to tensions between and within groups of atheists and humanists, especially with regard to how they believe atheism should be presented as relating to religion when it comes to public engagement and activism on religion-related issues, or the promotion of atheism in broader society.

Amarnath Amarasingam's chapter, "The Cultural, the Nominal, and the Secular: The Social Reality of Religious Identity among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada," provides insight into how ethnic allegiances shape how members of a specific community, in this case the Sri Lankan diaspora in Canada, present their religiosities, or lack thereof, to those in the dominant society that surrounds their ethnic communities. He discusses how nationalism related to places of ethnic origin, as well as the nationalism of adopted countries, both work to shape how groups are perceived and how members of those groups wish to be perceived.

In order to examine how religious identity (and by extension non-religious identity) shifts according to different political, social, and cultural criteria and concerns, Amarasingam has undertaken a case study of Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Canada. His chapter analyzes the impact of variables such as social movements, nationalism, and ethnic allegiance(s) on religious identity. One of Amarasingam's findings was that the higher the commitment to nationalist policies the less important religion became as a self-identifier; in this case some interviewees expressed that they still identify with familial religious affiliations, but they also believed religion was divisive, and would downplay its importance when it was believed to play a divisive role in nationalistic matters. Amarasingam's chapter points to how religious identities shift according to a variety of factors; even those who may self-identify at particular instances in time as belonging to a specific religion may fluctuate in the degrees to which they identify as such depending on larger social factors. His chapter also serves as a reminder that in today's global world the local is not an island unto itself. Political, economic, cultural, social, and national issues originating outside of Canada have the ability to affect how individuals and groups perceive their own religiosities, and how they wish those to be perceived by outsiders. While Amarasingam's chapter demonstrates how atheism is not necessarily culture, race, or ethnic specific, when it comes to the conjunction of the words 'groups' and 'atheism' it is not usually ethnicity or race that is the first thing to come to mind (although there are certainly discussions on demographic variables, see Ryan T. Cragun's chapter, this volume), but rather the creation of communities that are based on some form of rejection of religion.

1.2 Group Identities

Just as organized religion comes in myriad forms, so too does atheism. In addition to those we mentioned in our opening paragraph, a quick scan of the internet revealed the following list of atheist organizations:

- African Americans for Humanism
- American Association for the Advancement of Atheism
- American Atheists
- American Humanist Association
- American Secular Union
- Atheist Alliance International
- Atheists For Humanity
- Atheists For Human Rights
- Atheist Foundation of Australia
- Atheist Ireland
- Australian Skeptics
- Brazilian Association of Atheists and Agnostics
- British Humanist Association
- Center for Inquiry
- Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Supernatural
- Council for Secular Humanism
- Council of Australian Humanist Societies
- Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain
- Death of God Theological Movement

- European Humanist Federation
- Federación Internacional de Ateos
- Filipino Freethinkers
- Finnish Freethinkers Society, The
- Finnish Humanist Union, The
- Finnish Skeptics, The
- Freedom from Religion Foundation
- Freethought Association of Canada
- Gay and Lesbian Humanist Association
- German Freethinkers League
- Humanist Association of Canada
- Humanist Association of Ireland
- Humanist Institute
- Humanist Society of New Zealand
- Humanist Society of Scotland
- Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association
- Indian Humanist Union
- Indian Rationalist Association
- Indonesian Atheists
- Institute for Humanist Studies
- Italian Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics
- International Atheistic Secular Humanist Conspiracy
- International Humanist and Ethical Union
- International League of Humanists
- International League of Non-Religious and Atheists
- National Secular Society
- New Zealand Association of Rationalists and Humanists
- New Zealand Skeptics
- Norwegian Humanist Association
- Rationalist Association
- Rationalist International
- Rationalist Press Association
- Rationalist Society of Australia
- Secular Coalition for America
- Secular Humanist League of Brazil
- Secular Party of Australia
- Secular Student Alliance
- Skeptics Society
- Swedish Humanist Organization
- United Coalition of Reason
- Universal Church Triumphant of the Apathetic Agnostic
- and many others (of less global prominence).

From this extensive but by no means exhaustive list we can see that non-religious organizations, groups, clubs, and communities—atheist, secular, rationalist, humanist, etc.—come in many varieties. Indeed, the only thing we can say with certainty from simply scanning the list is that the two things they have in common is a philosophical opposition to religious beliefs and a desire to organize with those who share at least some commonalities. But are there communalities that transcend individual groups and might be said to be more regional, national, or perhaps even global in scope? Are these groups 'glocal', in other words, local manifestations of a global phenomenon of rising religious nones and more specifically atheists? Who are the members of these groups, and how do they identify with religion, or a lack thereof? Who chooses to be actively engaged in an atheist community, what makes these communities unique, and how are their agendas similar or different from each other? How are agendas decided upon within each group? On this latter question, a recent development causing vigorous debate related to group identity is to what degree atheist groups should be 'feminist' or engaged in feminist issues.

In the United States, for example, there have been accusations and criticism of sexism within atheist communities, and in 2012 a primarily internet-based movement began to fulfil a "need for a new wave of atheism" (Enthusiast 2014),

which was coined by blogger Jen McCreight as "Atheism Plus."[6] According to atheismplus.com, Atheism Plus (also written as Atheism+ and A+) is "a term used to designate spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to promoting social justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside of the atheist community" (Enthusiast 2014). The "inside" the atheist community aspect of their maxim has arguably proven to be the most controversial, with Atheism Plus (and similar efforts, such as those from Skepchick.org) attracting plenty of atheist supporters and atheist detractors, the former of which often argue that women are commonly objectified and not being listened to while the latter point to memes such as "shut up and listen" as evidence that the movement discriminates against white males. Moreover, at the Center for Inquiry's 2013 Women in Secularism series, which showcases prominent woman atheists and focuses on issues relating to "social justice" and "gender equality" while also advancing secularism, the opening address by Ronald A. Lindsay, the president and CEO of Center for Inquiry, sparked heated debate when he addressed said meme and denounced the "misapplication of the concept of privilege" (Lindsay 2013). He claimed that "it's the approach that the dogmatist who wants to silence critics has always taken because it beats having to engage someone in a reasoned argument," and went on to qualify, "I think the concept of privilege is useful; in fact it is too useful to have it ossified and turned into a dogma" (Lindsay 2013). As with Atheism Plus, his comments have both supporters and detractors, in this case within the Center for Inquiry itself, as evident from a growing number of blogs and comments on the subject. These examples of recent issues pertaining to feminism and agenda serve to highlight how each group has an identity different from another,

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[6]On sexism Jen McCreight wrote in 2012, (on the blog that would eventually spark the term "Atheism Plus"):

> I thought this flood of sexism I had never experienced before was just a consequence of me growing up and heading out into the real world, and had nothing to do with these movements in particular. I can't count how many times I publicly stressed that the atheist/skeptical movement, while not perfect, is still a safer place for women and other minorities.
>
> But now I recognize that I was trying to convince *myself* that this is true.
>
> **I *don't* feel safe as a woman in this community – and I feel less safe than I do as a woman in science, or a woman in gaming, or hell, as a woman walking down the fucking sidewalk**. (McCreight 2012, Emphasis and bold in original)

In January 2013, after months of dealing with threats, "trolls and haters," McCreight announced her disinterest in the "skeptical movement" and has since blogged less frequently on topics besides feminism:

> I've grown reluctant to deal with the egos of skeptic celebrities and politics of skeptical organizations who, frankly, aren't the great skeptics they think they are. But I'll still keep writing and speaking about science and skepticism because, well, I find them important and interesting. I've realized I don't need to be an official part of a group or a movement to do those things, nor am I personally responsible for spending my time and energy in improving a movement that is so stubbornly resisting improvement. (McCreight 2013)

and in many cases each group has its own identity-related issues that come from within. Of course, group identity-related issues also derive in part as a response to their environment and surroundings, particularly the way religions are understood by the populous at large.

Regarding the three countries primarily discussed in this volume, although the United States may be characterized as the most negative overall social context in terms of openness toward atheists, the context in the United Kingdom is also challenging. It differs from the United States in that it is not so much atheist negative as religious positive. Canada presents another situation, in that the political model of multiculturalism calls for the celebration of diversity, although the degree to which policy and practice intertwine is a matter of ongoing debate.

The situation in the United States deserves special attention because American atheists not only have to deal with accusations of being anti-cultural, but by extension they are also portrayed as being anti-American. To the extent that they still cannot even run for office in several states, and polls suggest they are the least trusted of any minority group, atheists face difficulty being accepted as belonging to the American melting pot. In their chapter, "Secularist Rituals in the US: Solidarity and Legitimization," Cimino and Smith explore the American situation, particularly with regard to atheist group solidarity and the challenges and strategies related to positively promoting atheism in American society. Although atheists struggle to shape a 'New New Atheism' that is much more positive in nature than that of the 'New Atheists', Cimino and Smith explore both the positive and negative manifestations of New Atheism, which can sometimes play out in ritual. They argue that organized atheism in America often expresses itself as sarcasm and protest about religion in order to foster atheist group identity. Atheist rituals are often both a response and a reaction to the perceived normative relation that religion has to identity in the United States, and it has led to both solidarity and divisions within atheist movements. As an example the authors point to "Darwin Day" as a created day of celebration, and by extension group unification, which serves as an atheist commemoration related to a deep respect for science.

Spencer Culham Bullivant addresses the question of exclusion versus inclusion regarding atheism in America through his chapter, "Believing to Belong: Non-religious Belief as a Path to Inclusion," which is based on fieldwork with American non-religious summer camps. His chapter reveals how some parents who sent their children to Camp Quest Montana stated that there "is a public misconception that people who do not 'hold a' religious belief are thought to have a hole in their lives where religious belief should exist," while getting together with other non-believers allows for a sense of belonging. Bullivant's chapter points to the difficulties of being an atheist in a society where being religious is seen as normative, which by default paints those who profess no religion under a cloud of suspicion. It also sheds light on how non-religious individuals are able to create space for non-religious expression through group solidarity and the creation of secular activities, in this case a summer camp, whereby a non-religious community has adopted an activity which is often utilized by religious organizations and made it their own.

Steven Tomlins' chapter, "A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Atheist Club, Why its Members Joined, and What that Community Means to Them," which is based on interviews with members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa, observes that among his participants the primary reason for joining the student group was a desire to converse with like-minded people. Other reasons included a wish to converse in a safe place where the probability of causing offense was minimalized. Most participants in this study do not report a desire for activism or the propagation of atheism as a motivation for joining, although they certainly engage in activities such as hosting a "Reason Week" on campus, club promotion and recruitment during the university's orientation week, and engaging in public debates. Tomlins' chapter explores a localized Canadian response to religion from the perspective of a university atheist group. Overall, the chapters by Cimino and Smith, Bullivant, and Tomlins can be understood as providing context to how group expressions, or agendas, of atheisms differ depending on local factors. While they speak to common traits that can be extrapolated from interviews with members of atheist organizations in order to paint a clearer picture of what makes atheist groups unique, they do not speak to what an inherent trait of atheism as a self-descriptor may be. Before attempting to define such a trait, it is worth first exploring the elements that are commonly associated with those who identify as religious, if for no other reason than to demarcate the borders of atheism through comparison with its oft-considered opposite.

1.3 Individual Identities

Religious identities are constructed by individuals on a day-to-day basis in the context of their social realities. Lived atheism, as Beyer describes it, represents the ways in which individuals create their non-religious identities. Core to constructing an atheist identity is the idea that atheism is based at least in part on negation. It is based on what one does not believe as opposed to what one professes to believe. It is an oppositional stance against the truth-claim of theism, which means that without theism there would be no category known as atheism. Atheism is symbiotically attached to theism, yet there are instances whereby individuals shift from identifying with religions, even theistic religions, to identifying as atheists. There are also cases whereby individuals identify as both religious (in the organizational and/or in the emotional sense) and atheist in the same space and time. An example of someone who identified as a "religious atheist," as Dworkin puts it, in the emotional un-organizational sense of the word 'religion', is Albert Einstein, who wrote:

> A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, our perceptions of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty, which our minds seem to reach only in their most elementary forms; — it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man. I cannot conceive of a God who rewards and punishes his creatures, or has a will of the type of which we are conscious in ourselves. (Arieti and Wilson 2003, 244)

Individual religiosity is not always clear-cut, even to the individual; it can often be quite complex, and the most accurate way to learn about anyone's identity at the individual level is to explore that complexity with the individual.

An interesting aspect of religiosity and spirituality in general is that the degree to which one may affirm or deny belief and or adherence to a specific set of beliefs often shifts throughout one's lifetime, and since humans are complex, they may hold seemingly contradicting or contrary views at any given singular time. While beliefs may appear to contradict, cognitive dissidence allows for a merger of beliefs to seem perfectly reasonable, and people tend to exhibit certain aspects of their faith or lack of faith depending on the shifting variables that they are presented within any given situation. The complex ways that belief and non-belief intertwine is illustrated by atheists and non-atheists alike through discussions of their religion/non-religion, as is illustrated by Beyer's chapter, "From Atheist to Spiritual but not Religious: A Punctuated Continuum of Identities among the Second Generation of post-1970 Immigrants in Canada," which examines individuals who identify with a religion but whose affiliation to that religion becomes more complicated during the course of interviews. Beyer's research, based on an analysis of 300 interviews with second and 1.5 generation Canadian immigrants,[7] illuminates how religious identity is fluid, shifting, and related to one's family background as positioned in the life course and social context. Simple "yes" or "no" answers to religious identity questions fail to adequately capture the nuance of religious/non-religious identity. Some interviewees explained that they were atheists, others were critical of religion but unsure of how to replace it, and some felt like they were not religious yet were somehow still connected to their religion in a complicated or confused way. Beyer suggests a "punctuated continuum" of religious self-description as a model for understanding the diversity of people's identification with religion.

Lorna Mumford's chapter, "Living Non-religious Identity in London," is based on interviews with atheists she met at atheist or non-religious meet-up groups in London, England. She found that some individuals conceal the atheist elements of their identities outside of the security of particular group settings, explaining that some do so because of concern about how his or her atheism will be interpreted, and pointing to 60 % of her survey respondents answering "yes" when asked if they have ever experienced a negative reaction from someone when they found out they were an atheist or a humanist. This, she argues, is in part due to the official role of institutionalized religion in British society and politics endorsing "a perception of religious affiliation as normative," with those lacking religious affiliation being viewed as different, even inferior, by default. Those who do assert their non-religion publicly often came to that decision through "an emotional response to personal or public events," and having made that decision they seek forms of expressing non-religion within society, but even then the decision to express their non-religious identity or conceal it often depends on social context; some may wish to hide

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[7] A 1.5 generation Canadian immigrant refers to an individual who immigrated to Canada before the age of 12.

their atheism from their family while others do not. As one example, Mumford's chapter serves to highlight how identifying as an atheist or non-religious is mutually an internal matter and an external matter, both of which are based on experience and contemplation, yet the latter may not always be expressed so as to reflect the former.

Individual disbelief in God, like individual religiosity or spirituality, includes a variety of ways people self-identify with, and highlight different aspects of, their atheism or non-religion. It is not simply a case of identifying as a believer in God or a non-believer, and, as previously noted, there are a number of terms individuals use to describe themselves in the positive as opposed to in the negative, i.e. atheism is a definition based on what one is not (a theist) whereas freethinker is a description of what one is. In order to explore the different self-descriptors of non-religious identity, Christopher R. Cotter's chapter, "Without God yet Not Without Nuance: A Qualitative Study of Atheism and Non-religion among Scottish University Students," proposes an analytic typology for the study of atheism, based on questionnaire and interview data from Scottish subjects. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of non-religion than the classic defining characteristic of atheists simply being those who are not theists. He is concerned with demonstrating "variety in the category 'non-religious', whilst demonstrating the inadequacy of attempts to do this in terms of dimensions of 'religiosity'." In other words, his chapter explores the use of self-identifying descriptors that are not limited to a simple negation of religion, the significance of which is to avoid considering religiosity to be the normative base from which non-religiosity is always compared.

Ryan T. Cragun's chapter, "Who Are the 'New Atheists'?" explores the characteristics of New Atheism based on individual surveys. By "New Atheists" Cragun is not referring simply to the commonly cited authors such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins; he has expanded the definition to include those who exhibit New Atheist traits. As traits he chose three questions from a 2007 Pew US Religious Landscape Survey which he felt, when answered in a specific way, best articulated the New Atheist worldview. These questions relate to a belief in an afterlife (with New Atheists saying "no" since they reject the supernatural), their view of evolution (with New Atheists agreeing with evolution since they have a positive view of, and reliance on, science), and the responders' view of the Bible (with New Atheists considering it a product of the human mind since they are critical of religion). He uses a two-step cluster analysis to explore how many of the atheists that the Pew survey identified exhibited these three traits.

1.4 Conclusion: Atheist Identities

Discussions about atheism have become commonplace in mainstream Western news media, but there has been little effort to critically assess and understand atheism from a non-theological or non-polemic foundation. Often, however, journalists act

as critics or supporters of atheism, as is clearly illustrated by the following headline which was published in the "Holy Post" section of one of Canada's most popular newspapers, the *National Post*, on December 5, 2010: "Dear atheists: most of us don't care what you think" (Lewis 2010). Likewise, there is an abundance of contemporary literature on atheism, but the literature is often written by people who have either an explicitly or implicitly anti-theist or anti-atheist perspective. Perhaps due to the New Atheist movement and its initial coverage, combined with freedom of expression, ease of communication and the anonymity and openness of Western internet culture, there is a resurgence of expressions of atheist identities, with many atheists choosing to increasingly vocalize their shared beliefs. This has led to an impressive amount of information about atheism as well as anti-atheist information. Both are helpful for understanding the contours of atheism's social realities as both critics and proponents of atheism and religion are essentially engaged in public dialogue, not only over worldviews and the roles of abstract concepts such as science, religion, and the secular, but also about how to navigate shared public spaces. More often than not these pieces of information and discussions are polemical rather than academic, so the sociological insights we can glean from them are derived from analysing their discourse rather than taking their arguments as scholarly in the first place.

Academic literature on atheism in general is, at present, more historical than sociological; in fact, sociological literature directly addressing atheism is scarce, although this is starting to change. In 2010 Amarasingam pointed out in the introduction to his edited volume, *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, that the academic community "has largely dismissed" the writings of the New Atheists as "unsophisticated, crude, and lacking nuance" (Amarasingam 2010, 2). In the introduction to *Atheism and Secularity*, Phil Zuckerman's comprehensive collection of essays pertaining to contemporary and historical atheism, also published in 2010, Zuckerman notes that the essays in his "two-volume set have been assembled and published in a concerted effort to not only begin filling a major lacuna within the social sciences, but more hopefully, to inspire further social-scientific research on irreligiosity in all its numerous dimensions and varied manifestations" (Zuckerman 2010, xi). Both of their volumes are excellent and highly informative attempts to address this noticeable absence, and they are increasingly being joined by numerous other scholarly contributions to the study of atheism and the broader category of nones. *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts* is our addition to the growing body of social science research on contemporary atheism. Unlike previous volumes, by making "identity" the main focal point from which novel empirically-based studies of various facets of atheism in the Western world come to the forefront, we have heeded Zuckerman's call for further research "on irreligiosity in all its numerous dimensions and varied manifestations" in our own way: by focussing on *one* dimension, albeit one which manifests in *various* forms.

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Chapter 2
The Church on the Margins: The Religious Context of the New Atheism

William A. Stahl

> *We can't just identify "religion" with twelfth century Catholicism, and then count every move away from that as decline*
>
> Charles Taylor
> *A Secular Age*

> *The old ideals and the divinities which incarnate them are dying because they no longer correspond sufficiently to the new aspirations of our day; and the new ideals which are necessary to orient our life are not yet born.*
>
> Émile Durkheim
> *"La conception sociale de la religion"*

Atheism is defined by what it is not. Since the one common feature of all forms of atheism is that it rejects religion, the form religion takes in any particular instance will shape the atheism which rejects it. As the old saying goes, there is a difference between Protestant and Catholic atheists. Therefore in order to understand any particular expression of atheism, we need to understand its religious context.

Although charges of "atheism" have been leveled against those who did not subscribe to the official cult since at least Roman times (e.g. early Christians who did not worship the emperor were accused of atheism), as an intellectual movement atheism dates to the eighteenth century. Since then it has taken a wide variety of forms (cf. Sparrow 2012; Amarasingam 2010; Haught 2008; Bellah 1970). This chapter will restrict discussion to the religious context of the so-called "New Atheism" of the twenty-first Century (e.g. Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007).

To speak of "context" is necessarily to paint on a large canvas with a broad brush. The New Atheism is a phenomenon of the industrialized world, particularly of the English-speaking countries. Among industrialized countries, northern and western Europe are characterized by state churches with very low levels of attendance. The

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United States of America and Canada have a pluralistic, denominational religious structure. The United States has robust evangelical and fundamentalist churches, while these groups are a tiny minority in Canada. These differences have led to long debates between secularization and rational choice/religious market theorists. In order to avoid largely unfruitful arguments about European and/or American religious "exceptionalism," empirical data will be drawn primarily (although not exclusively) from Canada. As Peter Beyer argues in a similar situation, "The Canadian case is well suited to this purpose because in many ways it seems to present a hybrid form between Europe and the United States, or at least a third form" (2006, 72).

My argument is that while religion has not disappeared, as classical secularization theory predicted it would, the place of religion in society has changed dramatically over the past half-century. Christendom is over. Structural and cultural changes have moved the church from the centre to the margin of society. These changes, which Charles Taylor (2007) describes as a change in the modern social imaginary from "The Age of Mobilization" to "The Age of Authenticity," describe the context for both religion and the New Atheism in the twenty-first century. Much of both current religion and atheism can be seen as a backlash to these changes.

This chapter will establish my argument over several steps. First, I will very briefly summarize the religious situation in Canada. Second, I will look at two narratives commonly encountered in today's debates which try to explain that situation. While neither has much explanatory power, much of the current debate remains fixated upon these old stories. Third, I will present another narrative that attempts to offer an explanation. Charles Taylor rejects secularization theory, but recognizes that the place of religion in the world is profoundly different today. Structural and cultural changes over the past half-century have moved the church from the centre of society to the margins. I will conclude by evaluating Taylor's theories for what they might contribute to our understanding of religion and atheism today.

2.1 Religion in Canada Today

In the nineteenth century, religion was one of the most powerful and divisive forces in Canadian society. In the 1850s, Protestants and Catholics rioted in the streets of Toronto, Montréal and other cities. Religion faded as the primary badge of identity in the twentieth century but those early conflicts left the country with sharp regional differences and a strong sense of institutional commitment. Unlike the United States, which has always been a land of opportunity for religious entrepreneurs, Canadians overwhelmingly stuck to the institutional churches. From Confederation in 1867 until about 1960, 75 % of Canadians could be found in one of three churches: Roman Catholic, Anglican, or United (or before 1925, those churches which would form the United Church). This hegemonic position allowed these churches to define (each in their regions) the centre of Canadian culture. John Webster Grant (1972) called this the *presupposition of Christendom*.

> What [the churches] most notably had in common, beyond the Christian faith itself, was a conviction that in the main the institutions and values of Western society rested on a

> Christian foundation. They believed in the existence of an entity that over the centuries had come to be known as "Christendom" and assumed that Canada was destined to become part of it. ... The status of Canada as a Christian nation was never in question, and in practice the churches were regarded more as public than as private institutions. (1972, 213)

It was a conviction shared by both traditionalists and reformers, Protestant Orangemen and Ultramontane Catholics. Grant concludes "Churchmen of all parties assumed that it was their responsibility to impart a Christian content to Canadian nationhood . . ." (1972, 215).

Christendom can be defined as the 1,600-year-long alliance between the church and the state, beginning in the fourth century CE, which gave the church cultural hegemony. It was most clearly institutionalized in northern and western Europe and the areas colonized by these countries.[1] For a millennium-and-a-half Christendom showed remarkable resilience and adaptability. Its institutional expressions varied over time; from the state church of the Roman Empire, to medieval Catholicism, to the territorial churches of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, to the state churches of Europe and the multiple denominations of the United States and Canada. In some countries it also included non-church forms such as civil religion (cf. Bellah 1975; Cristi 2001). A central assumption of Christendom was the equation of the church with civilizational order. It was widely believed that religion was necessary to establish a "moral core" for society, to give the polity a sense of identity, and to legitimate the state. Then, in a relatively short space of time, it withered away. To speak of Christendom became increasingly problematic in Europe after the First World War. In Canada it lasted for another 40 years.

By about 1960, the United and Anglican churches and the Roman Catholic Church in Québec entered a period of steep decline (see Figs. 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3). The central question of debate over religion in Canada has been why. But the decline of Roman Catholics in Québec and the mainstream Protestants has not been matched by other religious groups. Roman Catholics outside of Québec—their numbers replenished by immigration—have held their own, while Evangelical Protestants and some new religious movements have grown (Bibby 2009, 2011, 2012; Clark and Schellenberg 2006; Stahl 2007). In the past decade Evangelicals have increased their numbers from 8 to 11 % of the Canadian population (Bibby 2012). Although this is still a small proportion of the population, it is the first significant increase for these groups since Confederation. Immigration has added to the multicultural mix of the country by adding significant numbers of Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus. On the other hand, the number of those claiming "no religion" has grown significantly. So any account of religion in Canada has to account for *both* the decline of previously central groups *and* the continuation or growth of other groups. Two commonly encountered narratives have tried to do this but with, I will argue, little success.

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[1]Whether the concept can be applied at all anywhere else is debatable, but beyond the scope of this chapter.

The United Church Situation
National Membership (In 1000s)
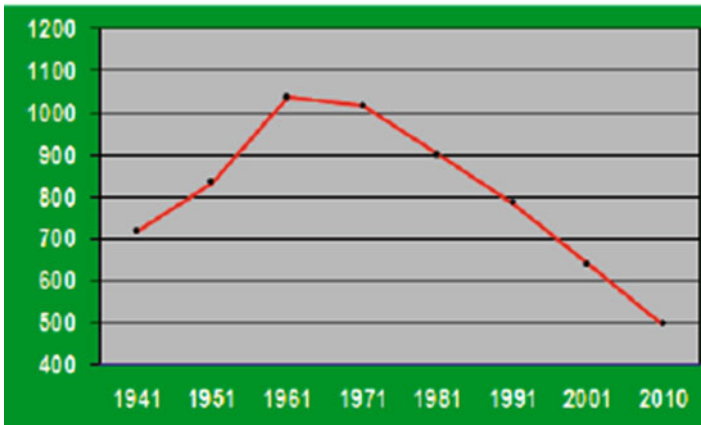
Fig. 2.1 United Church of Canada membership (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

The Anglican Church Situation
National Membership (In 1000s)
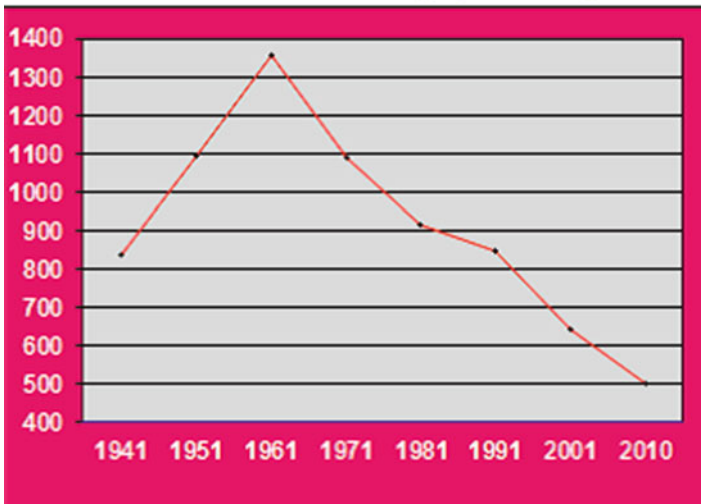
Fig. 2.2 Anglican Church of Canada membership (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

The Quebec RC Situation
Monthly-Plus Adult Attendance, 1965-2010
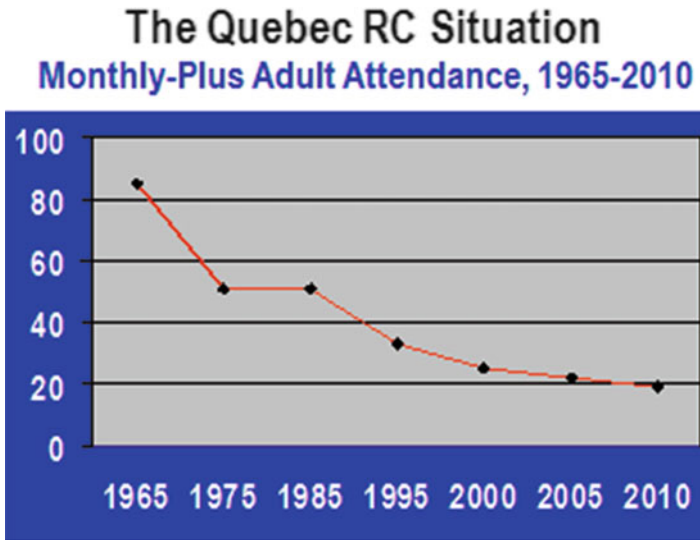
Fig. 2.3 Roman Catholic attendance in Quebec (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)

2.2 Two Stories About Decline

As the churches lost their central position in society, two pre-existing narratives have been frequently retold to make sense of this change. Both often operate as unexamined and taken-for-granted assumptions of "the way the world is."

2.2.1 A Narrative of Secularization

One narrative is a story of Progress and increasing rationality in which science replaces religion. Boiled down and simplified, it goes something like this:

> *Before the scientific revolution the world was ruled by ignorance and superstition. Galileo was savagely attacked by an obscuritantist church. After Newton, the Enlightenment— or Age of Reason—began to replace the Dark Ages. Science and technology began to replace religion. As secularization has proceeded, religion has declined and will eventually disappear entirely.*

Going back at least to Condorcet and Comte in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this story has been retold in a multitude of variations ever since. It is the root of secularization theory. Now, secularization theory is itself complex with many variations, but at its core it makes the claim that the decline of religion is universal, inevitable, and irreversible. That is, the decline of religion

is a universal phenomenon which will, eventually, affect all societies. Since religion is seen as incompatible with science and reason, the more the later progresses, the more religion must inevitably give way. And since history is seen as linear, Progress makes the decline of religion irreversible.

This story is almost unquestioned in large portions of today's universities. It is championed by the New Atheists, who see themselves as the vanguard of Reason (Borer 2010; Eagleton 2009). And, as history, it is wrong in nearly every particular.

Today's historians of science question the uniqueness (or even the existence) of the "scientific revolution" (e.g. Shapin 1996). The "war between science and religion" was declared in the late nineteenth century (and then as an anti-Catholic polemic) and read back into the story of Galileo (Stahl et al. 2002). If we look at culture beyond a tiny intellectual elite, there is little justification to call the eighteenth century the Age of Reason, at least before "reason" was spread by Napoleon's bayonets (Blanning 2007). And while science did indeed grow in authority from the eighteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, it generally did so alongside religion, rather than at the expense of religion. But (as we will see) while the authority of religion has declined over the past 50 years, the authority of science has declined as well.

Neither does Canadian sociological data support an unambiguous story of secularization (cf. Thiessen and Dawson 2008; Bibby 2008). As we saw above, mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics in Québec have declined significantly, but other groups have held their own or grown. Times may be hard for the United Church or Anglicans, but they have never been better for Mormons or Wiccans. One should not confuse the fate of the mainstream Protestants with the future of *religion*. There have indeed been major changes in religion in Canada over the past half-century, but change is not the same thing as decline.

So while it is difficult to argue that Canada is experiencing secularization as portrayed by narratives of the progressive triumph of science and reason, nonetheless there have been major changes. In particular, the shift of the mainstream churches from the centre of Canadian culture to the margins requires explanation. Québec is paradoxical in that while the province has the lowest levels of church attendance in Canada, identification with the Roman Catholic Church remains high and the province has the lowest number of those claiming "no religion" in the country (Bibby 2007b). Bibby (2011, 2012) argues that the Protestant decline has primarily been due to changes in demographics. Birthrates in these churches have fallen sharply, changing immigration patterns mean that few reinforcements arrive from abroad, and few of the children they do have remain with the church. Bibby observes: "Simply put, people were not particularly upset with the Mainline Churches and stomped off in a huff. On the contrary, they died and were not replaced" (2009, 2). But that leaves the question unanswered: why did youth abandon the mainstream churches?

Young people in Canada today are the best educated in history. Computers, the internet, and a plethora of electronic devices bring (for all except the poorest) the world's information to their fingertips. If the narrative of science and reason progressively replacing religion were true, we should expect that today's youth

Fig. 2.4 Teenage identification with mainline Churches (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)
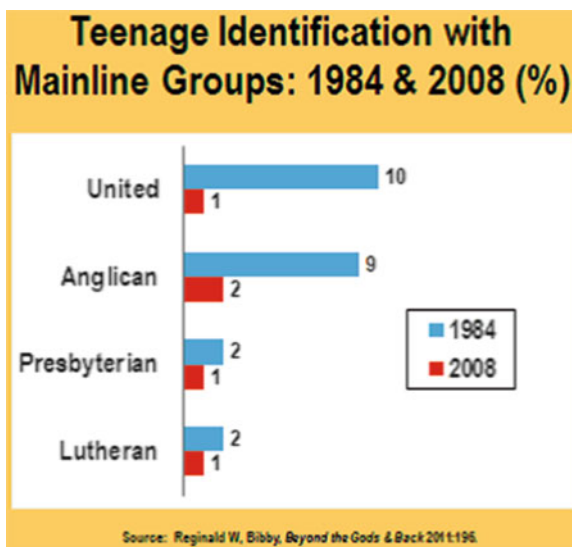
Fig. 2.5 Teenage desire for rites of passage (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)
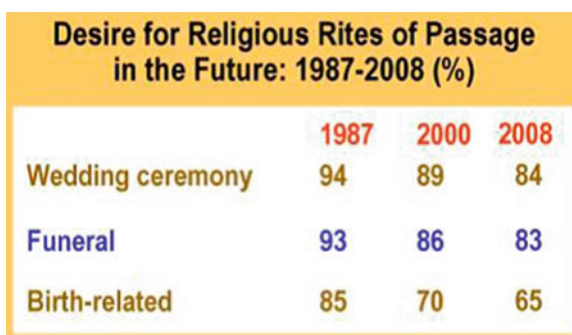
would be overwhelmingly secular. But that is not the case. Young people may have abandoned the mainline Protestants (Fig. 2.4), but that pattern does not hold nearly as strongly for other religious groups. As Figs. 2.5 and 2.6 show, desire for religious rites of passage remains high as does expression of spiritual needs (including by more than half of those who rarely attend worship and over a third of those who never attend). One frequently hears young people say "I am spiritual, but not religious." This means that while they have interest in what sociologists and theologians would call "religion," they have little interest in—and frequently show hostility to—the church.

Perhaps most significantly, Bibby's data (Fig. 2.7) shows increasing polarization among young people. The number of teenagers who never attend a place of worship has grown significantly. But the number who do attend weekly is nearly the same. The two middle categories, for nominal and occasional attenders, have declined. The difficulty is that the polarization is not symmetrical. Two-thirds of teenagers have little or no contact with a place of worship; nearly half have none at all.

Fig. 2.6 Teenage expression of spiritual needs (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)
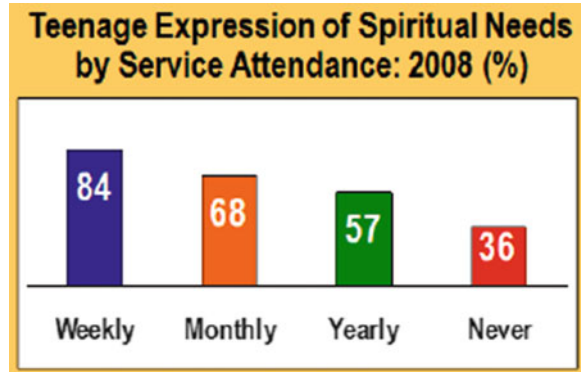
Fig. 2.7 Teenage attendance (Reproduced from Bibby 2012)
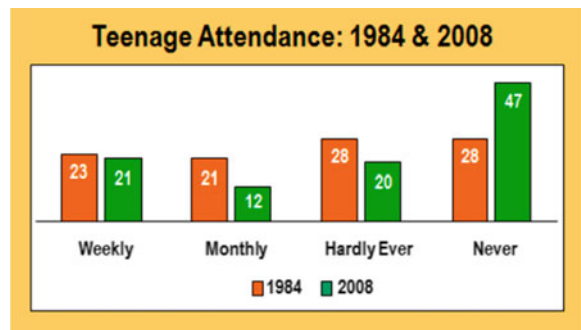
So the narrative of secularization has little explanatory power. There has been massive change, but religion has not disappeared, nor does it show much likelihood that it will. The tropes of Progress, increasing rationalization, and the triumph of science may be the mainstay of the New Atheists, but their story bears little resemblance to the facts on the ground. Secularization theory is more an ideology than a hypothesis. On the other hand, the decline of those churches which used to exercise cultural hegemony and formed the centre of Canadian society is a significant phenomenon which needs explanation.

2.2.2 A Narrative of Renewal

There is another narrative which is frequently told to explain the situation of the church, this time most often by clergy and theologians. Again, simplified and boiled down, it goes:

> Religion has always had its ups and downs. As people fall away, they are recalled to the faith by prophets. So the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation renewed the church. So did the First and Second Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries. Religion always comes back because human beings are inherently religious and society needs religion to maintain a moral order.

This story has inspired a shelf of publications on church growth and renewal and a minor industry in speakers and consultants. The one thing these efforts have in common is a notable lack of success.

There are two problems with this narrative. First, it assumes a cyclical view of history which negates social agency. It turns the fact of religious renewal in the past into its inevitability in the future. A second problem (particularly for those who like market metaphors) is that it assumes "demand" for religion is constant, so all that is necessary is to increase "supply." This story assumes that the religious organizations of today will continue indefinitely with no more change needed than a more vigorous stewardship campaign or membership drive. At worst this narrative breeds complacency; at best it offers local solutions to structural problems. Nor should the failure of secularization theory offer much comfort. *Religion* is in no danger of disappearing; evangelical churches and some new religious movements may be growing, but that is not an indication that the mainstream Protestant churches will avoid bankruptcy.

In the end, the effect of these narratives has been to lock debate into the same old stories. Neither of these narratives has much explanatory power because they are answers to the wrong question. Both are stories which try to explain the decline of *religion* (as permanent or temporary) when the more salient question is why certain previously hegemonic groups have declined (but other groups have not). To answer that question fully, one would have to examine the nature of cultural and structural change over the past 65 years. Rather than try to review such a voluminous literature in this limited space, I will analyze Charles Taylor's recent theories which, I will argue, speak directly to the situation of religion and atheism.

2.3 Charles Taylor's Story

Taylor insists that the modern world is a moral order. Traditional societies and the structures of meaning which configured them may be gone, he argues, but modernity is configured through its own structures of meaning. For Taylor, two aspects of this process are crucial. First, any moral order is embedded in a structure or framework, which he calls a *social imaginary*. Second, the process by which one social imaginary is replaced by another is dynamic and ongoing, both through time and across space.

2.3.1 Modern Social Imaginaries

Émile Durkheim said a society is the ideal it forms of itself (1915, 470). Taylor elaborates this, arguing that both social solidarity and personal identity are grounded in an imaginary which constitutes a moral order. He describes a social imaginary as: "The ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with

others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normatively met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (2004, 23). A social imaginary is not just an ideology or set of beliefs but "an unchallenged framework, something we have trouble often thinking ourselves outside of, even as an imaginative exercise" (2007, 549). It is a "constellation of background meanings" made up of symbols, myths and other narratives, rituals, and practices which form a structure or framework in which beliefs are embedded. Most of the time these frameworks are unacknowledged, tacit, and taken-for-granted—they are unspoken assumptions about "the way things are." While the *substance* of the modern social imaginary is profoundly different from the imaginaries of previous eras, that does not make it any less a moral order.

2.3.2 Dynamics of Modernity

Taylor argues that modernity is neither linear nor static, nor is it a program to be achieved (as in Walt Rostow's [1971] *Stages of Economic Growth*, for instance). Consequently, there is no one version of modernity. While all modern societies share, to a greater or lesser degree, the elements of the modern social imaginary, each country has its own configuration. Similarly, the process by which one social imaginary is replaced by another is dynamic and ongoing, varying from one historical period to another. The modern social imaginary itself, he argues, has gone through a series of formulations, or *redactions*, from the "Great Disembedding" of the early modern period, to the "Age of Mobilization" of the industrial revolution and world wars, to the "Age of Authenticity" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This dynamism shapes and reshapes social imaginaries. Taylor constructs three ideal types of social imaginaries, which he calls *Durkheimian dispensations* (2007, 486–492). Paleo-Durkheimian refers to the pre- and early-modern world, an ideal type very similar to what Durkheim himself called *mechanical solidarity* (1933/1890). It was a moral order based on conformity and in the early modern period—which Taylor calls the "Great Disembedding"—a bloody attempt to impose discipline on the lower classes (2007, 90–145). The social form of modernity from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the period Taylor calls the "Age of Mobilization," (423–472) is characterized as neo-Durkheimian. This corresponds to what Durkheim called *organic solidarity,* a moral order based on the co-operation of individuals in order to live together in huge economic and political institutions. In the late twentieth century, Taylor argues, a new redaction of the social imaginary developed which he calls the "Age of Authenticity" which he typifies as post-Durkheimian. This moral order is characterized by *expressive individualism*, a personal search for authenticity, unity, integrity, holism, and individuality (507).

2.3.3   Religion in the Age of Mobilization

These changes had enormous effects on religion and the churches, although in more complex ways than told by the stories of secularization or renewal. Taylor identifies four: spirituality, discipline, political identity, and civilizational order. These mark the adaptation of Christendom to the nation state and industrial economy throughout the late eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Spirituality during the Age of Mobilization shifted from the communal rituals of village life to an emphasis on individual beliefs and interior spirituality. In an urbanizing and industrializing society, adherence of people to the church could no longer be taken as a matter of course—they had to be mobilized into the faith. Consequently during the two Great Awakenings the Evangelical Movement employed new technologies for spiritual mobilization, such as the circuit rider, revival meetings, and Sunday schools (which were initially as much about adult literacy as educating children). While the established churches often resisted these "modern" innovations (e.g. *The Syllabus of Errors* by Pope Pius IX), they too eventually adapted (as in the Tractarian Movement within the Church of England). A second aspect of this changing spirituality was a consequence of the gendered separation of spheres between home and work brought on by industrialization. Religion fell on the "home" side of the divide, which led to a "feminization of piety" (2007, 451) and the growing identification of "morality" with sex and family. Most churches became characterized by a strongly puritanical moral code.

A second aspect was discipline. As states, armies, and corporations grew in size, they needed new levels of organization. Where the Great Disembedding was often brutal, industrial society needed a new form of social control in order to co-ordinate hundreds or thousands of workers at once. As individuals became disembedded from the social control of the village, the churches increasingly began to preach the importance of individual self-discipline. A society of individuals with a high division of labour, as Durkheim saw, required an ethic of self-discipline grounded in co-operation. This was the kind of solidarity necessary to regiment, factory, political party, and nation state.

Third was political identity. The state became the central institution of society as nation states superseded the gunpowder states of the early modern period. An ever-increasing number of individuals came to see themselves as citizens, as people who had rights and an obligation to consent in their governing. Religion became embedded in national society (even in those countries which had legal separation of church and state) while religious belonging, says Taylor, became "central to political identity" (455). Christendom became expressed through the various nations. This was of course the case with the state churches of Europe, but although organized differently, just as effective with multiple denominations in the United States and Canada.

Closely related is the final aspect, civilizational order. Taylor describes this as "the sense people have of the basic order by which they live, even imperfectly, as good, and (usually) as superior to the ways of life of outsiders" (455). From "Toronto the Good" to "The White Man's Burden," this sense of civilizational order legitimized and bestowed a sense of moral obligation upon the nation. While some would call upon this for reform (as in the Social Gospel Movement) it was just as easily used to justify imperial conquest.

Having slowly adapted to the Age of Mobilization, the churches were once again left behind when the social imaginary shifted again in the late twentieth century. Taylor summarizes his analysis:

> Thus the powerful forms of faith wove four strands together in this age: spirituality, discipline, political identity, and an image of civilizational order. These four strands had been present in élite religion in the two preceding centuries, but now this had become a mass phenomenon. They strengthened each other, made a whole. But these tightly organized churches, often suspicious of outsiders, with their strongly puritanical codes, their inherent links, of whatever sort, to political identities, and their claims to ground civilizational order, were perfectly set up for a precipitate fall in the next age which was beginning to dawn at mid-century. (472)

The contradictions within these four aspects would play a key role in the collapse of Christendom at the end of the twentieth century.

2.3.4 Religion in the Age of Authenticity

Taylor calls the Age of Authenticity *post*-Durkheimian. It is characterized by a change in the basis of social solidarity, the most salient feature of which is the rise of expressive individualism. As Taylor describes it, with expressive individualism "the religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand it" (486). Spirituality becomes an individual quest for authenticity.

The Age of Authenticity did not spring up suddenly, of course, nor has the transformation been complete. Institutionally, it arose from the cascading consequences of post-war affluence, mass post-secondary education, and the development of a consumer culture. The growth of the suburbs and high labour market mobility increasingly broke down community ties. The development of cheap, effective artificial contraceptives opened the door to the sexual revolution. Politically, emphasis shifted from party discipline to individual rights. Pluralism became officially recognized in policies of multiculturalism. Culturally, the roots of expressive individualism can be found in the Romantic Movement, but what formerly had been an affectation of intellectual and aesthetic elites had by the late twentieth century become a mass phenomenon. There was a growing emphasis on autonomy and self-realization, which Robert Bellah and his associates (1985) described at the time as "leaving home" and "finding oneself." As they put it: "Leaving home in a sense

involves a kind of second birth in which we give birth to ourselves. And if that is the case with respect to families, it is even more so with our ultimate defining beliefs" (1985, 65). Identity became a central concern, psychologically, socially, culturally, and politically. This was intensified by the development of the internet and social media which gave individuals an unprecedented ability to express their own ideas and opinions.

Perhaps the best place to see this shift in the nature of social solidarity and what it means for religion would be in the popular music in the 1960s and 1970s which exemplified the shift. Singers like the young Bob Dylan, the Byrds, The Doors and the Rolling Stones articulated the essence of expressive individualism and were (literally) instrumental in spreading it worldwide. Perhaps no group had more influence than the Beatles, and among their music, John Lennon's song *Imagine*. Written in 1971, the song remains one of his most influential. At the closing exercises of the 2012 Olympics it was sung as a hymn—reverently, before a hushed audience, by a choir dressed in white.

Taylor's four characteristics of religion in the Age of Mobilization are changed or notably absent from this music. While the occasional spirituality of this music echoed some of the themes of traditional Christianity (there was a great emphasis on peace and brotherhood), others were unconventional, as in The Doors' *Break on Through*. Institutional religion was ignored or explicitly rejected. There was a great deal of protest in these songs, but no hint of mobilization (to see the difference contrast *Imagine* with, say, the union anthem *Solidarity Forever*). Songs like *Imagine* also caught perfectly the present-orientation of expressive individualism. Any hint of discipline in this music is self-chosen and interiorized rather than institutionalized, let alone externally imposed. Political identity is radically participatory, when it is not rejected altogether. And, as Taylor says, "In the new expressivist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether 'church' or state" (2007, 487). Christendom is over. Indeed, the notion of a civilizational order itself has become problematic.

But it is at this point that Taylor's story raises some difficulties of its own. The post-war trends of growing affluence in an increasingly middle class society did not continue. By the 1980s incomes for all but the very rich had stagnated and the middle class started to decline. The rise of globalization and neo-liberalism, the outsourcing of industrial jobs and the shifting focus of the economy to the financial sector led to economic instability and, as Michael Sandel (2012) calls it, a transformation from a *market economy* to a *market society*. Culturally, this was accompanied—most strongly in the United States—by a cultural backlash and the rise of fundamentalism.

Over a century-and-a-half ago Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the new (for him) phenomenon of individualism was not the same as selfishness, but it could easily *become* selfishness (1945, II, 104). Durkheim shared that apprehension and was gravely concerned that *anomie*—a sense of normlessness—would undermine the cooperation between individuals which he saw as the essence of organic

solidarity. Taylor does not often address anomie, but he does express some anxieties. "My hypothesis," he says, "is that the post-war slide in our social imaginary more and more into a post-Durkheimian age has destabilized and undermined the various Durkheimian dispensations" (2007, 491–492). But Taylor is not at all clear on what are the limits of the "post-Durkheimian dispensation." Commenting on this passage, Robert Bellah asks: "My question here is, how far can this negative post-Durkheimianism go? At what point does a fractured society, one without common values and increasingly without common norms, cease to function?" (2007). The processes of "leaving home" and "finding oneself" inherent in any quest for an authentic identity risks becoming a never-ending series of departures and new beginnings in which solidarity with a broader community is diminished, replaced by ersatz and transitory associations. Without institutional frameworks, a search for authenticity risks becoming a series of masks or brands, discourse risks becoming mere spin. Widespread anomie may very well be the result. The Age of Authenticity may breed its own discontents. Taylor once criticized some theories for confusing individualism with "the anomie of breakdown" (1995, 32). But what if the "anomie of breakdown" is exactly what we are experiencing in the twenty-first century? As a "post-Durkheimian dispensation," the Age of Authenticity may turn out to be an unstable transition. What effect does this have on our understanding of religion?

2.4 Religion and Atheism After Christendom

Taylor's story is an alternative to the old narratives of both secularization and renewal. Religion is not disappearing, let alone being replaced by science and reason. On the other hand, there is little basis for optimism that younger people will be returning to the churches anytime soon. Those whose identity is formed through expressive individualism are (almost by definition) resistant to being mobilized, religiously or politically. Taylor is cautiously optimistic that religion can adapt, although he sees much of contemporary spirituality as trivial and shallow (2007, 508). But how well does Taylor's story answer the question of why the mainstream churches are declining while other religious groups are holding their own or growing? And how does this help us understand the New Atheism?

The social changes of the past half-century have largely by-passed the mainline churches. While individual congregations here and there have adapted well to new circumstances, as a whole the mainstream churches have continued the forms and structures of the Age of Mobilization. Apart from a few guitars and occasional PowerPoint slides, worship today is much as it was in the 1950s. Shrinking budgets have trimmed programs much more quickly than bureaucracy (the Anglican Church in Canada, for example, has lost over half its members since 1960 but maintains the same number of bishops). But without innovative programs it becomes difficult to attract new people. Most churches have clung to their puritanical moral codes, only to have their strictures on sex, family, and sexual orientation alienate young people.

As their numbers declined, the church's influence on the broader society waned. The mainstream churches have not grasped the significance of the end of Christendom. Taylor says:

> There was a tripartite connection which seemed to many absolutely unquestionable in the past: between Christian faith and an ethic of discipline and self control, even of abnegation, on one hand; and between this ethic and civilizational order on the other. But ... this second link has come to seem less and less credible to more and more people. ... Now where the link between disciplines and civilizational order is broken, but between Christian faith and the disciplines remains unchallenged, expressivism and the conjoined sexual revolution has alienated many people from the churches. (2007, 493)

To the extent that the churches have remained institutional relics of the Age of Mobilization, their appeal has gradually withered away as younger people have increasingly sought spiritual expression (to the extent that they do so at all) elsewhere. The churches today are on the margin of society. But there is still life on the margins. Some groups (such as the Taizé community) are experimenting with new forms of spirituality. It is possible that some of the mainstream churches may yet outlive Christendom.

Evangelical and fundamentalist churches are equally on the margin of society, but have reacted to the end of Christendom much more aggressively. In large part fundamentalism can be seen as backlash against the cultural transformation that Taylor describes (2007, 510). In North America, fundamentalism has been strongest among precisely those religious groups which were the "most modern" in the nineteenth century, e.g. evangelicals who pioneered new forms of religion during the Age of Mobilization. This gives fundamentalism in North America much of its paradoxical nature. On the one hand, many groups have continued to pioneer spiritual technologies; gathering in megachurches, deploying the latest communication technologies (they earlier pioneered the use of radio and TV for evangelism) and using contemporary music. On the other hand, the content of their message is strongly opposed to the dominant culture. This has two effects.

First, in part fundamentalism today can be seen as a reaction against the forms of expressive individualism characteristic of the Age of Authenticity. These are seen as both immoral in and of themselves (especially anything involving sexuality or changing gender roles) and as an evasion of the self-sacrifices demanded by Age of Mobilization discipline (hence the rage directed against "entitlements"). This moral conflict produces an anger that is easy to mobilize, as the late Jerry Falwell did with the "Moral Majority" in the United States. So the rise of the New Christian Right and the Tea Party movement in the US are protest movements, not the continuation of Christendom. They protest precisely because their values are no longer central to society.

Second, being a self-conscious minority enables fundamentalists to counter rapid social change with rhetoric of "victimization" and "persecution" (e.g. the "war on Christmas") which in turn helps to build stronger identity boundaries and group solidarity. Their social epistemology, based (as they see it) on the literal and inerrant Word of the Bible, fosters a sense of certainty (Stahl 2010). And a stronger group,

clearer identity, and sense of certainty could have great appeal for a declining middle class trapped in anomie and threatened by socio-economic change (cf. Hedges 2006). Hence the nostalgia for time when booming factories provided secure middle class incomes and the authority of their beliefs and values was unchallenged.

This, then, is the religious context for the rise of the New Atheists. The mainstream churches, which used to define the centre of society, are in decline while religiously-based protest groups grow. But more than just context, this is their condition as well. The New Atheists are both an expression *of* and a backlash *against* the Age of Authenticity.

In some ways, the New Atheism is another expression of the Age of Authenticity. As Christendom declined, a "space" was created for alternative forms of spirituality to become mass phenomena, including atheism. Some atheists in the UK and US have even set up their own "churches," called Sunday Assemblies, where they gather for weekly non-theistic "worship" services (The Sunday Assembly 2014). Atheism became one more choice in a pluralistic culture (Cimino and Smith 2010). When individuals decide their own spirituality, free from—and often hostile to—tradition and institutions, some will choose to have no religion at all. This is consistent with what empirical research tells us about the "religious nones"—they are a protean group without a fixed core or boundaries (Bibby 2007a).

At the same time, the rise of the New Atheists can be understood as a backlash against the changes in values and authority characteristic of the Age of Authenticity. Like the fundamentalists, the New Atheists are also a movement protesting change in authority and values. They differ over *which* values they hold dear. The New Atheists continue to espouse those values of the Enlightenment—reason, skepticism, progress—central to the Age of Mobilization and which they see as under attack.

A central aspect of this has been a relative decline in the authority of science. From Comte to Dawkins, the authority of atheism has rested on the authority of science (Fuller 2010; Eagleton 2009). But expressive individualism undermined the authority of science in exactly the same way (if not yet to the same extent) as it did the churches. Individuals choosing their own beliefs and values could choose to reject science—especially when science became identified with big corporations and the military. In the 1990s some scientists lashed out at what they perceived as threats to the authority of science in the so-called "science wars." Since then the authority of science has plummeted. Today science is trumped by ideology in both the United States and Canada as budgets are cut, labs closed, scientists muzzled, and climate change denied (cf. Turner 2013). The end of Christendom has been paralleled by the retreat of science towards the margins of society as well.

Further, the New Atheists' one-dimensional belief in the authority of reason and science leaves little room for individual authenticity or a quest for meaning. There is virtually nothing of expressive individualism here. Since "religion poisons everything" there is no point in exploration, discussion, or dialogue—religion is mocked and ridiculed. They reject the values of tolerance, pluralism, and mutual respect as (in Hitchens' words), "empty-headed multiculturalism" (2007, 33) and

"the morally lazy practice of relativism" (281). Harris declares that: "the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principle forces driving us towards the abyss" (2004, 15). The values of expressive individualism are seen as dangerous and threatening. In many ways, the New Atheists' social epistemology is the mirror image of fundamentalism (Stahl 2010). They, too, protest because their values are no longer central to society.

Finally, the political dynamic of the New Atheists has changed from that of their forbearers. Nineteenth-century atheism saw its aim as human liberation. The New Atheists are socially and politically conservative. Their writings show little interest in social justice or the poor. They support the Anglo-American wars in the Middle East. They are often accused of sexism and racism (e.g. Watson 2011; Greenwald 2013). Indeed, Islamophobia has become characteristic of the movement. For example, Sam Harris proclaimed "we are at war with Islam" (2004, 109), justified torture, called for ethnic profiling of anyone who "looked Muslim," and argued that, should an Islamist regime ever get nuclear weapons, "the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own" (129). Their politics, like their values, are backlash.

Thus Taylor's account helps us to understand why the mainstream religious institutions which previously exercised hegemony have declined while other groups have not. Christendom is over and the mainstream churches have not adapted to changes in the social imaginary. Although Taylor himself pays little attention to anomie or the rise of either fundamentalism or the New Atheists, extending his theory helps us to understand the success of both these groups as protest movements. Both rage against what they see as threatening challenges to their most central beliefs and values.

Reflecting upon a France divided by an obdurately reactionary Church a century ago, Émile Durkheim wrote: "The old ideals and the divinities which incarnate them are dying because they no longer correspond sufficiently to the new aspirations of our day; and the new ideals which are necessary to orient our life are not yet born" (1973/1914, xlvii). Perhaps today we are in a similar time of transition.

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Chapter 3
Freedom of and Freedom from Religion: Atheist Involvement in Legal Cases

Lori G. Beaman

Although there is a common perception that the management of religious diversity and tensions over religious symbols are the result of disagreements between religious groups, in fact very often it is atheists who are leading the charge against religious symbols and practices in the public sphere.

A 2006 article in the Ottawa Citizen begins this way:

> Call them the prayer police. They're on the hunt for Ontario cities, towns and villages that open their council meetings with the Lord's Prayer and they have 18 names on a hit list that will soon be in the hands of Municipal Affairs and Housing Minister John Gerretsen. (Barrera 2006)

More recently, in Peterborough, Ontario, a member of Secular Ontario stated in her affidavit to stop prayer at municipal council meetings: "My distress from the feelings of discrimination, exclusion and rejection have reduced my ability to enjoy living and participating in a democratic country and in municipal affairs," and "As a non-religious person, the Christian prayer practice of my local council makes me feel like an outsider in my city" (Wedley 2012).

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In August, 2012, news broke that an "active secular humanist" parent had filed a complaint with the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario in relation to the distribution of Gideon Bibles in schools. His action was described as "launching a human rights case that aims to drive the Gideons out of the province's public schools" (Hopper 2012).

Similar battles have taken place in Saskatoon, in schools in Alberta, and in Saguenay, Québec. In these cases, the complaints about the prayers and distribution of religious materials have come from atheists, not religious minorities. In many cases, the challenges are part of a broader strategic plan to secularize public space. The Secular Ontario society has systematically identified communities in which prayer is taking place before council meetings, for example, and taken action to stop that practice.

The percentage of people declaring themselves as religious nones, a category that includes atheists, is increasing worldwide. Recent Statistics Canada data suggests that one in four Canadians is now a 'none' (Statistics Canada 2011). A survey by the Pew Research Centre mapped the increase in the United States as 19.6 % (Pew Research Centre 2012). Similarly, in the UK, the "people who are atheists, non-religious, never participate in a religious service . . . comprise around 9 % of the population" (Spencer and Weldin 2012, 32). Both Pew and the UK results generated a reaction akin to a moral panic that, if nothing else, revealed the hold majoritarian religion retains on Western culture. Headlines such as "Is America Losing Faith?" and "Losing our Faith"[1] appeared, as well as a flurry of media coverage of the 'issue' of religious nones.[2] Without religion, it was argued, we are morally rudderless. The increase in nones was surely a clear symbol of moral decline. As Woodhead (2012) states in her critical commentary in *The Guardian* entitled "Surveying religious belief needs social science not hard science": "The fact that their number has been rising is cited by humanists and other there-is-no-God-botherers as proof of the demise of religion."

The combination of a rather dramatic rise in religious nones in Canada from 16.5 % in the 2001 Census to 23.9 % in the 2011 National Household Survey (MacDonald 2013) and consistent evidence that, at least in court cases and public battles 'people of faith' are not likely to challenge each other, means that the new frontier of challenges to religion in public space will be persistent skirmishes between the religious and the non-religious. Of course, the situation is not quite this simplistic, as contests that are ostensibly not between religions are arguably about Christian 'values' being challenged by other faith-based value positions.[3]

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[1] See Foster (2014) and CBS News (2012).

[2] See Cavaliere (2012), Connelly (2012), Glenn (2013), Grossman (2012, 2013), Posner (2012) and Woodhead (2012).

[3] Here we might think, for example, of the Sharia debates in Ontario or the N.S. case that dealt with a Muslim woman's desire to wear her *niqab* while giving evidence in criminal court. See *R.* v. *N.S.*, 2012 SCC 72. The argument that a proper defence is dependent on seeing one's accuser's face may have, argues Robert Leckey, a decidedly Christian basis. See Leckey (2013).

Nonetheless, it is important to pay attention to the ways in which atheists are engaging in public discourse and the framing of their actions by courts, non-atheists and the media. In particular, given the struggle of atheists themselves to create a "New New Atheism" (Cimino and Smith, this volume) that reacts against the negative, sometimes vitriolic and fundamentalist anti-religion position of the New Atheists, it is interesting to observe the deployment of the New Atheist image against atheists in court decisions.

This chapter considers the atheist battle to secularize public space and the risks of a strategy that fails to insist on the need for a public discussion about religious majorities, secular space, religious symbols and practices in public space. Whether and how religion should have a public presence remains a matter of contest and is likely to remain so for some time. The atheist fight to remove performances of prayer in public begs a broader discussion about how much or whether religion has any place in the public sphere. For many atheists the answer is none. Yet, in their failure to put the broader discussion of religion in the public sphere on the table, atheists may be furthering the retrenchment of majoritarian religion, contributing to its re-constitution as 'culture' rather than religion.

My interest here is not so much the elimination of religious performances and symbols from public space, but rather the identification of the myriad ways in which religion is imbricated in public life and social institutions, whether schools and daycares/education, courtrooms/law, hospitals/health care, or parliaments-legislatures/state. Thus, despite the frequently heard refrain that 'we live in a secular state', as the 'prayer police' comment reveals, religion, and the idea that we are 'all religious' or 'all spiritual' is everywhere, or, everywhere there is establishment (Beaman and Sullivan 2013; Beaman 2013). The seeming no-tenability of the idea that we are not 'all religious' or 'all spiritual' should tell us something about the degree to which the normalcy of being religious or spiritual is a normative touchstone that goes largely unexamined.

Western democracies are so steeped in Christian and other religious cosmologies that it is sometimes difficult to imagine alternatives. It is this re-imagining that is the project of some atheists, who struggle to move against the tide of transcendent cosmologies that claim universal truths. There are a variety of reactions to this project, including a fear-based claim that a world without god is a world without values or morals; that imminence is included in transcendence, and so on. Spinoza (1996), Bergson (1935), Freud (1927), and Connolly (2002), among others, have attempted to create alternative ways of imagining the world without a transcendent order. More dramatically stated, there is a sort of war of worlds that pits god against no god in a number of settings. One of these settings is the courtroom.

Winnifred Sullivan has documented what she calls 'the new normal' in her research on the ways religious freedom is defined in law in the United States. The new normal is the increasingly pervasive universalization of Christianity through the 'naturalization' of religion, which she defines as a "legal and social process by which religion and spirituality are increasingly seen in the US to be a natural and largely benign—if varied—aspect of the human condition, one that is to be accommodated rather than segregated by government" (Sullivan 2009, 2). The idea

that traditionally mainstream religion is not really religion but culture is not limited
to the United States. As I will discuss in the section below, the Italian case of
Lautsi, which was eventually heard by the Grand Chamber of the European Court
of Human Rights, also positions religion (in this case Roman Catholicism) as
producing and representing universal values that seem to be almost incidentally
religious in the discourse of the court. As is the case in *Lautsi* (except for the
difference in majority religions), Sullivan argues that Protestant conservatives in
the United States "want to convert the world to an anthropology of values that are
transcendental and eternal, and founded in biblical truth. To do that they must find
ways to translate their religiously derived values into universal ones, and to use
state authority to impose those values on all" (Sullivan 2009, 11). Thus, as atheists
attempt to displace religious symbols from schools and other public places they are
finding that those symbols suddenly become cultural rather than religious, and that
the religious beliefs and practices against which they are objecting are transformed
into heritage and universal values.

The focus of this chapter is a brief reflection on what happens in some of these
battles over religious practices and symbols in the public sphere, particularly those
that happen in court. My observation is that rather than religion or the secular being
declared the winner, religion disappears and becomes 'the cultural'. I draw on two
case studies, one a case from the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human
Rights, the other from the Court of Appeal of Québec, the province in Canada in
which I think the transformation of the religious to the cultural is most visible. In
the examination of these two cases I trace two strands of information or argument—
first, the ways in which atheists are imagined by the court when they challenge the
presence of religion in the public sphere, and secondly, the ways in which religion
is recoded as culture, universal truths, and values.

3.1 The *Lautsi* Case

In March, 2011, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights
released a judgment which held that the crucifix hanging in an Italian classroom did
not violate the religious freedom of Soile Lautsi and her children. The case, which
had been in the courts and tribunals since 2002, marked an important affirmation of
the cultural turn in the public display of religious symbols, and, most significantly, in
the symbols of historically majoritarian religion. Contrary to the argument that such
symbols mark a state endorsement of a specific kind of religion, the Courts (there
were multiple levels of court pronouncements) held that the crucifix represents core
values that symbolize the state's and indeed the Italian commitment to tolerance,
equality and liberty. Only the 2009 European Court of Human Rights held that the
display of crucifixes violates religious freedom and the parents' right to educate their
children. Importantly, Ms. Lautsi is a member of the Union of Rationalist Atheists
and Agnostics, which formed in 1987 and was the first organized atheist movement
in Italy. As stated on their website, their goals are to protect people who do not

have a religion, to defend the secular state, and to promote a non-religious view of the world (Unione deglli Atei e degli Agnostici Razionalisti/Union of Rationalist Atheists and Agnostics 2012).[4]

In *Lautsi*, several elements come together to create a picture of a morally strong society that has been created by Roman Catholicism. Everyone, it is imagined, benefits from this morally cohesive society, which has a long heritage and which is symbolized by the crucifix, which represents universal values that transcend religion and that are themselves neutral. Atheists' challenges to those symbols are therefore a threat to the nation, to national values, and are not neutral.

In the Italian case, the historical origins of the crucifix in classrooms date back to the Mussolini era. On November 22, 1922, the Ministry of Education sent out a circular (no. 68) with the following wording:

> In the last few years in many of the Kingdom's primary schools the image of Christ and the portrait of the King have been removed. That is a manifest and intolerable breach of the regulations and especially an attack on the dominant religion of the State and the unity of the Nation. We therefore order all municipal administrative authorities in the Kingdom to restore, to those schools which lack them, the two sacred symbols of the faith and the consciousness of nationhood. (*Lautsi and Others* v. *Italy* 2011, at para. 19)

Justice Bonello took up the link to Mussolini in his judgement, but, more importantly, he also makes clear, through his off-hand comment about Mussolini and his description of Ms. Lautsi's 'anti-crucifix vitriol', that she poses the greater threat to the nation. He says:

> It is uninformed nonsense to assert that the presence of the crucifix in Italian schools bears witness to a reactionary fascist measure imposed, in between gulps of castor oil, by *Signor* Mussolini. His circulars merely took formal notice of a historical reality that had predated him by several centuries and, *pace* Ms Lautsi's anti-crucifix vitriol, may still survive him for a long time. This Court ought to be ever cautious in taking liberties with other peoples' liberties, including the liberty of cherishing their own cultural imprinting. Whatever that is, it is unrepeatable. Nations do not fashion their histories on the spur of the moment. (*Lautsi and Others* v. *Italy* 2011, Bonello concurring, at para. 1.5)

The implication is that the crucifix is a cherished symbol of Italian culture that should not be changed on the spur of the moment. Justice Bonello sets Ms. Lautsi against Italian culture and tradition, rendering her a non-citizen, or a non-worthy citizen.

Atheists, then, as represented by Ms. Lautsi, are imagined not only as being anti-religion, anti-god, and anti-Christian; they are anti-nation, intolerant heretics who threaten the stability of the country. The crucifix (a most violent religious symbol) is heralded as passive, harmless and neutral. Its removal is aggressive, harmful, and ideological, according to Justice Bonello:

> Seen in the light of the historical roots of the presence of the crucifix in Italian schools, removing it from where it has quietly and passively been for centuries, would hardly have been a manifestation of neutrality by the State. Its removal would have been a positive

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[4]The goals have been summarized from a rough English translation on the website of the International League of Non-Religious and Atheists by Lorenze Lozzi Gallo (2012).

and aggressive espousal of agnosticism or of secularism—and consequently anything but neutral. Keeping a symbol where it has always been is no act of intolerance by believers or cultural traditionalists. Dislodging it would be an act of intolerance by agnostics and secularists. (*Lautsi and Others* v. *Italy* 2011, Bonello concurring, at para. 2.10)

Does the mere silent and passive presence of a symbol in a classroom in an Italian school amount to "*teaching*"? Does it hinder the exercise of the guaranteed right? Try hard as I might, I fail to see how. The Convention specifically and exclusively bans any teaching in schools unwelcome to parents on religious, ethical and philosophical grounds. The keyword of this norm is obviously "*teaching*" and I doubt how far the mute presence of a symbol of European cultural continuity would amount to teaching in any sense of that fairly unambiguous word. (*Lautsi and Others* v. *Italy* 2011, Bonello concurring, at para. 3.2)

Atheists, then, are the intolerant presence, not majoritarian religion. The court goes further, though, by not only emphasizing the cultural significance and historical value and tradition symbolized by the crucifix, it transforms this specifically Christian symbol into a universal value and then foists it upon those who might specifically wish to exclude themselves from that framework:

While the sign of the cross was certainly a religious symbol, it had other connotations. It also had an ethical meaning which could be understood and appreciated regardless of one's adhesion to the religious or historical tradition, as it evoked principles that could be shared outside Christian faith (non-violence, the equal dignity of all human beings, justice and sharing, the primacy of the individual over the group and the importance of freedom of choice, the separation of politics from religion, and love of one's neighbour extending to forgiveness of one's enemies). Admittedly, the immediate origin of the values which formed the foundations of present-day democratic societies was also to be found in the thought of authors who were non-believers or even opponents of Christianity. However, the thought of those authors had been enriched by Christian philosophy, if only on account of their upbringing and the cultural environment in which they had been formed and in which they lived. In conclusion, the democratic values of today were rooted in a more distant past, the age of the evangelic message. The message of the cross was therefore a humanist message which could be read independently of its religious dimension and was composed of a set of principles and values forming the foundations of our democracies.

As the cross conveyed that message, it was perfectly compatible with secularism and accessible to non-Christians and non-believers, who could accept it in so far as it evoked the distant origin of the principles and values concerned. In conclusion, as the symbol of the cross could be perceived as devoid of religious significance, its display in a public place did not in itself constitute an infringement of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Convention. (*Lautsi* v. *Italy* 2009, at para. 35)

In the court's read of the meaning of the cross, it becomes impossible for anyone to exclude him or herself from its 'universal' message. By establishing the message as universal, as a humanist message that undergirds democracy, the denier (such as Ms. Lautsi and other atheists) sits outside of nation, democracy and morality. This impossibility of exclusion is identified by the administrative court as a core part of Christianity, ensuring that everyone is included. Thus, we are all Christian, or included in the Christian message, which is universal, no matter what we do or believe. The court cites the Administrative tribunal that first heard the case:

The cross, as the symbol of Christianity, can therefore not exclude anyone without denying itself; it even constitutes in a sense the universal sign of the acceptance of and respect for every human being as such, irrespective of any belief, religious or other, which he or she may hold. . . .

> It is hardly necessary to add that the sign of the cross in a classroom, when correctly understood, is not concerned with the freely held convictions of anyone, excludes no one and of course does not impose or prescribe anything, but merely implies, in the heart of the aims set for education and teaching in a publicly run school, a reflection—necessarily guided by the teaching staff—on Italian history and the common values of our society legally retranscribed in the Constitution, among which the secular nature of the State has pride of place. (*Lautsi and Others* v. *Italy* 2011, at para. 15)

Ironically, while the court may see this as true, or generous, or inclusive, it is exactly this all-encompassing pervasiveness that atheists are reacting to. The attempt to create space for the non-religious, and the non-Christian, thus results in a re-inscribing of Christian symbols as universal symbols (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993).

3.2 Québec

Like Italy, Québec has historically been a Roman Catholic majority province. To be clear, the argument I am making is not that Roman Catholicism has any particular tendency to shift from religion to culture—Sullivan's work in the United States, for example, makes clear that this transformation is equally possible in countries where Protestantism has historically dominated (Sullivan 2009). As in Italy, the crucifix continues to be present in a wide range of public settings. Indeed, the Bouchard-Taylor Commission, a public commission established to consider the issue of 'reasonable accommodation' of minorities, specifically mentioned the crucifix in the Salon Bleu, the main chamber of the province's legislature (the National Assembly), and recommended that it be removed. They stated:

> In the name of both the separation of the State and the churches and State neutrality, we believe that the crucifix should be removed from the wall of the National Assembly, which is the very embodiment of the constitutional state. For the same reason, the saying of prayers at municipal council meetings should be abandoned in the many municipalities where this ritual is still practised. (Bouchard and Taylor 2008, 178)

On the day the report was released in May 2008, the Assembly voted unanimously to retain the crucifix in the primary meeting place of the government of the province. The motion to retain it was as follows:

> That the National Assembly reiterate its desire to promote the language, history, culture and values of the Québec nation, foster the integration of each person into our nation in a spirit of openness and reciprocity, and express its attachment to our religious and historic heritage represented particularly by the crucifix in our Blue Room and our coat of arms adorning our institutions.[5] (Québec National Assembly 2008)

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[5]Official translation from original French: Que l'Assemblée nationale réitère sa volonté de promouvoir la langue, l'histoire, la culture et les valeurs de la nation québécoise, favorise l'intégration de chacun à notre nation dans un esprit d'ouverture et de réciprocité et témoigne de son attachement à notre patrimoine religieux et historique représenté notamment par le crucifix de notre salon bleu et nos armoiries ornant nos institutions.

Such a state endorsement of religion is especially ironic given that this motion took place in a province which is the only one in Canada where implementing a charter of secularism has been considered. It is in this context that a contest over the presence of a 'sacred heart' statue and a crucifix as well as the recitation of prayer at the beginning of a council meeting took place. The complainant, Alain Simoneau and the Mouvement laïque québecois (MLQ), argued that these violated his human rights. The Québec Human Rights Tribunal agreed; the Court of Appeal disagreed. On January 16, 2014, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed to hear an appeal to the *Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois* decision; the case will be heard tentatively on October 15, 2014 (Supreme Court of Canada 2014).

As in the *Lautsi* case, the Court of Appeal creates a narrative that intertwines history, culture, nation, and the religious symbolism and activities of the municipality. Though not in so many words, both the City of Saguenay and the Court of Appeal position Mr. Simoneau as a problematic ideologue and the MLQ as a radical organization intent on destroying the procedures and the religious heritage of the municipal meetings. This despite clear evidence presented in the case that Mr. Simoneau had a long history of and commitment to atheism, including submitting a declaration of apostasy to the Montréal diocese, persuading his partner not to baptise their daughter, asking that his daughter be exempted from the religion course at school, and so on. It is worth noting that during the course of his interactions with the municipal council of the city of Saguenay, Mr. Simoneau was threatened by telephone and had wooden crosses left in his truck with messages written on them. Expert evidence described his objection to the religious practices and symbols as unconvincing, and as being motivated by the "defence of a militant ideological project rather than by a problem of individual discrimination" (*Simoneau* v. *Tremblay,* 2011). During the course of his attempts to have the prayers stopped and the religious symbols removed, the MLQ joined Mr. Simoneau in support. The Court of Appeal described the movement as "a militant organization dedicated to the promotion of a complete secularism that demands this system of values for all branches of government"[6] (*Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois*, 2013 at para. 19). The actions advocated by Mr. Simoneau are described as 'draconian':

> In fact, the displays that were once closely linked to "identified" religious dogma have since been secularized. In my opinion, given this new context, they can't be abolished due to a draconian conception of the State's neutrality. What would be the purpose of this kind of result if these demonstrations, in spite of their original meaning, are only history's passive witnesses? In other words, this exercise would only entail disadvantages since it would add nothing to the concept of neutrality.[7] (*Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois*, 2013 at para. 70)

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[6]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: une association militante vouée à la promotion de la laïcité intégrale qui revendique ce système de valeur pour toutes les branches de l'État.

[7]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: En effet, les manifestations qui autrefois étaient intimement liées à des dogmes religieux identifiés ont été depuis laïcisées. Vu ce nouveau contexte, elles ne peuvent, à mon avis, être supprimées au nom

In contrast, the actions of the city are framed as being conciliatory, attempting to address the challenge posed by Mr. Simoneau by passing a motion which stated in part:

WHEREAS there exists a tradition in the City of Saguenay in which the council meetings are preceded by the recitation of a prayer which is reproduced below;

WHEREAS the purpose of this tradition is to ensure the *decorum* and the importance of the advisors' work;

WHEREAS unanimously, the members of the council wish for this tradition to continue and wish to continue this tradition according to their individual rights and freedoms, especially their freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and of religion;

WHEREAS the importance of specifying that the members of the council and the public are not forced to participate or be present during the recitation of the prayer;

WHEREAS the importance of ensuring that members of the council and the public that do not wish to participate to the recitation of the prayer may still be present for the entirety of the council meeting;

THEREFORE, the following is enacted:

ARTICLE 16.1 – As soon as the person presiding over the assembly enters the council's chamber, the members of the council may rise to pronounce the traditional prayer reproduced below.

"*Almighty God, we thank you for the many blessings you have granted to Saguenay and to our citizens, such as freedom, growth opportunities, and peace. Guide us in our deliberations as members of the municipal council, and help us to take seriously our obligations and responsibilities. Give us the wisdom, the knowledge and the understanding to allow us to guard (maintain) the advantages enjoyed by our city in order that all can benefit from them and that we may make wise decisions*".

In order to enable the members of the council who do not wish to participate in the recitation of the prayer to take a seat in the room, the president of the assembly declares the meeting open two minutes after the end of the recitation of the prayer. [8] (*Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois*, 2013 at para. 22)

The motion and bylaw enshrined the prayer as a public ritual in the city, the preamble mentioning both the tradition of the prayer and the 'fact' that no one was forced to participate.

As in the *Lautsi* case, Mr. Simoneau is portrayed as not being reasonable or well informed. It is he, not the religious hegemony of the Christian weight of the municipal council chambers, that is unreasonable, out of line, and ideological:

Here, the respondents could not simply allege references to the religious heritage in order to conclude (*de facto*) that the City's neutrality obligation wasn't respected. A well-informed and reasonable person who is conscious of the implicit values that underlie this concept

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d'une conception draconienne de la neutralité de l'État. A quoi servirait un tel résultat si ces manifestations, en dépit de leur sens initial, ne sont que des témoins passifs de l'histoire? En somme, l'exercice ne comporterait que des inconvénients puisqu'il n'ajouterait rien de plus au concept de la neutralité.

[8]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: ATTENDU qu'il existe à la Ville de Saguenay une tradition a l'effet que les séances du conseil sont précédées de la récitation d'une prière dont le texte est reproduit plus bas; ATTENDU que cette tradition a

could never, under this circumstance, accept the idea that the City's state activity, due to this prayer, was under a particular religious influence.[9] (*Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois*, 2013 at para. 107)

Although it is clear that Mr. Simoneau was living his atheism (see Beyer, this volume), his actions and wishes are positioned as being ideological. There is no suggestion in the Court of Appeal decision that the beliefs of the mayor and council and the defence of the Christian practices are equally as ideological and indeed militant, with the force of the law and state behind them. The use of municipal legislative power to pass a bylaw that forces prayer in a public meeting is a striking abuse of power, and yet it is not framed in that manner. Instead it is Mr. Simoneau who is constructed as the threat.

Astonishingly, and as was the case in *Lautsi*, the prayer said by council is deemed to not really be specifically Christian, but instead a ritual that is universal. Thus prayer is effectively neutered as a religious activity, rendered instead as ritual that complies with "modern theistic doctrine." The fact that it is felt as religious by Mr. Simoneau is displaced by expert testimony about its neutral and acceptable nature, as noted by the court in the following comment:

> What I have learned from the expert opinion is that the values expressed through the contentious prayer are universal and do not identify with a specific religion. Still according to these experts, this prayer complies with a modern theist doctrine open to non-obtrusive

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pour objet d'assurer le *decorum* et l'importance du *travail* des conseillers; ATTENDU que les membres du conseil, à l'unanimité, souhaitent que cette tradition se perpétue et souhaitent la poursuivre en fonction de leurs droits et libertés individuelles, notamment la liberté d'expression, la liberté de conscience et de religion; ATTENDU qu'il importe de préciser que les membres du conseil et du public ne sont aucunement contraints de participer à la récitation de cette prière ou d'y assister; ATTENDU qu'il importe de s'assurer que les membres du conseil et du public qui ne souhaitent pas assister à la récitation de cette prière puissent tout de même assister à la séance du conseil en son entier; A CES CAUSES, il est décrète ce qui suit: ARTICLE 16.1 – Dès que la personne qui préside l'assemblée entre dans la salle des délibérations du conseil, les membres du conseil qui le désirent se lèvent pour prononcer la prière traditionnelle dont le texte est reproduit ci-après. *Dieu tout puissant, nous Te remercions des nombreuses grâces que Tu* as *accordées* à *Saguenay et* à *ses citoyens, dont la liberté, les possibilités d'épanouissement et la paix. Guide-nous dans nos délibérations* à *titre de membre du conseil municipal et aide-nous* à *bien prendre conscience de nos devoirs et responsabilités. Accorde-nous la sagesse, les connaissances et la compréhension qui nous permettront de préserver les avantages dont jouit notre ville afin que tous puissent en profiter et que nous puissions prendre de sages décisions. Amen.* Afin de permettre aux membres du conseil et du public qui ne souhaitent pas assister à la récitation de la prière de prendre place dans la salle, le président de l'assemblée déclare la séance du conseil ouverte deux minutes après la fin de la récitation de la prière.

[9]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: Ici, les intimes ne pouvaient simplement alléguer de simples références au patrimoine religieux pour ensuite conclure que *de facto* l'obligation de neutralité de la Ville n'était pas respectée. Une personne raisonnable, bien renseignée et consciente des valeurs implicites qui sous-tendent ce concept ne pourrait en l'espèce accepter l'idée que l'activité étatique de la Ville, du fait de cette prière, était sous une influence religieuse particulière.

and reasonable religious denominations.[10] (*Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois*, 2013 at para. 88)

In addition to the neutrality or non-religious nature of the prayer, the court points to the heritage and cultural value of the cross and the statue. Given this emphasis on culture and heritage, one has the impression that this municipal council chamber has from time immemorial displayed these symbols, but in fact they date only to the late 1970s and 1980s. The cultural and heritage value of what is challenged by Mr. Simoneau is repeatedly noted by the court:

> The duty of neutrality can only be achieved by a delicate arbitrage, but inevitably, between the common good supposedly defended by the State, that includes the safeguard of the *cultural heritage*, and everybody's right to have their moral beliefs respected.[11] (emphasis added) (*Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois*, 2013 at para. 63)

> This goal does not require the society to be cleansed from all confessional reality, including that which falls within its *cultural history*. As a matter of fact, we must recognize that some *historical values* of the Québec society remain compatible with the so-called neutral and universal current values.[12] (emphasis added) (at para. 65)

> This does not imply circumventing the State's neutrality obligation by maintaining practices that subtly allows what is prohibited by the *Charter*. On the contrary, we should argue that the contextual analysis requires considering everyone's religious diversity and moral believes and to reconcile this need with the *society's cultural reality*, including references to *its religious heritage*.[13] (emphasis added) (at para. 72)

> This decision brings forward the importance, when studying issues related to the application of fundamental rights, of taking into account the society's cultural reality in which these rights are invoked.[14] (at para. 75)

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[10]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: Je retiens de l'opinion de ces experts que les valeurs exprimées par la prière litigieuse sont universelles et qu'elles ne s'identifient a aucune religion en particulier. Toujours selon ces experts, cette prière est conforme à une doctrine théiste moderne, ouverte à certains particularismes religieux non envahissants et raisonnables.

[11]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: L'obligation de neutralité ne peut se réaliser que par un arbitrage délicat, mais inévitable, entre le bien commun qu'est censé défendre l'État, incluant la sauvegarde de son héritage culturel, et le droit de chacun de voir ses convictions morales respectées.

[12]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: Cette finalité n'exige pas que la société doive être aseptisée de toute réalité confessionnelle, y compris de celle qui relève de son histoire culturelle. D'ailleurs, sur ce plan, il faut reconnaitre que certaines des valeurs historiques de la société québécoise demeurent toujours compatibles avec des valeurs actuelles dites neutres et universelles.

[13]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: II ne s'agit pas ici de contourner l'obligation de neutralité de l'État par le maintien de pratiques qui subtilement permettrait de faire indirectement ce qui est défendu par la *Charte*. Au contraire, il nous faut plutôt affirmer que l'analyse contextuelle impose de tenir compte de la diversité religieuse et des croyances morales de chacun et de concilier cet impératif avec la réalité culturelle de la société, incluant les références à son patrimoine religieux.

[14]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: Cette décision fait ressortir l'importance, au moment d'étudier les questions relatives à l'application des droits

In these paragraphs, the religious power of the crucifix and the statue (whose status alternates between religious symbol, art, and heritage item) is denied in order to make acceptable their presence in the space in which municipal governance is conducted. Further, the court concludes that two symbols, the crucifix and the statue of the sacred heart, are cultural symbols that do not interfere with the idea of neutrality of the city:

> I agree that the evidence heard before the Tribunal broadly endorses the idea that these two religious symbols (the cross and the sacred heart statue) represent, for a significant part of the population, remains of their religious connotation and that their presence essentially arises from a cultural and historical heritage that does not interfere with the city's neutrality.[15] (at para. 125)

As was the case in *Lautsi*, the court in the *Saguenay* case minimizes the religious significance of the symbols, re-inscribes their neutrality and juxtaposes their 'reasonableness' against the radicalness and unreasonableness of the atheist complainant.

3.3 Conclusions

As Christianity is transformed into culture, and its symbols become a part of 'our' heritage, atheists are potentially less able to challenge the presence of those symbols in the public sphere. Instead of challenging the presence of god, and religion, they are then challenging 'our nation', which renders them much more vulnerable to accusations of radicalness, unreasonableness, and as being somehow 'against' rather than 'for' us.

It is interesting to speculate about what might happen if a member of another religious group were to challenge the prayer or the presence of the crucifix. While the courts in both *Lautsi* and *Saguenay* v. *Mouvement laïque québécois* construct the atheist parties as bad citizens, ideologues and disingenuous, could we imagine this construction occurring if, for example, the United Church of Canada were to complain about the content or presence of the prayer? The legal image of the atheist constructed by these cases implies that the atheist or religious none is unworthy of voice and indeed of citizenship, that they are not part of the history of the nation, and that they are therefore unable to contribute to the public discussion about religion or its presence in the public sphere.

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fondamentaux, de prendre en considération la réalité culturelle de la société dans laquelle ces droits sont invoqués.

[15]Translation of original French provided by Tess Campeau. Original French reads: Je suis d'avis que la preuve entendue par le Tribunal appuie largement l'idée selon laquelle ces deux signes religieux (la croix et la statue du Sacré-Cœur) sont pour une partie importante de la population dépouilles de leur connotation religieuse et que leur présence relève essentiellement d'un patrimoine culturel historique n'interférant nullement avec la neutralité de la Ville.

Atheist strategies to cope with what they perceive as the intrusion of religion into public life unfortunately frequently fail to generate the sort of public discussion that is required in the present social climate of "superdiversity" (Vertovec 2007) and the current preoccupation with religion as a potential source of social good, as is identified by Mumford, for example, in her chapter in this volume. Yet, it is worth considering the ways in which dominant religions have manufactured culture to the extent that "even if societies become secularized, they still bear the cultural imprint of the founding religion" (Olivier Roy 2010, 67). Instead, atheists themselves become the objects of scorn, disrespect, and sometimes harassment. They are seen, to some extent, as threatening not only majoritarian religion, but as a challenge to culture, heritage and nation.

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Chapter 4
Atheism Versus Humanism: Ideological Tensions and Identity Dynamics

Stephen LeDrew

This chapter is concerned with processes of collective identity construction and debates regarding general strategy in the atheist movement in North America. In particular, it examines the use of minority discourse, representations of morality, and disagreements within the movement on the issue of whether atheists should adopt a "confrontational" position toward religion or a more "accommodationist" stance that allows for cooperation with religious groups on matters of mutual concern. These interrelated issues, I will argue, are indicative of an essential tension within the movement between two major sub-groups that I refer to as "New Atheists" and "secular humanists." These two groups are driven by distinct ideologies that crystallized in the nineteenth century. I call these ideologies "scientific atheism" and "humanistic atheism," and only by taking account of the tension between these ideologies can we hope to understand the dynamics of contemporary atheism. Scientific atheism is clearly represented in the New Atheism, a literary phenomenon comprised of bestselling critical books on religion by Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2004), and Christopher Hitchens (2007). It dominates discourse in the loose network of organizations that constitute the atheist movement. This discourse, however, is far from uncontested, a fact that this chapter intends to shed light on.

This chapter proceeds in the following steps. The first section reviews the historical development of atheism, concentrating on the nineteenth century division of atheist thought into two major trajectories, and outlines the main characteristics of each of these ideologies. The second section briefly examines the New Atheism and situates it within this ideological division. Following this, the paper turns specifically to the social movement aspects of atheism. First is an analysis of

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the processes of collective identity construction, illustrating the importance of morality and minority discourse. This is followed by a review of debates concerning movement strategy. The final section argues that intra-movement tensions regarding identity and strategy reflect an essential ideological tension that can be understood with reference to the established historical framework. A crucial point that runs throughout is that atheism is not strictly a position on God or religion's relationship to science, but rather, that at its heart it is a deeply political phenomenon. We should therefore understand the ideological tension within the atheist movement precisely as a political one.

4.1   Two Atheisms: A Historical Perspective

The most compelling account of the rise of modern atheism comes from Michael J. Buckley (1987, 2004), who suggests that a contradiction within theism itself, rather than a conflict between religion and science, is what gave rise to atheism. Buckley identifies a revolution in Christian theology that accompanied the Scientific Revolution. This theological turn saw God transformed from a transcendent and immaterial spirit into an immanent presence in the material universe. Gavin Hyman (2007) similarly argues that in the seventeenth century a modern conception of God as an entity of definite substance and location replaced the prior immaterial being of pre-modern Christianity. As a material presence in our world, God became an object of scientific inquiry.

This did not lead directly to science 'debunking' religion. Rather, scientists of the age were overwhelmingly religious (Isaac Newton is the most famous example of a deeply devout scientist of this period) and were encouraged by clerics to search for evidence of God's design in nature. Hence, religion and science, according to Buckley, were engaged in a dialectical relationship, in contrast to a prevailing view among some popular scientists and atheists today that the two have perpetually been in conflict. Some, like Newton, claimed to find the desired evidence of God, but as science became increasingly capable of explaining nature on its own terms, God was relegated to the sidelines. Eventually the suspicion arose among Enlightenment philosophers that science was not successfully demonstrating that God does exist, and further, it might in fact be demonstrating precisely the opposite.

As the enchanted world was transformed by science into "a system of intelligible forces" (Hampson 1968, 37) and God's presence was nowhere to be found, the foundation of modern theology was undermined, laying the groundwork for the emergence of a peculiarly modern atheism from this troublesome dialectic. Rationalist and empiricist critiques that could not have applied to a transcendent God took hold against the modern conception of God. This first led to deism, or "natural religion," which insisted that religion should be founded upon rational proofs and that evidence of God's design could be found in nature (Byrne 1989). When this evidence was not found, and science increasingly claimed the ability to explain nature on its own terms, the modern conception of God became unsustainable and a distinctly modern form of atheism emerged.

Despite advances in science, particularly physics, atheism remained somewhat tempered during the Enlightenment by the problem of design, or the appearance of design in nature (thus the dominance of deism over outright atheism during this period). Specifically, the major lacuna in the developing scientific understanding of nature was the origin of life. In the nineteenth century a major revolution in the field of biology finally provided an answer to this riddle, and a fully mature and confident atheism arose in its wake. I call this "scientific atheism."

Scientific atheism is a specific atheistic ideology arising out of a fusion of Enlightenment rationalism with Victorian Darwinism. Enlightenment philosophy had provided rational critiques of religion and refutations of the existence of God, but could not account for the origins of life. Darwin's theory of evolution provided this account while obviating a role for God, and thus the argument from design, which had been so compelling for centuries, was finally rendered impotent in the view of many leading intellectuals. Bringing a Darwinian framework into rationalist critiques of religion, scientific atheism has several distinctive characteristics, which I have previously discussed in greater detail in LeDrew (2012) and will briefly review here. First, it is grounded in the natural sciences. It considers religion a product of ignorance, a false ancient explanation of nature that is superseded by modern science. In this view religion is strictly a matter of beliefs—in this case, false beliefs—that would fade as scientific knowledge grew. It also involves a Darwinistic conception of progress. While Darwin was clear that evolution is not a process of progressive improvement, but rather differentiation in response to environmental conditions, in its political formulation evolutionary theory took on a decidedly progressivist character. Darwinism was thus ideological fodder for those inclined to a teleological view of social evolution that situated Europe at the summit of a universal process of civilization, a position it occupies by virtue of its defining characteristic—the triumph of reason. For those taking this view, atheism was accordingly considered a natural culmination of intellectual progress from superstition to Enlightenment.

Darwin's theory of evolution, of course, met with resistance from religious authorities. This led some early Darwinists to engage in a public conflict with religious ideas (exemplified by Thomas Huxley's famous debate with Bishop Samuel Wilberforce at Oxford). This conflict still shapes the discourse of the New Atheism today. As this relationship developed, atheism was increasingly tied to the theory of evolution, and thus increasingly tied to liberalism as the Darwinists viewed themselves as progressivists struggling to emancipate science from the conservative force of the Church (Olson 2008). Scientific atheism, then, was not only a basis for rejecting and critiquing religion. It was also inextricably linked to a political project. It moved from being a simple negation of religious beliefs to being an affirmation of liberalism, scientific rationality, and the legitimacy of the institutions and methodology of modern science—and thus from religious criticism to a complete ideological system with fully-realized epistemological and political positions (LeDrew 2012).

At roughly the same time in the mid-nineteenth century a very different kind of atheism was developing that diverged dramatically from the Enlightenment

tradition that found its culmination in the scientific atheism of the Darwinists. I call it "humanistic atheism." Its strongest articulation came in Marx's view—drawing on Feuerbach—of religion as an ideological manifestation of alienation. Arriving a little later, Nietzsche and Freud are other major pioneers of this tradition. They developed very different conceptions of religion that nonetheless shared some essential characteristics with Marx's analysis.

The most important unifying characteristic among these approaches is their grounding in the social sciences and humanities, rather than the natural sciences. The key insight in this perspective, which is where it diverges from the Enlightenment and Darwinistic traditions, is its consideration of religion as a social phenomenon. Assuming the non-existence of God rather than seeking to prove it, these thinkers were interested in why religion persisted despite its irrational nature and its obviously false versions of natural history and human origins. Their answer was that religion is not a rational pursuit of knowledge that can be eradicated by science, but a fundamentally irrational response to social conditions and existential anxiety. In Marx's terms, religion was a product of alienation, a cry of protest against the injustice of the world that provides consolation in its shared expression. At the same time, he considered it an ideological instrument of oppression that mitigated the impulse to revolt against earthly injustice through a promise of divine justice in the afterlife. In his view, religion could not be wiped out by scientific enlightenment because this did nothing to address its social nature. Rather, social revolution is required to rectify the injustices of the world that produce the longing for divine justice (Chadwick 1975; LeDrew 2012).

For all their differences, Freud and Nietzsche also, in their own way, considered religion a social phenomenon and response to suffering and injustice. Though they did not share Marx's socialist politics, they all agreed that the root of religious belief was not ignorance or lack of scientific understanding, but the experience of existing in a particular social formation (LeDrew 2012). Humanistic atheism, like scientific atheism, is therefore a political project as much as an intellectual one—both are grounded in a vision of how society is and how it ought to be. Humanistic atheism focuses attention on social justice for people, while scientific atheism is more interested in the freedom and authority of science and reason, from which social progress is expected to flow.

Through the twentieth century, other approaches to atheism would develop—notably existentialism—though its strongest political articulation would come in the establishment of officially atheistic communist states, guided by a reading of Marx that saw religion as an ideology of oppression that must be stamped out by force (Peris 1998). This, notably, was a questionable interpretation of Marx, who believed that religion would disappear more naturally after the abolishment of the class structure of society (Olson 2008). Humanistic atheism—or what passed for it in these communist regimes—lost traction as the horrors of Stalinism unfolded. Scientific atheism, meanwhile, became firmly entrenched as the dominant form of atheism with the progressive rationalization of late modern society.

4.2 The New Atheism

This outline of the two major historical strands of atheist thought can help us understand contemporary developments. Specifically, the New Atheism may be understood as an extension of Victorian scientific atheism, updated with the theories and language of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. Drawing on these new sciences, the New Atheists craft a vision of religion not only as a pre-scientific explanation—what Richard Dawkins (2006) refers to as the "God hypothesis"— but as a natural phenomenon. This means that religion is produced by natural forces rather than social forces, and that these can be understood by recourse to evolutionary theory. Daniel Dennett (2006) and Richard Dawkins (2006) promote a theory of religion as an "evolutionary by-product" of adaptive cognitive processes that lead us to attribute agency to inanimate objects and natural phenomena. Sam Harris (2004) similarly argues that our minds have evolved to detect patterns in the world, and therefore we are prone to detecting patterns in the workings of nature that are not there. For all these writers, religion is produced by, and exists within, the *individual mind*. These cognitive tendencies, determined by biology and shaped by natural selection, are allowed full expression when alternative explanations are lacking. Note that these theories treat religion strictly as belief—there is little to no accounting of the social nature of religious practice. Indeed, Daniel Dennett argues that due to a taboo regarding criticism of religion, "few good researchers, in any discipline, want to touch the topic" (2006, 34). This claim can only be made in ignorance of the vast amount of ongoing interdisciplinary social scientific research on religion worldwide.

This narrow understanding of religion is a natural consequence of the general ideology shared by these authors. This ideology, in short, is defined by *scientism*. By this I mean a belief in the epistemic authority of the natural sciences over and above all other forms of understanding, which in practice also amounts to the political authority of the natural sciences. This commitment to the authority of the natural sciences is an extension of the basic epistemological position common to the New Atheists: scientific materialism, or the view that "everything that exists (life, mind, morality, religion, and so on) can be completely explained in terms of matter or physical nature" (Stenmark 1997, 24). The social sciences are reduced to an undeveloped branch of evolutionary biology, subsumed to what Dawkins (2006) considers the "ultimate" theory of natural selection, and which Daniel Dennett views as a theory of such vast scope that it transcends all disciplines, "promising to unite and explain just about everything in one magnificent vision" (1995, 82). On the question of religion, reductionist socio-biological accounts, like the ones mentioned above, are favoured at the exclusion of social scientific approaches. If religion were to be examined as a social phenomenon then the natural sciences relinquish authority on the matter, and in a scientistic ideology, the authority of the natural sciences is paramount.

The last characteristic of the New Atheism I want to point out is the defence of a teleological vision of modernity as a universal unfolding of history along the

lines I already discussed in relation to scientific atheism. This, again, is tied to a politicized understanding of evolution as a social process, with all cultures at various stages of evolution toward a singular civilization driven and defined by scientific rationality. We can see these views on the nature of modernity and civilization most clearly in the New Atheist discourse on Islam. We are repeatedly told that Islamic civilizations are "backward" and "uncivilized" and that the presence of Muslims in the West threatens our progress. Islamic societies serve as the 'other' of enlightened modernity, a notion employed in portraying the advanced status of Western secular-liberal society, and in the construction of a binary that pits religiosity against civilization. This view posits that modernity, which for the New Atheists is essentially scientific hegemony, is the end of history. In a sense one could argue that the New Atheism is deeply conservative—despite its self-conscious opposition to traditional ways of life represented by religion, it is equally dismissive of the possibility of alternatives to the secular-liberal constitution of the modern West. There is little political imagination in the New Atheism: it is politics of the status quo.

The rise of the New Atheism in the years 2006–2008 (a span that saw the publication of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*) corresponded with a surge in membership and activity in organizations constituting what I refer to as the atheist movement. I will argue that, under the influence of the New Atheism, which became a dominant ideological force within the movement, the atheist movement adopted new cultural goals that took priority over prior political ones. These include building community and identity, and the more ambitious goal of cultural transformation, or, changing dominant beliefs and values. While the New Atheism did not introduce much that was new in the way of ideas—since, as I have pointed out, the views they promote were actually forged in the nineteenth century— it was a novel development in the context of the atheist movement. Doug McAdam (1994) argues that in any movement there is usually a dominant segment, and that this segment's "cultural package" will likely be privileged to the extent that it is perceived to be effective. The New Atheists had astonishing publishing successes and became ubiquitous commentators on religion in a variety of media formats, which we may assume led to the perception within the atheist movement that their approach is substantially effective. They thereby introduced a new "cultural package"—or a new ideology, identity, and set of cultural goals—that transformed the movement. So while the atheist movement has been around for some time, the New Atheism was a new or latent movement that emerged within this existing structure and came to dominate movement discourse.

Some object to the idea that atheism can constitute the basis of a social movement (e.g. Stahl 2010) while others recognize that a movement is happening but prefer to consider it more of a subculture or cultural movement (e.g. Cimino and Smith 2007). Taking a more traditional view of social movements as collective, sustained campaigns aimed at the state (Tilly 2004; McAdam 1982) we may indeed find it difficult to argue that atheism should be considered a social movement. But for some identity-based movements (most notably the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

(LGBT) movement) collective identity construction is the most important element of collective action (Melucci 1989; McAdam 1994). For these movements successful outcomes are not limited to state action, but rather, success can come in transforming cultural representations and social norms in terms of how groups see themselves and how they are seen by others (Gamson 1998; Polletta and Jasper 2001). If we grant that the atheist movement is involved in projects of collective identity construction and transforming cultural representations and social norms regarding atheists, then according to this definition it is quite reasonable to consider atheism a social movement. I turn now to an examination of these projects. I will argue that the historical ideological tensions I have outlined can help us to understand some intra-movement tensions that are shaping the development of movement discourse, strategy, and formal structure.

4.3 Atheist Identity Politics

In the atheist movement, the discourse on identity revolves around two issues: morality and minority status. In this view I am supported by the work of Cimino and Smith (2007). Atheist identity construction focuses on atheists as a minority, subject to stigma and discrimination, that is comprised of "moral" people; a phrase often heard in the movement is "good without God." This is effectively a challenge to the claim from conservative Christians that religion has a monopoly on ethics. We see this at work in some of the atheist movement's most famous campaigns. The largest and most well-known to date is the Atheist Bus Campaign (ABC), which started in the UK before spreading to North America, Australia, Russia, Brazil, and a number of other European countries, and involved running an advertisement on buses that read "There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life."

The point of the atheist bus campaign was not really to convert people to atheism, but rather, to bring atheists into existence *as a group* rather than isolated individuals with their own beliefs. It was a project of community-building among atheists, an effort to build bonds and to recruit people who were already atheists to join the movement by showing them that there are others out there like them, that there are groups they can join, and so on.

Another campaign that similarly seeks to build community and recruit members to the movement, but that goes a step further in explicitly seeking to construct a collective identity rooted in morality, is the OUT campaign. This is obviously modeled after the LGBT movement, which the atheist movement feels an affinity to. The OUT campaign was a creation of the Richard Dawkins Foundation and, like that of the gay movement, simply encouraged atheists to "come out" and make themselves known and visible in order to demonstrate the numbers of atheists out there, and to work to dissolve the stigma against atheism (notably, this stigma is really only strong in the US as the situation in Canada is very different). Another similar kind of campaign came from the US-based Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), which initiated an "Out of the Closet" ad campaign in another

effort to humanize atheists by demonstrating that "Freethinkers are your friends, neighbors, relatives, colleagues, the person who opens the door for you at your grocery store, a parent at your playground" (Freedom from Religion 2011a). FFRF designed billboard advertisements that featured a photo of an atheist along with a "freethought testimonial" that makes "an affirmative statement about being a freethinker" (Freedom from Religion 2011b), and a short self-description. The "affirmative statement" generally refers to morality and represents atheists as moral, good, peaceful people. For example, one testimonial reads "Another atheist for peace and world harmony," while another simply says "Good without God," a phrase commonly employed by atheists as a challenge to religion's claim on morality.

Another campaign that makes use of this expression is one underway by Center for Inquiry (CFI) Canada called "Good and Godless." It invites people to submit 1-min videos to the CFI YouTube channel *Think Again! TV*, where contributors explain what they do for charities, non-profits, or society, and end with the statement, "That is why I am good without God." Another campaign with similar goals is Non-Believers Giving Aid, a project of the Richard Dawkins Foundation. This is a disaster relief fund that was created in the wake of the catastrophic 2010 Haitian earthquake. Non-Believers Giving Aid collects donations to be distributed to non-religious humanitarian aid organizations (Doctors Without Borders seems to be the most frequent choice).

What all of these campaigns have in common is an effort to construct a collective identity centred on morality. This emphasis on morality is perhaps a response to the well-established fact that, at least in the United States, atheists are among the least-trusted and most disliked of any social category (Cragun et al. 2012; Gervais et al. 2011; Swan and Heesacker 2012) and are considered to be outside the moral boundaries that define cultural membership, constituting an "other" in American society (Edgell et al. 2006). Because of the perceived stigma against atheism and a general view in American culture that religiosity and morality go hand in hand, it is understandable that atheists might be inclined to focus attention in their self-representation on morality and the notion that one can be "good without God." Identity construction is therefore a major goal of the movement. However, these campaigns are also themselves strategies used in pursuit of goals beyond identity itself. We can think of these movement campaigns and actions, and the identity they serve to construct, as strategies deployed toward two different kinds of goals.

To develop this analysis I draw on Mary Bernstein's related concepts of "identity deployment" (1997), "identity strategy" (2002), and "political identity" (2008). Bernstein argues that the distinction between political and cultural movements should be abandoned in favour of an analytical framework that recognizes that these are not isolatable elements of movement discourse and activity. In her view, identity is not strictly a cultural matter (a tool for recruitment or a self-verification among members of the in-group) but rather, "expressions of identity can be deployed at the collective level as a political strategy, which can be aimed at cultural and/or instrumental political goals" (Bernstein 2008, 281). In the examples given above identity is being deployed toward both cultural and political goals.

There are several related cultural goals at work here. The first of these is ideological validation. Identity is deployed in these campaigns in an effort to illustrate that atheists are moral people, thereby combating the stigma against atheism, which is key to a project of universalization of the atheist ideology of scientism, which, as I have argued, is the goal of the New Atheism. It is also essential to the related goal of building community and drawing new members to the movement. A less ambitious goal is simply acceptance. Representations of collective identity may be deployed simply to counter anti-atheist stigma, without being used as a move in an ideological struggle.

Identity is also deployed in these campaigns in pursuit of political goals, namely establishing recognition of atheists as a minority group that is unjustly subjected to prejudice and discrimination. Minority identity discourse is deployed toward the instrumental goal of gaining political power, in much the same manner that minority discourse was successfully deployed in the civil rights movement and the LGBT movement. Some atheists believe that beyond defensive measures like protection from discrimination, building solidarity among atheists through defensive minority discourse can create opportunities for real political power if atheists successfully represent themselves as a unified interest group and voting bloc. In this sense minority identity is deployed as instrumental political action.

The best example of this kind of identity deployment is the recent Reason Rally, held in Washington, D.C., in March or 2012, which was billed as "the largest secular event in world history." Attendance estimates range widely from 10 to 20,000 which in either case is an impressive number for a gathering of its kind. The intent of the rally, according to organizers, was "to unify, energize, and embolden secular people nationwide, while dispelling the negative opinions held by so much of American society" (Reason Rally 2013). What was particularly striking about this event was that it signaled a decisive shift in emphasis in atheist discourse, with a lineup of speakers, headlined by Richard Dawkins, all moving away from discussing the moral character of atheists to focusing on the status of atheists in American society. So while the statement of intention refers to cultural goals—namely, to represent atheists as a moral minority and to combat stigma—the emphasis seems to be on the instrumental goals of gaining support for the protection of the atheist minority from discrimination, and claiming a role in the political sphere.

These themes were repeated by a succession of speakers. David Silverman, President of American Atheists, declared: "We are here to deliver a message to America. We are here and we will never be silent again" (Winston 2012). The "come out" message was repeated by a number of speakers, with Silverman offering reassurance to "closeted atheists" that "you are not alone." Fred Dewords, National Director of the United Coalition of Reason, borrowed another slogan from the gay movement (substituting "godless" for "queer") in leading the crowd in a chant of "We're here, were godless, get used to it" (Aratani 2012). Paul Fidalgo, a spokesman for CFI, echoed these sentiments in saying, "We have the numbers to be taken seriously," and "We're not just a tiny fringe group" (Aratani 2012), clearly pointing to the potential for political power given a sufficient level of organization.

Even more explicitly, comedian Paul Provenza said, "We are here to say to elected politicians ... that there is a base for them to stand on to stand up to the religious right" (Winston 2012). In this quote there is both a claim of possessing political power and a desire to acquire it. The Reason Rally is a clear sign that the atheist movement is a sustained and organized movement geared toward the establishment of a new minority group in American society, or more precisely, recognition of an existing but previously dormant one.

Note that there is a tension between the way identity is conceived and deployed in these two different kinds of goals, namely that the cultural goal of ideological universalization seems to be in contradiction with the political goal of establishment of a distinctive minority. This is indicative of a key defining tension at the heart of the movement that is shaping its development. This tension is manifest in an ongoing debate regarding strategy, which reveals a good deal about divisions within the movement relating to goals and collective identity. These can be understood as ideological tensions that reflect the historical division in approaches to atheism.

For several years the atheist movement has been faced with an internal tension regarding strategy that was nicely summarized in a panel debate at the 2010 conference of the Council for Secular Humanism.[1] This debate considered two broad strategic orientations termed "accommodation" and "confrontation." "Confrontation" refers to an uncompromising strategy of attack and criticism of religious beliefs. "Accommodation" refers to a willingness to cooperate with religious groups on issues of mutual interest (for example, science education, the environment, and so on). These strategic positions reflect a similar tension that occurred within the LGBT movement regarding "distinction" and "assimilation," with some preferring a very subversive and confrontational style that sought to highlight differences, and others favouring a more conservative approach that emphasized things like marriage, serving in the military, and employment discrimination—in other words, fitting into mainstream society (Ghaziani 2011).

The increasingly "confrontational" tone within movement discourse became a concern after the rise of the New Atheism, with some humanists within the movement dismayed by the increasingly militant position taken by atheists emboldened by the attention drawn by Dawkins and the others. As early as 2006, the year of publication of *The God Delusion*, there were concerns about both the tone and content of the emerging discourse. For example, Julian Baggini (2007) argued in the pages of *Free Inquiry* (the flagship publication of the Center for Inquiry) for a more moderate approach in an article entitled "Toward a More Mannerly Secularism." It is therefore crucial to bear in mind that this movement is comprised of self-identifying atheists *and* secular humanists, which are not necessarily the same thing even though there are obviously some commonalities. The division between these

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[1]Streaming video of many of the conference sessions, including this one, can be viewed at http://www.secularhumanism.org/laconference/live.html, which serves as the reference for all of my discussion of this debate. Edited versions of the four presentations were published in the June/July 2011 issue of *Free Inquiry* (vol. 31 no. 4).

two major ideological positions within the movement is reflected in the debate among those advocating strategies of confrontation and accommodation.

Those advocating for confrontation, I suggest, are primarily scientific or "new" atheists. As I have argued, the New Atheism is an uncompromising defence of a particular understanding of modernity as a teleological process of ideological universalization, the ideology in question being scientism. In this sense it may seem contradictory to embrace a strategy that emphasizes difference, but confrontation can be considered an attempt to defend a distinctive identity that must be carefully defined and strengthened in order to achieve the larger goal. It is a pragmatic means of maintaining ideological rigour that might be sacrificed through assimilation with the mainstream and association with religious groups. The long-term project of universalization can only be realized if ideological boundaries are carefully maintained, hence a movement strategy that emphasizes distinction.

Humanists, of course, do not need to take the same approach since their identity and worldview is not defined strictly in relation to religion ("new" or scientific atheists, on the other hand, are defined by their position regarding supernaturalism and science). Humanists therefore do not necessarily see religion as sets of pre-scientific knowledge claims, and are more inclined to view it as a social phenomenon that addresses social and emotional needs as well as cognitive ones. They recognize that these needs must be met somehow and are more inclined to be open to compromise in addressing those needs, since in absence of other means religion will surely continue to carry out this function, even as the scientific case against religion mounts. This point is made quite effectively by humanist Joseph Hoffman in a *Free Inquiry* article in which he criticizes the New Atheism's approach to religion. Hoffman says, "Megachurches will not empty out when the faithful learn the secrets of the atom" (Hoffman 2006, 47). This is an implicit recognition of the view from humanistic atheism that religion cannot be dismissed as an ignorant and pseudo-scientific position on nature—and thus strictly a matter of belief—but rather, it is a way of living and a response to the conditions of social life.

These intra-movement tensions on the closely-related questions of identity and strategy reflect a fundamental division between two approaches to religion that we can better understand by situating them with the historical atheist traditions I have identified. While we should not simplistically reduce "confrontation" and "accommodation" to "scientific" and "humanistic" atheism, we can clearly see the impact of tensions between these distinct ideological positions in the debate concerning movement strategy. These are two different strategic positions that reflect different goals that are informed by different ideological orientations, and thus we have a movement faced with a serious dilemma. Those favouring accommodation implicitly recognize the point at the heart of humanistic atheism, which is that religion is a thoroughly social phenomenon that cannot be eradicated by reason, and therefore they want to focus their attention on the social conditions and problems that religion can both mitigate and exacerbate (depending on both the problem and your point of view). Those favouring confrontation, on the other hand, see religion itself as the problem, and their mission is to complete the project of modernity as they see it and usher in the rational society—for this reason ideological rigour is paramount.

In this sense the two historical variants of atheism are still at odds with each other within the movement, even if one is considerably stronger than the other. These tensions can be understood at the level of identity as a division between atheists who construct their identity in opposition to religion, and humanists whose identity is centred not on negating religion, but promoting humanistic values. Because their identities are not predicated on negation and distinction, humanists may be more open to the view that religious and non-religious groups might work together in areas of mutual interest—for example, science education, the environment, health care, and social justice more generally.

4.4   Atheism Versus Humanism: Individualism or Social Justice?

This is a movement comprised of atheists and secular humanists, and it is internally divided according to these groups. Atheism seeks distinction (confrontation), while humanism seeks assimilation (accommodation). One side is defined through negation, the other through a positive system of ethics. One sees religion as an essential enemy to be vanquished by rational critique, while the other sees it primarily as an obstacle to tackling the real social problems that are of greater concern. I suggest that the tension between atheism and humanism could be understood as a tension between historical currents of atheism that emerged from specific political projects and are in many ways at odds with each other. That is, both these groups are atheists, but they are very different kinds of atheists with different kinds of goals.

This division was expressed in striking fashion in a 2009 episode of *Point of Inquiry*, the podcast of the Center for Inquiry, titled "Secular Humanism versus . . . Atheism?" (Isaak 2009). The episode featured a debate between Paul Kurtz, the founder of CFI and a self-described secular humanist, and Tom Flynn, current editor of CFI's magazine *Free Inquiry* and a scientific atheist who takes a very aggressive approach to religion. The two discussed the supposed rift within the movement between secular humanists and atheists. Flynn denied any tension between the two and sought to reconcile the positions by arguing that atheism is "an essential starting point" or basic epistemological foundation for secular humanism. Kurtz, by contrast, insists that "you can be a secular humanist and not an atheist" and makes a distinction between secular humanism, which is a "positive" philosophy, and atheism, which is "negative." It is noteworthy that Flynn has been a vocal critic of the notion that atheism is or should be associated with social justice—indeed, he is a libertarian who abhors social welfare programs (Flynn 2011)—and there are many similarly libertarian, individualistic, hard-line scientific atheists within the movement who share his views.

The controversy over the notion of "social justice" within the atheist movement is so intense that the most recent event of significance at the time of writing has been the emergence of a group calling themselves "Atheism+," which means atheism

plus social justice. It was formed by several self-described feminist atheists[2] in response to specific perceived misogyny within the atheist community. According to the group's website, "Atheism Plus is a term used to designate spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to promoting social justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside of the atheist community" (Atheism Plus 2014). At this point the group has no discernible goals beyond this mandate and has not yet engaged in any action other than creating a website, which currently contains only a short FAQ about the group and a discussion forum (which is already very active). Examining the blogs written by the founders of the group, however, indicates that they very clearly embrace the scientism that the movement is grounded in, as well as a confrontational approach to religion. And yet, they claim that "there is a sizable contingent of atheists who agree that a desire for social justice connects to their atheism in a meaningful way" (Atheism Plus 2014).

Atheism+ has been criticized by a number of prominent movement leaders (including no less than Richard Dawkins), and discussion forums of atheist web sites in recent months have hosted intense—in many cases hostile—debates concerning the relationship between atheism and responsibilities toward social justice. The debates concerning Atheism+ point to major disagreements over the nature and limits of atheism as an identity and as a movement. Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from the emergence of Atheism+ and the reaction to it is that the historical division in atheist thought, ostensibly epistemological but more essentially political in nature, still resonates today. Atheism+ does not distinguish itself from other atheist groups epistemologically (they do not voice any opposition to scientism, a confrontational approach to religion, or a minority identity). Rather, the distinction is essentially political. The contemporary atheist movement, then, reflects the division that emerged in the nineteenth century between a scientific atheism rooted in liberal individualism and a humanistic atheism rooted in social justice.

This group is in a very early stage of development and it remains to be seen whether it can be considered an emerging latent movement, or a temporary response to a specific internal issue. While it is new, with 2,907 registered members on the website and a total of 102,498 posts to the site's discussion forum as of April 10, 2104 (Atheism Plus 2014), it is not insignificant and clearly speaks to the concerns of many atheists. What we can say is that Atheism+ illustrates the difficulty in maintaining cohesion within a movement comprised of individuals united only by shared identity rather than a shared structural location. The debates concerning minority politics, strategies of accommodation and confrontation, and the connection (or lack thereof) between atheism and social justice, are all instances of "identity work" (Einwohner et al. 2008), which is the internal dialogue required

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[2]Atheism+ was originally conceived by Jen McCreight, author of the blog *Blag Hag* (http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag), which is hosted on the *Freethought Blogs* network headed by PZ Myers.

to bring a collective actor with a shared identity into being and maintain its cohesion over time. These tensions must be reconciled—if not fully overcome—for the movement to work in a united fashion to achieve its goals (which are themselves also up for debate). Atheism+ explicitly distinguishes itself from humanism and makes atheism specifically the core characteristic of the group, so in effect it introduces a further complication and shows the movement becoming more and more internally divided, which makes identity work increasingly difficult. It remains to be seen if sufficient work can be done to overcome these differences and keep the movement from splintering into a number of politically divided factions. Because atheism is not an identity related to some fixed characteristic (e.g. race, class, sex), but rather an achieved identity that must be collectively constructed, this movement is particularly susceptible to factionalism.

4.5   Conclusion

In summary, the New Atheism and its ambitions were something of an anomaly. The atheist movement now seems to favour again taking a defensive position and defining itself against mainstream society, rather than assuming itself the embodiment of a sweeping cultural transformation. We are thus back to the point identified by Cimino and Smith (2007), who argued that the failure of naturalism and scientific thought to become dominant over supernatural explanations of reality—which was assumed by many "progressive secularists" throughout the twentieth century to be the inevitable course of history—had led these movements to shift their strategy at the dawn of the twenty-first century. After a surge of growth instigated by the New Atheism that emboldened the movement to target broad cultural transformation by aggressively attacking religion, the strategy of confrontation today is not aimed at ideological dominance as much as maintaining ideological rigour and a distinctive identity within the in-group, which now self-represents as an excluded minority. So the atheist movement has in some sense betrayed the New Atheism and its lofty goal of cultural transformation, which has again been replaced by a slightly more modest, but still very significant, political goal of establishing a newly-recognized minority group in American society. Atheism today is a deeply political project, as well as a fragmented one, just as it has been throughout its history.

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Chapter 5
The Cultural, the Nominal, and the Secular: The Social Reality of Religious Identity Among Sri Lankan Tamil Youth in Canada

Amarnath Amarasingam

5.1 Introduction

The labels we use are important. When individuals call themselves "Christian" or "Muslim" or "spiritual but not religious," they evoke very different images of what constitutes their religious or non-religious life. If it were that simple, however, the study of religion, as well as non-religion and atheism, would be somewhat straightforward. What complicates matters is the tendency of some individuals to *label* themselves using terms that may not actually *describe* themselves. Some of the ways in which this trend has been examined in the academic literature is with concepts such as "fuzzy fidelity" (Voas 2009), "cultural religion" (Demerath 2000), "belonging without believing" and "believing in belonging" (Day 2006). Indeed, as Demerath (2000, 127) points out, countries like Poland, Northern Ireland, and Sweden exhibit a "common syndrome" of cultural religion by which "religion affords a sense of personal identity and continuity with the past even after participation in ritual and belief have lapsed." He goes on to argue that while this phenomenon may be "one of the world's most common forms of religious involvement" it is simultaneously "one of the most neglected by scholars" (Demerath 2000, 127).

This chapter attempts to rectify this neglect by moving the conversation forward in several different ways. First, by focusing on the religious identities of Sri Lankan Tamil youth in Canada, I move beyond the tendency of many studies to focus mainly on European Christians or Christianity in Europe. In other words, what is often neglected in the Western conception of atheism, with its commonly assumed rejection of an Abrahamic God, is the overlooking of non-Abrahamic traditions and the (non)belief systems of immigrant or diaspora communities who now live

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in the "West." Complicating this matter is an "all or nothing" assumption—that either one is religious or is an atheist—that does not always translate into the lived reality of those whose cultural backgrounds or upbringings may be complicated by other ethnic or political factors. In this volume Beyer's notion of the punctuated continuum touches upon this reality.

Second, I argue that sociologists of religion need to pay particular attention to "other salient identities" that may impact an individual's adherence or rejection of religion, such as ethnic identity, social movement identity, "national" identity, and so on. I have argued elsewhere, for example, that those members of the Tamil diaspora who are particularly connected to the conflict in Sri Lanka have a tendency, first, to move away from the religion of their upbringing while maintaining nominal adherence and, second, to connect more deeply with universalistic or social justice oriented spirituality (Amarasingam 2014). This chapter further develops the first tendency with respect to scholarship on cultural religion, belonging without believing, as well as non-religion studies. While this chapter focuses more on religio-cultural as well as ethnic and national identities than strictly atheist identities, it does argue that more attention needs to be paid to *how* religious, non-religious, or atheist identities could be formed through an interaction with an individual's other salient identities—such as ethnic and cultural.

5.2   The Sri Lankan and Broader Social Movement Context

Sri Lanka is a small island off the southern coast of India, roughly the size of 25,000 square miles. Its close proximity to India has meant that Indian religious, cultural, and social influences have always been significant. Sri Lanka, despite its small size, is ethnically and religiously diverse. According to the 2012 census, the total population of Sri Lanka is 20.2 million people. According to the census, the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka is the Sinhalese (75 %), the vast majority of whom are Buddhist. The Tamil community in Sri Lanka, roughly 15 % of the total population, consists of Sri Lankan Tamils (11 %) and Indian Tamils (4 %). The vast majority of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka is Hindu, but with a significant number of Christians. Sri Lankan Muslims are also an important ethnic group, and make up about 9 % of the population. The smaller ethnic groups (1 % in total) consist of the Burghers (descendants of European settlers), the Malays (descendants of settlers from the Malay Peninsula who arrived during the Dutch and British colonial period), and the Veddas (the indigenous peoples of Sri Lanka).

In addition to Indian influence, for over 400 years, all or parts of Sri Lanka fell under the control of successive waves of European powers: the Portuguese (1505–1658), the Dutch (1658–1796), and the British (1796–1948). In order to better understand the role of religion in the history of the Sri Lankan civil war, the British colonial period is significant in providing a context for the Hindu and Buddhist revivals of the nineteenth century (Blackburn 2010; Bond 1988). These revivals are best characterized as a kind of fusion of ethnic and religious identity.

Although Buddhism did play an important role in the ethnic and religious revival following independence from the British in 1948, it often *manifested itself* in secular policies. In other words, Sinhala nationalism, while intimately tied to Buddhism, was often put into practice through land colonization, language legislation, and educational policies which were discriminatory based on ethnicity. While these policies could indeed have produced a religious response from the island's (largely Hindu) Tamil population, this did not occur, and the Tamil nationalist response, particularly in its turn to militancy, was often equally secular. This broadly secular and non-religious context, it will be argued, informs not only the Tamil Canadian diaspora's political identity, but exercises influence over youth and their ir/religious identity as well.

While a full examination of the course of the civil war cannot be undertaken here, it should be sufficient to point out that following communal violence during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s—including the riots/pogroms of 1977, 1981, and Black July 1983, as well as the subsequent Indian involvement in the training and funding of Tamil militant groups—the civil war reached levels of destruction that were hitherto unforeseen (Swamy 2003; Thiranagama 2011; Weiss 2011). Consequently, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, or Tamil Tigers) became one of the most feared rebel groups of the twentieth century, equipped with an air force, a navy, an intelligence wing, an international propaganda and funding structure, as well as close to 10,000 well-trained cadres ready to die for the cause of national liberation (Swamy 1994).

The Tigers, while fighting for an independent state within the island, also began to deeply influence the nature of Tamil identity. They framed the movement along linguistic and ethnic lines, but received support from many Hindus and Christians in the Tamil community. As the civil war became more violent, hundreds of thousands of Tamils left the island and settled in countries like Canada, the UK, the United States, Norway, and Australia among others. The LTTE has received support from members of these diaspora communities since the late 1980s. Under the "cover" of a series of organizations, the LTTE had been raising funds and other kinds of support for their war effort for some years. As Stewart Bell (2004, 27) noted during the war, "When it comes to fundraising, the Tamil Tigers are unrivaled. They have used every conceivable tactic—government grants, front companies, fraud of every type, migrant smuggling and drugs." According to successive reports by the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS), the LTTE received anywhere between $1 million per month to $2 million per year from the Canadian Tamil diaspora. In addition to fundraising, diaspora leaders have long been accused of engaging in sophisticated propaganda campaigns, radicalizing the youth of the community, and political lobbying on behalf of the Tigers. Theorizing about ir/religious identity among Tamil youth in Canada, in other words, cannot be entirely divorced from such nationalist or activist stirrings in the diaspora community. To properly understand religious as well as atheist and non-religious identity in the Tamil diaspora, as well as many other politicized diaspora communities, requires understanding the full social reality in which individuals live.

5.3   Non-religion and Cultural Religion

Many scholarly studies of phenomenon like "cultural religion" or "belonging without believing" have often been too restricted to Christians in European countries, and have often failed to examine more micro or meso-level movements that individuals may be a part of in other contexts, and how such involvements may impact religious, atheist, or secular identity. In other words, for our particular case study, does increased ethnic allegiance (to "Tamil" identity or the plight of Tamils in Sri Lanka) influence how individuals conceive of their ir/religious identity? A recent study by Ingrid Storm (2009) of people who are neither very religious nor very non-religious suggests that "belongers" are "on average more proud of their nationality" than others. To be sure, this nationality can be something other than Polish or Swedish, and could apply to nationalist social movements as well.

   The notion of cultural religion adds much complexity to not only the study of religion and ethnicity, but also the study of non-religion and atheism. It would indeed be comforting if this phenomenon only existed on the fringe, a worldview only espoused by a minority of individuals. But, as Jay Demerath (2000, 136) argues, cultural religion "may represent the single largest category of religious orientation." He goes on to rightly point out that there is a kind of "oxymoronic quality" to cultural religion. It involves, he (2000, 137) argues, "a label that is self-applied even though it is not self-affirmed. It is a way of being religiously connected without being religiously active. It is a recognition of a religious community but with a lapsed commitment to the core practices around which the community originally formed. It is a tribute to the religious past that offers little confidence for the religious future." To be sure, many atheists in the Sri Lankan Tamil community in Canada still prefer to be somehow "religiously connected" to their cultural heritage, even while professing their current atheist identity. Teasing apart the different threads of an individual's identity—atheist but culturally religious or non-religious but with strong ties to ethnic identity and so on—often proves quite difficult. However, as I argue below, a clear picture of atheist and non-religious identity only arises after understanding how many of these threads actually interact.

   My attempts to investigate this issue proved to be more complicated than I initially imagined. While I intentionally limited my research focus to Canadian Tamil youth—to presumably "keep things simple"—the variety of viewpoints were astonishing, and very much in line with current research in the sociology of religion. I spoke to atheists who still identified as Hindu or Christian, to Christians who periodically attended Hindu temples, to Hindus who said they were 'spiritual but not religious', and so on. Such responses are reflective of the often ambivalent relationship my respondents had with their religious, atheist, or non-religious identity. For those who were deeply committed to nationalist politics in Sri Lanka, religion simply did not seem very important. In fact, it was seen as fundamentally divisive to what should be a unified Tamil identity, based on ethnicity.

   Even more than, or perhaps in addition to, notions of cultural religion and belonging without believing, Abby Day's recent work on a phenomenon she

calls "believing *in* belonging" proved particularly useful. Day recalls the moment she began to think differently about the role of religion in the contemporary context. During an interview with a respondent named Jordan, Day (2009, 265) noted an unusual statement he made: "I'm Christian, but I don't believe in [something/anything]." Day's (2009, 265–266) general conclusion, arising from fieldwork with Christian youth in Yorkshire, was "that people 'believe in' their human affective relationships in preference to Christian doctrinal beliefs, even when they claimed Christian identity on the census." Much of Day's recent work is important for understanding my interviews with Tamil youth in Canada as well. While my results are not identical to Day's, many of those I interviewed still identified as "Hindu" or "Christian" because it was the religion of their upbringing and it was the religion of their families back home in Sri Lanka. This nominal "belonging," however, did not preclude an often radical break with the religio-cultural elements of their families. In other words, as Day suggests, they "believed in belonging" but also believed that their belonging does not have to dictate how or whether they believe. As one Tamil man in Toronto put it:

> If I do anything Hindu, it's because my mom told me to do it. If there's anything Hindu that I do, it's maybe that I do the readings and I try to follow the teachings but any of the temple-going stuff or doing pujas or observing *natchathiram* [horoscope]—if my mom tells me to do it, then I trust my mom's word on those things, and then I would do it. But I wouldn't go out of my way to do it. But beyond that, I try to do things on my own, like what I would call secular Hinduism [laughs]. I know it sounds oxymoronic but it *is* that, I call it secular Hinduism because it's not so much the idol worship and all of that, but it's the secular teachings you can take away from that that I try and . . .

> Interviewer: *Which are?*

> Which are like, you know, duty unto others is a huge concept, right? So those kinds of things, I believe, are quite universal. I find that Christian [notions of] charity is the same kind of concept. So those kinds of things I think are secular that I can take for myself and share it beyond myself. So, I have a group of friends—we're all stuck in the secular Hindu phase. We don't really want to go to the temple but we don't mind discussing these things.

My respondent's self-identification as a "secular Hindu" is in line with Voas and Day's (2010) recent urging of sociologists of religion to move away from dividing individuals into the religious and non-religious. As they (2010, 1) note: "Clearly there is a broad middle ground occupied by people who are neither especially religious nor overtly secular." According to Voas (2009) this middle group is not insignificant, roughly making up half of the European population. Indeed, the term "secular Christians" may accurately describe the nature of this broad intermediate group: "These are people who call themselves Christian, but who for all practical purposes are secular. They live in a world centered on their social relationships, in which God has no everyday role. They do not expect God's help, fear God's judgment, or believe that things will happen *God willing*. They are indifferent to religion for the good reason that it gives them nothing of practical importance" (Voas and Day 2010, 2).

While Voas and Day's research focuses primarily on Christians in Europe, many of their insights are directly applicable to the Tamil youth I spoke with in Canada,

both Hindu and Christian. An important subcategory of secular Christians identified by Voas and Day are individuals they call "Nominal Christians," which, for our purposes, can also include "Nominal Hindus." As they (2010, 11–12) point out, individuals in Western countries often still specify their religious background when asked on a census or by a researcher, just as they can name the place of their birth or their mother tongue. What is less clear is why they choose to specify themselves as such, even as the salience of their belief or religious outlook is on the wane. The nominally religious "are unsure whether God exists, but in any case he does not play a part in their lives. They do not engage in religious practice and do not give the matter much thought. They do not refer to God or religion in answer to questions about what they believe in, what is important to them, what guides them morally, what makes them happy or sad, their purpose in life or what happens after they die" (Voas and Day 2010, 12). Day (2006) divides the nominally religious into three sub-varieties: natal, ethnic, and aspirational. The first two groups, natal and ethnic, are significant for our current discussion.

Natal nominalists are clear that thinking about their religious or non-religious identity is not a major concern. For natal nominalists, religion is "something you are born into" and something that is part of your upbringing, but also something that has waned in significance. Throughout my own research with Tamil youth in Canada, I encountered many who would likely agree with this classification. They may check off "Hindu" or "Christian" on a survey, and may attend temple/church if their families asked them to, but on a daily basis, religion is not "on my radar." They are attached to a culturally religious identity because of historical and familial reasons, but find that they can just as easily live their life as an atheist or secular individual. Indeed, understanding this complicated interaction between a kind of cultural *identification* and atheist/secular *identity* has often been neglected in the academic literature.

Day's second group, ethnic nominalists, were also highly prevalent among my respondents. These individuals would describe themselves as Hindu or Christian "as a way of identifying with a people or culture, and to position themselves as different from others" (Voas and Day 2010, 12). In other words, many youth I interviewed would identify as Hindu or Christian not as a way of emphasizing the importance of religion in their lives, but rather to highlight the *inevitable* links that they saw between religion/culture/ethnicity that they could not easily pick apart. As Voas and Day note, individuals would also emphasize that, in Canada, their Hindu identity was often "assumed" or imposed from outside. As such, some of my respondents explicitly made statements like, "I guess the Canadian public would see me as a Tamil Hindu." In a pluralized environment like Canada, calling oneself Hindu may serve as an important marker of one's overall *cultural* identity. For many respondents, it seemed as if they wanted to keep their personal religious evolution separate from the "numbers game" taking place with the census results. In other words, they may identify on the census as "Hindu" or "Christian" because *they think* that is how the Canadian public perceives them and, secondly, it is one (perhaps easy) way to respect their heritage, their upbringing, and their culture. For many,

this created a distinctive "I'm Hindu/Christian, but" category, which allowed them to self-identify with their cultural upbringing, while at the same time allow for personal ir/religious change and development.

As Voas and Day (2010, 16) make clear, "As religion becomes less influential in society, it is increasingly possible to have a religious identity without sharing a religious worldview . . . Christianity has been sufficiently dominant in Western societies that an equivalent label seemed unnecessary until recently. Religious diversity in combination with widespread irreligion has now made self-identification as Christian meaningful. What it means may have little or nothing to do with religion, however." As one male respondent pointed out:

> I was born into a Hindu family but I don't think . . . I mean studying science and stuff, it's hard to take things literally. I wouldn't say I'm an atheist and I wouldn't say I fully believe anything religiously. I look at Hinduism and I see it as more full of guidelines than anything spiritual or religious—just basic how to live your life so that it's better for you— not as an afterlife type of thing. I've always had problems with how Hinduism tells you not to eat meat, but then if you do eat meat you don't eat it on Friday or Tuesday. I've had conversations with other people on that topic. The best answer I ever got was that the only reason why they do that is so that you're able to exercise some kind of self-control at some point, even though you do eat meat. The main goal of that is to exercise self-control, so I mean religiously I don't follow anything, but if my mom is doing something in the temple and she wants me to go, I'll go.

A Tamil woman stated that initially she was religious simply as a form of "risk management," but later developed a more emotional attachment to the Hindu tradition of her parents. She expressed that she does not understand the rituals, and is pretty sure that her parents are equally confused by them, but considers them to be unique and "cool."

> There are certain religious things that I do because . . . say weddings, for example, there are certain aspects of the wedding ritual—like the *thali* [marriage necklace] and stuff like that— that just seems like it is fun to do. It is not because of religion, it is more of a practice that is kind of cool. No other culture does it or no other religion has it. I am not talking ill of my parents, but I don't think they know why they do half the things they do. I don't think they know 90 % of why they do it, and as you grow you start to question these things, especially if your social circle or those that you associate with have come from different backgrounds, different religions—some are atheist, some are secular. You start to open your mind outside of what mom and dad have told you, so you start to question a lot of things.

She goes on to note that when it comes to having children of her own, the "risk management" approach would likely prevail again. She mentions a popular ritual that is performed by many Hindu families on the 31st day following the birth of a child. On this day, the newborn's hair is shaved off, as the hair from birth is thought to contain undesirable traits from past lives. According to my respondent, it is best to perform these rituals just to be sure that the child is safe going forward. It is evident that dividing individuals into broadly secular and religious categories misses the "broad middle ground" on which this particular respondent clearly resides.

> I think of me having children. Would I do certain things like shaving their head on the 31st day and all of that? I would do it even if I don't know the background of it, because it is too big a risk not to do it, and assume something may happen in their lifetime, and then feeling

a lifetime of regret: 'Oh my god, had I done that, had I done this, that, and the other thing'.
I think with marriage it would be the same thing. I would want to incorporate certain things
[rituals] out of the fear that if I don't then, 'oh my goodness I might have a failed marriage'.

Much of Voas and Day's work may sound similar to Grace Davie's now-famous "believing without belonging" thesis (Davie 1990, 1994). However, there are important differences. Davie, drawing mainly on data from the European Values Survey, argued that the majority of Britons continued to believe in God even as they saw no need to attend religious institutions. While some scholars have accused Davie of being imprecise with her use of the word "belief" (Day 2010), others have pointed out, perhaps rightly, that the important question is not whether an individual believes, but what their not-belonging may say about their belief. As Voas and Crockett (2005, 14) have noted: "Whether or not they are confident that God exists, it is apparent at the very least that they doubt the Almighty much minds whether they spend Sunday in church or in the shops. Nor is it simply a matter of believing in a god who does not take attendance: they evidently do not believe in a god who is sufficiently important to merit collective celebration on any regular basis. Put simply, increasing numbers of people believe that belonging doesn't matter."

Voas and Crockett (2005, 14) go on to suggest, "Many people in Britain have beliefs about the rights and wrongs of fox hunting, but comparatively few are either participants or protestors. It is not enough to find that people accept one statement of belief or another; unless these beliefs make a substantial difference in their lives, religion may consist of little more than opinions to be gathered by pollsters." Similarly, Voas and Day (2010, 13) point out, "The point is simply that we cannot conclude from the fact that people tell pollsters they believe in God that they give the matter any thought, find it significant, will feel the same next year, or plan to do anything about it. While economists claim that there is no such thing as a free lunch, survey responses come very close." Understanding the full social reality of individuals, then, also involves moving beyond the "oxymoronic" quality of cultural religion. If, as Demerath suggests, particular labels are self-applied but not self-affirmed, then understanding individual identity involves taking seriously those aspects of their identity that *are* self-affirmed and examining how these identities may inform their religious, atheist, or secular worldview.

5.4   Holes and Scaffolding

In addition to a kind of nominal religious identity, many respondents also argued that they often approach religion as a "resource," even as they evinced a deep-seated respect for their religious and cultural heritage. From nominally religious identity, then, we move to important discussions of Tamil youth and new identity formation, signified by their "picking and choosing" new ideas and viewpoints from different religious traditions and spiritual philosophies. Such changes lay the broader landscape for our later discussion of how ethnic as well as social movement identity inform Tamil youth and their ir/religious identity.

This reflects Roof's (1999, 136) contention that in the contemporary world, religious communities form the "outer limits on fluidity" for many individuals. Roof recalls the case of a female Jewish respondent who spoke of her religious identity in terms of "holes" and "scaffolding": "I believe in the Jewish tradition *and* I believe in the importance of cherishing the earthy, the feminine, and the mystical. I used my own experiences to 'fill in' the holes left by the scaffolding," she told him. As Roof (1999, 136) points out, her discussion of holes and scaffolding reflects how many people approach religion today: "'Holes' for her refers to things she wished her religion had provided but had not, such as a closer connection with the divine, an experience of mystery, and spiritual empowerment . . . but that was only one side of her story. There was the 'scaffolding' to which she referred, too: her Jewish tradition had provided a structure on which she could build." As one Tamil man in Toronto pointed out, he found many holes in his Catholic upbringing which had to do with the Church's views on social issues. While his Catholic "scaffolding" was present, and further complicated by his inter-faith parents, the "hole" was filled by a more spiritual and universalistic worldview. As he told me:

> If I had to fill out a form or something I would put down Roman Catholic but I guess my own religious belief is . . . I would like to call it universal. I think I was very fortunate to come from—like my parents are very respectful of other religions and they themselves are from two different religions—so I think I was very fortunate to grow up in that atmosphere. My mom is Hindu and my dad is Catholic. I guess growing up I was exposed to both forms of religion and, I don't know, I think I just got to a point where I put faith before religion. I don't value religion that much. I think it is really important to believe in God but not necessarily follow any particular religion.

> Interviewer: *Why is faith important?*

> Well, first of all I believe faith is important, but it is more so that religion is *not* so important. To me I would say that, number one, I believe it is more of a manmade thing, it is more of a tool put to use. A lot of negative comes from it in my opinion, and I think many times the negative can overshadow the positive or the reason that it was made in the first place. I guess I would like to think that I am very liberal-minded and I can't see any religion conforming to my own ideals.

> Interviewer: *Would you call yourself spiritual?*

> Yes. I think initially I will acknowledge that there is a God but I won't use any forms of . . . religious forms [to communicate] with God. I feel like all that was said before me and I kind of had to discover him on my own, and I can call him Jesus, I can call him Allah, I can call him Krishna, I can call him whatever I want, and I can call him nothing. I can step into any place of religion and I still communicate with my God. I don't think [for] something so incomprehensible [there] should be any sort of barring on how we communicate [or] talk to God. I don't think we should conform our thoughts and our ideals to religion.

While this may sound similar to Day's notion of "nominally" religious individuals, Roof's argument highlights an individual's recognition of how embedded they are in the culture and traditions of their upbringing, yet also "confronting the fact that the inner life may not be fully formed or contained by tradition as received, and that by pulling together from other sources, often resources neglected from within one's own tradition, new and enriched meanings are possible" (Roof 1999, 137).

The particular argument that I put forward here is that while the "scaffolding" (cultural religion) may persist and continue to hold significance for many Tamil youth, academics have theorized the "holes" without taking full stock of ethnic identity or the various social movements with which individuals also identify. In what follows, I deal successively with ethnic identity and social movement identity to argue that scholarly theorizing about religious, non-religious, or atheist identity cannot be entirely divorced from the various other micro and meso-level commitments that animate an individual's social reality.

5.5   Ethnic and Social Movement Identity

As suggested above, it was clear throughout my field research that, for most Tamil youth in my sample, ethnic identity was more important than religion. For some, there was simply no distinction, and they could not pinpoint the differences. As I continually pushed them throughout the interview process to think more about these differences, if they in fact existed, many, especially those who identified strongly as Hindu/Christian *and* Tamil, simply laughed off my persistence as "impossible." For others, since Hinduism or Christianity was not exclusive to Tamil identity, it was often experienced as being of secondary importance. As one Tamil woman pointed out:

> Tamilness isn't exclusive to Hinduness, right? So I feel like I can't impose that on [people]. I know there's tons of Tamils who are lapsed [Hindus or Christians] and it doesn't exclude them from being Tamil. I think that it's almost like a Venn diagram right? There are places where they overlap, but it's not exclusive. I have a lot of friends who are Indian and who are Hindu, but the way they express their Hinduness is similar to ours. So it doesn't make it exclusive to Tamils. At the same time I have a lot of friends who are Sri Lankan but who are not Hindu and, for whatever reason, there's so much in common there.

In interviews with Tamil Christians, however, the distinction between ethnic and religious identity was often more prevalent. For some Christians, religion, and the religious kinship they felt with other Christian communities around the world, was more important than the fact that they were *Tamil* Christian. Interestingly, even while some Tamil Hindu youth felt that *there was* a distinction between Hinduism and Tamil ethnic identity, Christian Tamils at times expressed a feeling of being an "ethnic outsider" due to the fact that they do not share the majority religion. As one female youth noted in frustration:

> I ran into a lot of people who don't view Christians as Tamils. I never found that earlier, but I find Hindus really question Tamil Christians like, 'you're not really Tamil'. That has brought out a defensive side in me. It started with my best friend. I don't think she really knew what she was talking about. She said, 'you guys are not traditional.' I said, 'What do you mean by tradition?' What exactly do you mean by tradition? What about Christian culture excludes me from being Tamil?' And I find that happens a lot—the idea that the majority of [Tamil] Hindus do reject Christians as buying into a Westernized culture. However, I think [Christian] Tamils, if you look at them historically, have incorporated a lot

of Hindu culture into their day-to-day practice in order to avoid major conflicts. But I think for me, my identity as Tamil is more important than my identity as Christian because being Christian is a faith choice. Being Tamil's not a choice.

Interviewer: *Do you think there's something Hindu about your Tamil identity?*

For sure, in the sense that Hindu culture has definitely impacted it—the culture has a lot of Hindu religious rituals built into it. As Christians, especially in Sri Lanka, I think we subscribed to almost all of them. But as my family became very, very ultra-religious, we've excluded a lot of those. However, things like the puberty ceremony or anything like that— people still do them. They just don't put the whole Hindu statements at the top. You have something else. It does have a cultural base but we choose to practice or not practice Hindu rites. But have Hindu rites become cultural norms? Yes, and I think we have a lot of that in our culture, for sure.

Another Tamil Christian man reflected on what some of the tenets of his Catholic faith would mean for the "Tamil people" with whom he felt an equally strong connection. When I asked him whether there was something "Tamil" about how he practiced Catholicism, he responded:

Yeah, there are a lot of Hindu elements I would practice in Catholicism. Like we probably invest more of our prayer into saints than most Catholics would, which has very much a polytheistic feel to it. We have a lot of the Evil Eye, bad karma stuff, and some Hindu rituals you do at home. We actually once got into a huge fight with our pastor. We invited him over for lunch, and he was a pretty outspoken guy so I felt a little less guilty about it, but I remember him once saying at the end of the day, the tenet of Catholicism is that all people have to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord before they enter Heaven. And I think everyone was just kind of up in arms because, as a Tamil, that eliminates ninety per cent of your own people on that tenet alone! So yeah, the very fact that we wouldn't . . . like I still don't believe something like that.

Interviewer: *So at that point, you ended up defending your . . .*

My Tamil identity, yeah, absolutely, yeah. But could I say that I prioritize one over the other? That's very difficult to say.

Interviewer: *That was actually going to be my next question.*

Right, because you can actually think . . . even in the exercises, if you were to go through your family or even for yourself, picking somebody or choosing someone to marry, we prioritize Catholicism very highly, to the point where my mother would say she'd prefer I marry a Catholic, if it came down to it. Whereas my father would probably go the other way. But ultimately, it's more that I be allowed to raise my kids, not exclusively Catholic, but at least exposed to Catholicism. So for me personally, I don't think I could prioritize one over the other. I think they're both relatively equal.

Interviewer: *What's more important to you in a partner, her being Tamil or . . .*

Her being Catholic? I don't know. That's probably why I'm not married yet! I really don't know. That's a very good question.

In other words, while some of my Christian respondents at times experienced a distinction between their religious and ethnic identities, many Hindu respondents, especially those who expressed a strong commitment to Tamil nationalism, went out of their way to point out that Tamil identity included many religious groups. They had a vested interest in presenting 'Tamil' as an inclusive ethnic identity marker,

even if non-Hindus at times expressed a sense of exclusion. However, they were also quick to point out that a heightened commitment to religion would likely lead to the fracturing of Tamil nationalism. There was a widespread perception, then, that religion is fundamentally divisive. As one youth in Toronto pointed out:

> First of all we call ourselves Tamils. Not Hindu Tamils or Christian Tamils or Muslim Tamils. With the Tamil community, that's the uniqueness of it, right? We all come under one umbrella, which is we classify ourselves as Tamils, and I think that's important, or we would have a split community. And I think the reason it's important not to associate the Tamil struggle with any religion is because religion is a way to help people find themselves, find a purpose to life, or trying to find someone to follow. But people use religion as a way to show superiority or to show that, you know, one religion is better than the other or stuff like that. So, I think that kind of politics should never be brought into the Tamil cause.

Another respondent, while identifying himself as Hindu, noted that religion does not matter and breeds disunity in the Tamil community. As he told me:

> I pray to my Hindu god and I go to church too sometimes. When I go to Montreal, I go to church. I don't mind. My brother's girlfriend is Muslim, so we have all the religions in the family. Forget the religion. We are all human. Religion is important, but you don't go against one of them, right? One guy told me, 'God has abandoned Sri Lanka. That's why people are fighting and there are a lot of [people dying]. If there is a god then he could have stopped the war.' I told him, 'There's not only Hindu. There's Christian, there's Muslim, everything. So what do you expect?'

As should be evident, many Tamil youth in Canada are undergoing profound changes in how they interpret and live the religions of their upbringing. If we were to conclude our discussion here, it may be accurate to conclude that Tamil diaspora politics, particularly in the post-LTTE period, and perhaps like the LTTE itself, will be largely secular in its outlook. However, I wish to complicate the matter a little further, as the large-scale identity shifts experienced by many Tamil youth is not in fact entirely secular. Indeed, diaspora politics and its transition to a more transnational, non-violent, human-rights oriented activism is deeply influenced by universalistic and cosmopolitan sensibilities that are increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. While this section slightly deviates from the larger theme of this book, I argue that it is important to more fully understand the layers of influence that form an individual's identity, ranging from a nominal adherence to the religion of one's upbringing to the interaction of social movement activism with this identity, to how the broader cosmopolitan ethos interacts with and influences both. Indeed, atheist identity arises out of or is at least influenced by the interrelationship of all of these forces.

For many I interviewed, the local, ritualized, and often limited nature of their own traditions are seen as insufficient to address the needs of individuals who wish to fashion a more global ethic. As their identities and political sensibilities are transnational, it should not surprise sociologists of religion that their religious beliefs go beyond the borders of their faith with equal ease. As Roof makes clear, contemporary religious and atheist identities are characterized by a concern for equality, human rights, tolerance, and inclusivity. This does not mean, of course, that such an ethic of humanity or an increasingly cosmopolitan worldview precludes any

commitment to nationalism. As Levitt (2008, 785) makes clear, "While, in theory, cosmopolitanism seeks an allegiance to humanity writ large, in reality everyone belongs to social groups, networks and culture . . . every contemporary cosmopolitan is somehow rooted somewhere. Each individual cobbles together his or her own combination of universal and particularistic ethnic, national and religious elements" (see also Appiah 1998).

Related to what Roof, Levitt, and others have put forth is a phenomenon that Nancy Ammerman (1997) has called "Golden Rule" religion. Individuals who practice Golden Rule religion are neither highly religious nor highly secular. Instead, they are mostly concerned with treating others with respect and dignity, caring for their families, doing good, being a good person, living a good life, and being civically committed. Treating others as you would like to be treated is not spouted as a "throw away" catchphrase having little actual significance, but as a deeply held belief that animates their daily life. In critiquing how these individuals are often discussed in the scholarly literature, Ammerman (1997, 196) points out, "Implicitly, most observers seem to measure strength of belief and commitment against a norm defined by evangelicalism, equating that with 'religiosity' and painting these non-exclusivist, less involved practitioners as simply lower on the scale." I suggest that 'lay liberals' are not simply lower on the religiosity scale. Rather, they are a pervasive religious type that deserved to be understood on its own terms.

However, it is not only scholars who often use this "norm defined by evangelicalism" or the example of the strictly observant Hindu to gauge the religiosity of their research participants. In many of my interviews with Tamil youth in Canada, I found that they themselves were measuring their level of religiosity with some mythical "Hindu" who practices the religion perfectly and in its entirety. Most respondents, when I asked them what it meant to be a "strong Hindu," hesitatingly stated something about rituals and temple attendance. Even as they were not entirely sure what a "strong Hindu" was, they inadvertently measured their own religiosity up against it and found that they came up short. What is also interesting is that regardless of whether they saw themselves as a "strong Hindu" or "spiritual but not religious," many described their religious outlook in terms of what Ammerman has called "Golden Rule Christianity," or for our not-exclusively-Christian purposes, Golden Rule religion/spirituality. For those I interviewed, for instance, it was less about what they believed and far less about "traditional" Hindu ritualistic practices. As Ammerman (1997, 202) writes, "What I want to suggest, in fact, is that 'meaning' for Golden Rule Christians consists not in cognitive or ideological structures, not in answers to life's great questions, but in practices that cohere into something the person can call a 'good life'." While their definitions of the good life are not uniform, most individuals agree that grand societal change is not what they are after. Rather, they only wish to leave the world a better place, even if only one life is affected, by their having lived in it (Ammerman 1997, 203). As one Tamil man put it:

> I'd like to say I'm spiritual, but not exactly very religious. Again, it's for the same reason. I think religion divides people, right? I come from a Hindu background, but I don't really differentiate myself as a Tamil Hindu. I'm very tied to my Tamil identity, but I don't really associate myself with any specific religion. But I'm spiritual, I'm just not religious. I believe that there is a God. And I believe that, you know, there is obviously something that runs us. And I respect that and I respect people who commit a lot of time, you know, trying to make a change in the world. And I respect those who serve fellow human beings, so I see spirituality in that way. But I don't see being faithful to God by going and pouring milk on, you know, the altar and calling it being religious when there are kids in the world that really need that milk. Why throw it down the drain? So I see—like my spirituality comes from helping somebody that is in need. So whether it's people back home [Sri Lanka], whether it's somebody in Darfur, or whether it's, you know, somebody that is at a Salvation Army shelter, if you're helping a person that is in need, you're basically serving God. That's the way I see it. To me that's what it means to be spiritual.

A Tamil woman, heavily involved in social activism, similarly pointed out:

> Yeah, my spirituality, my politics . . . I'm religiously committed. I'm religiously committed to . . . like I'm willing to invest everything I have into social justice. Yeah, I could say that. I believe in it. It's where I invest my hope, it's where I invest my emotions, my sweat, my blood, my tears. This is what makes change, you know? Some people believe that going to temple will make change, will make things better, that there are bad times. Religion says that if you participate in this ritual . . . for me, participating in a demonstration is my way of saying that. This is how we're going to make change in real life, by lobbying, by changing, by organizing people . . . The purpose of life, for me, is to ensure that, whether it's holding a door for someone, whether it's helping someone along the way, it's just the way I am. I've always been like this since I was a kid, I guess. It's just like, if we stand there and we are a bystander, then we are complicit in the injustice that's going on and so that's why I take it upon myself to be an active participant and not be a bystander, because otherwise you can't control it and you can only control it so far. But the work that you do has to be influential.

This broader worldview about social justice and politics, one that I suspect most atheists and secularists would not disagree with, is in line with Christian Smith's (2009) research on religion and American youth. Much like with many of my Tamil respondents, Smith points out that when individuals were asked if it was easy to know what is right and wrong in their daily life most respondents noted that it was easy. As Smith (2009, 46) states, "Many hardly had to even think about it. When then asked how hard it is to know right and wrong—regardless of how difficult it is to do what is morally right—again, nearly everyone said it is easy. Morality is like common sense; unless you are actively resisting it, it is not hard to know what to do or to do it." Smith similarly points out that youth today are, in essence, philosophical consequentialists: if individuals hurt other people, it is plainly wrong; if they help others, it is the right thing to do. However, as Smith notes, many youth cannot explicate *why* they think hurting others is morally reprehensible. As he (2009, 47) argues, "To them it is just obvious . . . They did not appeal, for instance, to God's will, natural law, utilitarian principles, the Bible, or any other supposed source of universal moral truth to justify this belief. 'Don't hurt others' functions instead as a kind of free-floating, unjustified supposition that informs intuitive moral feelings and opinions." It is these kinds of spiritual and cosmopolitan beliefs—variously described by Levitt, Appiah, Smith and others—that influenced many of respondents' views on the conflict in Sri Lanka. In other words, as noted, virtually

none of the Tamil youth I spoke with thought that Hinduism or Christianity, first, had anything to do with the civil war in Sri Lanka and, second, had an influence in forming their own opinions about the future of the conflict. As one Tamil woman put it:

> I guess the way I try to live my life is to treat everyone with kindness and respect. So I mean with the conflict [in Sri Lanka], all we need to do is treat everybody with kindness and respect and really take care of each other, do unto others what you would want done unto you. And that's not what's happening right now.

One Tamil man in Toronto noted that while he did not fully support the LTTE, he felt an attachment to them arising out of his morals and values. As he pointed out:

> I understand why people consider Prabhakaran [the leader of the LTTE] a prophet or whatnot, because he has moved a lot of Tamils with his words and bravery, I guess. But probably, I am very secular in terms of what I think in politics as well. Why I think I have an attachment to the LTTE is because I feel like no one stood up for us, and the LTTE is the only one who actually did that. In the long run, I don't know if that was very helpful— we lost 80 thousand people, but it's just the principle, that we're being treated badly and, you know, like you have to say something to that, you have to do something against that, I believe, and I think the LTTE did that. I'm not sure if it was a good idea or not, but based on the principle, I think it was a good idea, so I would side with them.

Another Tamil man, when asked about how he viewed the relationship between religion and politics, responded after some reflection that his spirituality was very important:

> Like on a personal level, yes, I think it is really different from . . . I want equality and I would love to believe, I would really love to believe that if we role reversed everything, if Tamils were the majority in Sri Lanka and I was still of Tamil descent and Sinhalese were the ones being discriminated against, I really really would love to believe that I would support the Sinhalese cause in that scenario. So in that case, yes. I don't believe I am in this cause because I am a Tamil. I believe I am in this cause because of my spiritual values and my value of human life and my morals and dictating what is right and wrong.

To conclude, for many Tamil youth religious identity, ethnic identity, and diaspora activism (social movement identity) are intimately intertwined, with each influencing and informing the other. As discussed above, it cannot be assumed that Tamil diaspora activism is influenced simply by inherited religious traditions (be it Hinduism or Christianity). Rather, Tamil youth are equally influenced as their North American counterparts by broader religious changes taking place, which inevitably colors how they view the conflict in Sri Lanka, the plight of minority populations in the country, as well as the role of the diaspora going forward. Discussion of diaspora politics, particularly the post-LTTE turn to a kind of transnational human rights activism, will be significantly one-dimensional if the changing religious and spiritual identities of Tamil youth are not taken into account. Similarly, discussions of religion, atheism, and secularism will be equally misinformed if scholars fail to understand the different micro and meso-level movements that individuals are a part of, which also color their ir/religious identities. Individuals do not become atheists or secularists in a vacuum, and thus it is important for scholars to better understand the varying factors that impact the development of religious or non-religious identities.

Much of the scholarship on religious identities in North America remains bifurcated. Mainstream, white, and middle-class individuals are thought to undergo large-scale religious changes. They become more secular, atheistic, adopt spiritual-but-not-religious sensibilities, and/or practice a syncretistic form of religion. However, studies of religious identity in ethnic or immigrant communities are often limited to understanding generational differences in religious practice or the relationship between religion and ethnicity. It is too often assumed that the religious changes experienced by immigrant populations and their children are somehow *contained* and are, in some way, free from the influence of the large-scale changes scholars see taking place in the broader North American landscape. This approach is not only short-sighted, but also hinders our ability to more fully understand diaspora activism as well as the role of religion in imported conflicts.

As we recognize, then, that the labels we use are important, we also keep in mind that sometimes these labels are inadequate to fully capture the full social reality of individuals and their religious or non-religious life. Ethnic identities, social movement involvement, adherence to other groups, political or otherwise, all shape and influence their religious or secular worldviews. When individuals call themselves "secular Hindus" or say that they would select Roman Catholicism "if they had to fill out a form or something," but actually believe very different things, it reveals much about what we do not know about contemporary religious life and also suggests that we ought to re-examine what we think we do know.

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Chapter 6
Secularist Rituals in the US: Solidarity and Legitimization

Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith

This chapter is based on a longer and different version of a chapter that appears in our book Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America (Oxford University Press, 2014)

In recent years, the New Atheism and its polemical stance toward religion has been met with a kinder and more compassionate face, at least in the United States. Sometimes called the "New New Atheism," this camp emerged in the heat of battle between the New Atheists and theists, calling for a truce with religions as well as summoning secularists, our term for atheists and non-theistic humanists, to develop a more positive identity. Part of this agenda, as outlined in the bestselling book by Harvard humanist chaplain Greg Epstein, *Good Without God* (2009), is to cultivate a coherent ethical system, a greater sense of community and the practice of rituals.

Although a large segment of US secularists eschew the need for rituals, claiming that they have left such rudiments of religion behind, in this chapter we argue that rituals play a particularly important role in American organized humanist and atheist circles. The growth of the Sunday Assembly in the US, a movement of secularist "churches," started in Britain suggests that there is interest in community, rituals, even what can be called a "secular spirituality," among atheists. At the same time, more hardline atheists have opposed these developments.

We found that various kinds of secular rituals and other symbolic forms, such as commemorations, can play different functions—they may generate solidarity between atheists or play a legitimizing role for secularity in wider society. In this chapter, we look at the rituals created both intentionally or unintentionally by secularists. The results are based on findings of an internet survey of American atheist and secular humanist groups as well as ethnographic observations and textual analyses.

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American organized secularist groups have long been split between "debunking" or attacking religion—whether in a defensive or offensive mode—and trying to build community and a positive atheist identity. Positive atheism was evident in what was called religious humanism in the mid-twentieth century, which was most strongly embraced by the American Humanist Association, Ethical Culture and a significant segment of Unitarian-Universalists. The use of the term "religious" was meant to stress experiences and activities which are humanly significant, while excluding any supernatural beliefs and explanations of reality, but it has served to divide the various camps of atheists.

In more recent years, a form of positive atheism (a redundant notion for many atheists since they see their atheism, ispo facto, as positive) can be seen in the secular humanist movement, which is defined as a system of ethics rather than as a movement attempting to negate theism. Paul Kurtz, the late founder of the Council on Secular Humanism, stressed this point about the positive nature of secular humanism in contrast to the New Atheism, although at first he was strongly supportive of these writings (a change in attitude which played a part in his resignation from the council). Kurtz (2008) also increasingly spoke of the need for rituals and an appeal to the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual and scientific domains of life in establishing secular humanism.

Epstein's book seeks to rehabilitate religious humanism as he calls for secular versions of weddings, funerals, baby naming ceremonies, and observing secular holidays, such as "festivals of light" and solstices as substitutes for Christmas and Hanukah. He also popularizes and creates secular rituals and practices for secularists who are largely unaffiliated with atheist or humanist organizations. Following a functional definition of religion, Epstein proposes such alternatives as meditation (to induce the "relaxation response"), cognitive or rational emotive behavior therapy, which he calls the secularist equivalence of prayer, and cultivating a renewed appreciation of art.

6.1 Organized Secularists and Positive Atheism

How has the "New New Atheism" circulated and been received among secularist organizations? Inspired far more by Kurtz than Epstein, the Council for Secular Humanism and its parent body, Center for Inquiry (CFI), have inaugurated a "secular celebrant" program to provide officiates for non-religious weddings and other rites of passage. At the same time, as mentioned above, there has been controversy and divisions about the place of the New Atheism in the council's leadership (with a general consensus favoring the New Atheism and its more oppositional views and approach). What are their views on the importance of, and their participation in, secular rituals in their groups?

We asked 167 participants in US secular humanist, humanist, and atheist groups about these issues in an internet survey. Although it was not a random sample, we

attempted to obtain fair representation of the various organized secularist groups throughout the country. However, we especially focused on the secular humanists represented by the Council for Secular Humanism, not only because they are the largest subgroup of secularists but also because the umbrella group, at least under the leadership of Paul Kurtz, has been advocating some of the above changes. Most of our responses came from the Southeast and Northeast, which have markedly different constituencies—the former being far younger than found in most other segments of organized secularism. Pasquale (2010) found that the Pacific Northwest has the largest percentage of secular affiliates, so our largely Eastern sample may not be representative of organized secularism in the US. Generally, however, the demographic makeup of our survey reflects those of other studies, especially the greater proportion of men to women and whites to minorities who tend to participate in these groups (Pasquale 2010; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006).

The results of our survey showed that it is clear that most of the respondents want to retain the role of debunking religion, even if the "New New Atheists" might discourage it. This does not necessarily mean that they do not want to develop a positive image and agenda for secularists, but most do not want to discard their skeptical and even polemical edge toward religion. At the same time, almost half of respondents agreed that ritual needs to be given more attention in their organizations; only 26 % disagreed with the idea that such ceremonies should have a more regular role in such groups. Only 35 % had attended a secular ritual (we did not count those who cited rituals outside of these organizations, such as family events, Burning Man, sporting events), while almost 62 % said they would be open to participating in such ceremonies in their groups. However, there were some strong dissenters. As a 79 year-old self-identified secular humanist who was turned off by our survey stated: "The word 'ritual' drips with religiosity. Conformity is inherent in the meaning of the word. Atheists are 'free thinkers' and as such are quite capable of creating and personalize celebrations uniquely appropriate to each of their life events." She went on to assert that she would feel uncomfortable participating in a secular group that performed rituals and "would question the focus of such a group as being not truly atheistic."

However, over 32 % said rituals of some kind should have a regular part in their meetings. Most of these rituals involved rites of passage, such as weddings, funerals and baby naming ceremonies. But there were some more unusual ones, including de-baptism, where an atheist would renounce their baptism, usually with the help of a hair dryer, and winter solstice celebrations. There was some ambivalence about the role and affects of rituals. Only 29 % said they felt a sense of community through participating in rituals; just as often they said they found such a sense of community in the secularist meetings themselves. As for the emotional effects of awe, wonder and a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves, only 12.5 % reported feeling such emotions in these rituals.

6.2   A Diversity of Rituals

The rituals and practices we have observed in person and on the internet (through YouTube, for instance) have used meditation and contemplation and, in some cases, art as well as personal sharing in their meetings. This is not something particularly new for a religious humanist group such as Ethical Culture. The Ethical Culture service one of the authors attended included a "colloquium" that opened with taped music by Beethoven and an observed silence for about 5 or 10 min as people sat around a circle. The leader of the group then introduced the topic of pride, asking each participant what he or she was proud of in each of their lives. They shared events or achievements that gave them a source of pride. After that the music came on again, this time Mozart, and another 5 min of silence was held. Some of the participants closed their eyes while others stared off into space. After the leader recounted a story about pride, participants were free to express their further thoughts about the topic before the meeting closed.

A more formal service followed that was based on a talk given by the director of the society on the value of music. But again there were moments of silence interspersed between discussion and announcements. After the service, we found that the event drew a diverse following. Included were both secular humanists and religious humanists as well as one woman who said she espoused a belief in God, noting that at first the old time members had difficulty with such a belief but had grown more tolerant over time. But all agreed that formally religious elements, such as prayer, should have no part in the colloquy and the service.

One should expect these quasi-religious practices at a "religious humanist" group such as Ethical Culture, but the event was very similar to a secular humanist gathering we attended. The leader was introducing meditation practices to the group, again mixed with personal sharing. Periods of silence for meditation were announced with a small Tibetan prayer bowl being sounded. After the silent periods, participants were asked to recount experiences of anger and interpersonal conflict they had felt during the week and how they dealt with these feelings. Both meetings combined secular spiritual practices with a strong therapeutic element.

The rites-of-passage ceremonies suggest that a different dynamic is in play. These rituals are not only intended to unite a group of people together; they also seek to be "effective" in a more specific way. For instance, wedding ceremonies seek to be effective in celebrating the union of two individuals for families and friends while funeral services are largely seen as a source of consolation for the bereaved. Many of the texts used for these rituals in secularist groups are authored by Jane Wilson, a British humanist, although the secular celebrants we interviewed also write their own and draw on texts used by a national secular humanist organization such as the Center for Inquiry.

The ceremonies suggested in these texts follow what can be called a "low church" or informal Protestant style rather than a liturgical one, which is not unusual considering the influence of Unitarian-Universalism in organized secularist history. The funeral service is structured around opening words, followed by thoughts on

life and death, a tribute to the deceased, a simple committal of the remains (usually cremation) and, finally, closing words. These texts show an obvious, strong "this-worldly" quality; funeral ceremony texts, for instance, stress the importance of the deceased having a full and fulfilling life. The particular personal qualities of the deceased take precedence over a general service for the dead. Mourners are asked to look beyond their grief and to celebrate the relationships and contributions of the deceased that will remain. The references to non-theism are clearly stated in most of these funeral texts (Center for Inquiry 2012). As one humanist funeral text plainly states: "Those of us who accept the unity of the natural order, and believe that to die means the end of the conscious personality, look death in the face with honesty, with dignity and with calm" (Center for Inquiry 2012). Thus memory is the central component of secularist funerals, with mourners being asked to remember the deceased during happy times of their lives. Throughout the ritual there is a de-emphasis on intense emotion, with the celebrant balancing mourning with celebration of the deceased's life. The role of literature and poetry should also be noted. All of the samples recommend that celebrants read or play recorded poetry and prose throughout the ceremony, believing that such recitation "can soothe and release pent-up feelings in some people which will help in the long process of grieving" (Wilson 1990).

In a similar way, the wedding ceremonies outlined in the texts are very low church in structure and style. There tends to be more improvisation in wedding ceremony texts, with the secular celebrant program at CFI offering a variety of sample ceremonies that can be used for particular occasions (such as committal ceremonies and same-sex ceremonies). But the ceremonies tend to be structured along the lines of, first, opening thoughts about marriage or partnership—again—reading from literature and particularly poetry on the subject. The vows are then exchanged, with the prompting of the celebrant. The main ritual, besides the exchange of rings, is the lighting of a "unity candle," which symbolizes the sharing of "energy and love" between the couple. The couple is asked to express their love and equal responsibility to each other while they exchange rings. Perhaps somewhat unusual for an atheist ceremony, a CFI sample ceremony text includes a closing American Indian blessing (although without reference to a deity) just before the couple are pronounced married or partnered by the celebrant (Center for Inquiry 2012).

Various dimensions of secularist culture gain potency by standing somewhat apart from the larger society. Yet, insofar as innovations are often easier to institute and find less resistance on the margins, this "standing apart" is a position of opportunity for secularists. The idiosyncratic nature of the services and ceremonies we observed, which are acts of "bricolage" that decouple practices from a traditional context and reinvent them anew without any anxiety regarding authenticity, or linking such practices to traditions in the past, speak to such opportunity. Another opportunity for secularists can be found in large secular gatherings and rallies.

6.3   Solidarity and Secularist Public Events

We argue that secularist gatherings and events also function as rituals because they serve to symbolize unity and strength to both secularists themselves and the wider society. This could be seen at the 2012 Reason Rally in Washington, D.C., said to be one of the largest secularist gatherings in history. As the crowd was filtering into the National Mall, a band fired up the crowd with a rousing song that lampooned the belief in "Jesus coming again," mixing it with sexual innuendo. As the assembled crowd of about 10,000 clapped and sang along to other songs satirizing religion—mainly Christianity—a large costumed puppet figure of Jesus danced among the spectators. "We're not here to bash anyone's faith, but if it happens, it happens," comedian and master of ceremonies Paul Provenza announced to laughter and applause at the outset of the event. The bashing and attacks on religion, mainly Christianity (often in its evangelical and Catholic forms), happened as much—if not more—than positive portrayals of secularism and were in sync with new atheist leader and scientist Richard Dawkins' advice to "mock and ridicule" people's beliefs. When we asked an official from the Secular Students Alliance, a group prominent in organizing the event, about whether the ridiculing of religion was productive, he replied with a nervous laugh that "this is what we do."

Large video screens positioned around the Mall allowed participants to view themselves as part of a significant gathering. The event not only served to physically mobilize secularists in a particular location; it also acted to emotionally liberate and strengthen solidarity among participants in highlighting their common identity, allowing participants to come out and speak out publicly as secularists. The speeches, music, and especially the comedy, not to mention the confrontations with Christian protesters, managed to meld these independent freethinkers into something of a convivial community. These secularists, who within their particular meetings and groups often engage in open and critical debate among and about themselves and their own diverse identities and interests, publicly came together and took their respective and collective interests and identities for granted. In this way, they put on a unified public front and performance. Despite different opinions, agendas, identities, and interests, then, these freethinkers found a common rallying point, *not within but against.*

Almost every secularist public event we attended commenced with a segment devoted to poking fun at the foibles of religious groups and people, or with a performance of music satirizing religious themes. In her study of British secular humanists, Susan Budd (1977, 266) found that the condemnation of religion in these groups can "act as a protective ideology, since it becomes a defining characteristic of the movement and a method of uniting otherwise dissident opinions." To a casual observer, the tweaking and provocation of religious America might seem to be the least effective strategy for atheists to gain political or cultural acceptance. Yet, aside from their local atheist and secular humanist meetings and cyberspace, there are few venues or spaces for secularists to collectively come together and vent their frustrations and sense of alienation. Humor is an important component of this

venting—both in the freethought culture generally and at the rallies specifically. As a 41-year-old atheist activist from California remarked, "We all make fun of everything, including freethought. In a free marketplace of ideas everything is open to ridicule. If there is something that can't be made fun of, then there's something wrong." As a symbolic affirmation of values, secularist rallies often use humor to render pressing concerns and future desires into a communal experience. Strategically using humor helps constitute public rallies as festive, carnival-like spaces separate from the mundane where secularists can suspend ordinary roles and reality. Within this context, participants are invited to express themselves and collectively mock their adversaries in ways not typically afforded to them in their everyday lives. In this way, rallies act as a mechanism not only for in-group integration but for creating a ritualized space in which challenges to the status quo and symbolic hierarchies can be carried out. Other avenues for secularists' self-legitimation and redefining their position and identity in American society involve commemorations such as Darwin Day.

6.4 Commemorations, Rituals and the Legitimization of Secularism

As organized secularity has expanded the interest in and debate about the importance of rituals, commemorations, celebrations and other observances have become more common. This interest has manifested itself throughout history with numerous attempts to create new holidays, rituals and other rites-of-passage to mark secular events and movements. This can be seen in the French Revolution's architects' attempt to wipe the historical slate clean, abolishing holy days and observances, including the Christian calendar's trajectory originating in Christ's birth. In its place, the inauguration of the revolution was established as year 1, accompanied by a panoply of observances of revolutionary "saints" and commemorations to legitimize and celebrate the new order. Organized secularism, at least in the US, was modeled on a low church Protestantism that generally eschewed observances, not to mention developing a cult of saints and martyrs. Yet as contemporary secularism has sought to provide a community for atheists and compete with theists, there have been several attempts to create secular holidays and commemorations.

Two of the most prominent of these observances have been the winter (and, to a lesser degree, summer) solstice and Darwin Day. Since the solstice celebrations are also shared with Neo-Pagans and New Age practitioners, it is difficult to study many of these events as strictly secularist observances (many atheist and humanist groups list general solstice celebrations that are not strictly secular in makeup). The winter solstice celebrations sponsored by secularist groups are often treated more like holiday celebrations (usually held at a restaurant) for those uncomfortable with Christmas, but show minimal atheist or humanist content. "HumanLight" is another secular alternative to Christmas, celebrating the "humanist values" of tolerance,

compassion, empathy, honesty, free inquiry, reason and rationality. The event was started in New Jersey by the New Jersey Humanist Network in 2001, but does not appear to have spread throughout the secularist community. In a similar way, "Blasphemy Day," which was established both to celebrate freedom of speech and attack religious values, was started by more hard-line atheists and has not been taken up by the softer humanist groups. For this reason, we will focus on Darwin Day as the most prominent secularist commemoration.

6.5   Celebrating Darwin and Science

The celebration of Darwin Day did not naturally evolve as a commemoration on the secularist calendar. Darwin Day was organized by the humanist community at Stanford University in 1995, although there were earlier Darwin celebrations. Massimo Pigliucci, a secular humanist philosopher, also independently initiated an annual Darwin Day at the University of Tennessee in 1997. These commemorations were viewed both as a homage to Darwin and as a celebration of science for the secularist and academic community. A national organization to coordinate Darwin Days began in 2000. The event became more widespread in colleges and universities around the country, which also served to create an important link between academia and secularist organizations. While commemorations generally are aimed at unifying and providing identity to the people or groups celebrating them, our observations of four Darwin Day events in the New York-New Jersey area in 2012, lead us to argue that such observances play a part in legitimizing secularism to a broader public.[1]

"Screw the creationists! We don't care about them. Science has already answered them. This is the day to celebrate science," said Calvin Dane, the director of Long Island's Ethical Humanist Society, when one of the authors asked him why the society's Darwin Day event did not pay much attention to creationism. It was the society's fourth Darwin Day commemoration and, like the others, a scientist was invited to lecture on an aspect of evolution. About 75 to 100 members and visitors filled the society hall as the service commenced with a rap song about Darwin's discovery of evolution. Signs of "Darwin fishes" lined the auditorium. The lecture was a fairly scholarly account of natural selection. The lecturer made no reference to atheism and it was only during the question-and-answer session that someone asked about creationism and its claim that the creation of the eyeball was proof of an intelligent designer. After the lecture, a leader told the assembly that the commemoration was "not about debate but about inclusion. Here everyone can come together over science." After a guitar and vocal rendition of the theme song from the sitcom The Big Bang Theory, everyone was invited to a science fair, as the society's children had set up exhibits and experiments throughout the auditorium.

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[1]We would like to thank Ayako Sairenji for her observation of the Darwin Day in New Jersey.

The irenic and innocuous tone of the event seemed planned. In an interview Dane said that Darwin Day is a way that the Ethical Humanist Society reaches out to the community and especially to children. The event always draws visitors and some attendees have become regulars and joined the society.

Even in the more strongly atheistic secular humanist society in New Jersey where we observed another Darwin Day, the tone was more scholarly than polemical. Along with selling Darwin and evolution fishes, the event, attended by 80–100 people, was based around a scholarly lecture by a biologist on the myths and misconceptions of evolution. Interestingly, Darwin was introduced as a "deeply spiritual but not religious" thinker, and there were few criticisms of organized religion.

The question of whether or not Darwin was an atheist and whether or not evolution endorses atheism is part of the broader political and symbolic struggles in the US around the relationship between science and atheism. Atheists like Richard Dawkins and PZ Myers actively promote the view that there is a positive correlation between science and atheism, wherein knowledge and study of the former inevitably leads one to the latter. A more moderate position is expressed by those like Eugenie Scott and Stephen Jay Gould who argue that religion and science necessarily ask and address different questions and aspects of the human condition, and are therefore not necessarily incompatible. Flanking the extreme end of the anti-science, postmodern spectrum is sociologist Steve Fuller who assertively seeks to disavow any link whatsoever (be it historical, social, or cognitive) between science and atheism and propagates the idea that intelligent design is scientifically legitimate (which he argued at the 2005 Dover school board trials no less). And, finally, there are those atheists like Jerry Fodor who challenge and critique certain aspects of Darwin's theory of evolution.

A Darwin Day event held a few days after the event in New Jersey by a secular humanist group on Long Island may have unsettled Charles Darwin himself. The scientist who was scheduled to speak could not make the engagement, and after a brief talk by a member, the meeting morphed into a free-wheeling discussion on evolution and its implications. A man with a Southern accent said that evolution raises more questions than answers and that the "theory is running into dead ends." Another attendee asked with some puzzlement, "What is this fascination with Darwin among secular humanists? Darwin had a big part in [explaining] the structure of the universe and our place in it. We do depend on experts. We have a right to ask how he did it." One of the members shot back in an exasperated tone, "We need a holiday to promote and celebrate science and rational thinking—it's an important way to get together and affirm that." A middle-aged woman turned the discussion to the controversy of teaching evolution and questioned the need to interpret the theory in a non-theistic light: "Why can't we just teach evolution and let people attach their faith to it if they want?" Strangely enough, we later found out that some of those questioning the secularist interpretation of evolution were regulars of the society; the small group had two ministers who attended the events, often playing devil's advocates, while others defined themselves as agnostics (we learned that the secular humanist group had lost its charismatic leader and other members over the years).

In fact, it was only at a Darwin Day event at Hofstra University on Long Island that the strong critique against creationism and even theism that one might expect to hear from secularist organizations was given a major role in the proceedings. The university had sponsored Darwin Day events for a decade, often in a celebratory manner: a sizable cake was served, dramatic presentations were given, and one time a professor dressed up like Darwin (with obligatory mutton chop sideburns). They have included a joint Valentine's and Darwin Day conference on Darwin and sex, and a reenacted debate between Darwin and David Hume and how they would address intelligent design.

The celebrations at Hofstra began when one of the professors was trying to find a way to teach evolution after visiting the Museum of Natural History with students. During this time, another professor heard about the national organization and decided to link up with it to publicize their event. There was no association with the secularist groups that had first inaugurated Darwin Day—it was only after holding the event at Hofstra that the organizers learned that secularists were also commemorating the day. But the 2012 Darwin Day at Hofstra clearly had creationism in its line of fire. The first presentation by a geology professor showed footage from the creationist video *Darwin's Dilemma* and argued that the fossils record used by creationists disproved creationism. Other presentations criticized intelligent design and religion in general as being unscientific. These are fairly standard views found in most science departments at universities. We were, however, struck by the fact that the secularist organizations' celebration of Darwin Day that we observed tended to stress the positive elements of science rather than the negative nature of religion while the university event had a more explicitly anti-religious theme.

A look at the Darwin Day listings for 2012 by the national organization suggests a strong overall academic orientation. The commemorations were either sponsored by a university or by a group such as the Student Secular Alliance, or were special programs of a secularist group featuring a recognized scientist or scholar. The academic pedigree of these commemorations helps enhance Charles Darwin's role as a "secularist saint" among atheists and humanists. Coalescing with the growing academic sponsorship of naturalism, the influence of neo-Darwinism and the "turn to nature" evident in disciplines from psychology to economics creates a growing place for organized secularism in academia and among scientific elites. However, it is actually Darwin's recognition by the wider academic culture and American society more generally that is of most use for secularists in their quest for spreading the good news of science and creating a more positive, populist identity.

6.6   Atheist Individualism and Rituals

American secularists understand ritual differently than their American religious counterparts. What we take away from rituals varies according to what we bring to them. Being a product of such an individualistic culture, secularists in the US bring an overriding concern with remaining independent and free thinking, and one of

their main "collective" activities/activism remains debunking religion and theism. This helps us make sense of a few things. First, it explains American secularists' aversion to the term "spirituality" (and the reason some respondents disliked or disapproved of the term "secular spirituality"). As noted, throughout our survey we had respondents both confirm the positive role of ritual in their lives and deny any spiritual component to such. It also allows us to understand why secularists view personalized and less formal rituals more positively. As a 60-year-old secular humanist from Pittsburg put it, drawing on the herding cat analogy (an analogy that was mentioned more than once by different respondents): "In this cat herd, each will decide his own preference." Often respondents were reluctant to be too specific regarding the whole issue, stating that it is up to each individual to decide for themselves what they need, want, find pleasure in, and if they want to participate in rituals.

"What makes religion distinctive from everything else," argues Randall Collins, is announced in its symbols, which affirm the existence of a sacred realm explicitly higher than mundane life" (Collins 2010, 4). Where religion has historically understood ritual as a means for becoming part of a larger community and transcending "the worldly," secularists understand ritual as a means for celebrating oneself as human and dwelling in a contingent world. For secularists rituals are less about group integration and more about creative meaning-making grounded in an emphasis on the individual. Any community-oriented rituals seem to be largely of secondary importance for secularists. In fact, when we asked about the community-generating nature of rituals, the respondents (when not outright dismissing the need for community) often stressed that their local meetings fulfilled their need for community.

Even the most individualistic of religions still places a sacred figure or text at the center of their rituals, whereas if we wanted to draw a comparison among secularists we could at best maybe point to an intellectual personality or a "canon" of texts (perhaps the writings of new atheists) similar to what one might find in an academic discipline. The comparison to academia is apt given the intellectual and mind-heavy orientation of the culture and the fact that science is the main meaning-structure secularists draw upon to "replace" religion (Smith 2011), even as science is detrimental to meaning-making insofar as it has been one of the main sources of disenchantment (in the name of truth and the search thereof) in the modern world. This disenchanting and demystifying aspect of science is one of the main draws for American secularists, and their fostering of an oppositional culture in a US society that is viewed as religious, irrational, and anti-intellectual. It should also be noted that in terms of activism, secularists are not using science to pursue the truth per se; they are using the authority or cultural power of science to press their claims. In this respect, the issue of whether or not atheism can rightly claim a prominent place in the progress of scientific achievement historically, or presently have a correct view or understanding of Darwin's legacy, is inconsequential. More consequential, in terms of politics, is whether or not such a scientific discourse and narrative can be a strong resource for a more mainstream, popular mobilization in the US. Using the rational authority of science is different than using the moral

authority of God. Religious interests can connect their political motives and goals to God's will. They can also mobilize their constituents more easily due to the inbuilt community ties and a stronger organizational infrastructure (where there are often strong links between individuals rooted in local settings and larger organizations and institutions at the state and national level in the US). Science, at least as a practice, remains open to contestation and revision by its very nature in a way that religion does not. For this reason, using science as a stable cultural resource and an ideological tool for political ends, organizing, and community-building in a country that is still strongly religious and often reluctant to side too strongly with science (especially outside urban centers) is more difficult than using religion, an issue that American secularists, insofar as they have goals beyond the epistemic, will have to continue to address. No doubt knowledge of this matter is in the background of Epstein and Kurtz's call for a more positive atheism, an atheism perhaps informed by science but rooted in a humanistic, universalist ethics.

A de-emphasis on the role of science in secularism can also be found in Alain de Botton's controversial call for secularists to use religion for their own purposes (De Botton 2012). De Botton—who claims that the most boring question you can ask about religion is whether or not the whole thing is true—is concerned with how to adapt or reorient certain aspects of religious ritual tradition without replicating what he sees as problematic in religion, going so far as to suggest an atheists' temple for non-believers to meditate. When asked in an interview why atheists throw away the useful aspects of religion, de Botton had the following to say:

> I think it's because of a great intellectual honesty: I cannot scientifically appreciate God so I'm going to have to leave all that behind. I'm going to have to give up all those benefits because something doesn't make sense. That's a very honest and very brave, lonely decision . . . All sorts of things have become impossible because they seem too religious. There are any number of moments in secular life when atheists say "oh, that's getting a bit religious isn't it." I think we need to relax about approaching some of these areas – they don't belong to religion, religion happened to sit on them. They're for everybody (Lawton 2012.)

Sam Harris—a hard liner, and one of the so-called four horseman of the New Atheism—has come out in defense of the positive aspects and usefulness of meditation as well, stating that one can practice it "without believing anything preposterous about the world." And, like de Botton, he has expressed some frustration with the fact that "many atheists reject such experiences out of hand, as either impossible, or if possible, not worth wanting" simply because of the religious association (Snider 2005; Harris 2007). In expressing such views, de Botton and Harris have faced critiques from fellow non-believers. PZ Myers, in one of the harsher critiques, referred to de Botton as a "fence-sitting parasite" who, in advocating the use of religion, sees "a personal opportunity to pander to the believers" for his own personal gain (Myers 2012). *Free Inquiry* editor Tom Flynn (2005) accused Harris of allowing his ideas to become muddled on account of his use of spiritual language. Flynn and Myers' adherence to a hard-nosed, hard-won rationalism commits them to oppose sociological (read: sympathetic) views of religion and ritual that would rationalize such by pointing out the positive function they serve for the individuals

involved. To point out that there is some deep-seated human need for ritual, or that engaging in such action satisfies psychological needs for participants is little more than religious apologetics for Myers (2011b) and Flynn (2012). As Myers (2011a) assertively argued in a post on Epstein's use of religion as a model to structure atheist meetings: "No gods, no masters, no dogma, and no goddamned priests . . . not even atheist priests."

It is not too surprising to find that the term spirituality or the idea that non-believers should use religion give many atheists pause for concern and incite condemnation. It is going to be a hard sell to convince the majority of atheists that "mysticism is a rational enterprise" (Harris 2004, 221). Spirituality and mysticism carry a negative connotation and are synonymous with religion for many non-believers. In his lecture, "The Problem with Atheism," the same lecture in which he defends spirituality, Harris makes the case for not self-identifying as atheist on account of the negative perceptions attached to it. Such advice significantly downplays the strong, and often primary, identity commitment atheism holds for many secularists. To self-identify as atheist—sometimes at great emotional and social cost—is a meaningful achievement for many, not a default position of indifference, or simply a condition of the absence of belief in a society that is already sufficiently secularized. Non-believers do not have a problem self-identifying as atheists, they have a problem with the fact that self-identifying as such is a problem at all. In fact, it is precisely this strong, personal identity commitment—often archived against traditions and belief systems they were socialized into within a cultural environment where religious belief still tends to be the norm—that leads American secularists to rhetorically valorize reason above all else and defensively rebel against anything that even remotely implies religion, including rituals.

On a second look, however, these public performances and self-secularity rituals clearly show that secularists are interested in more than reason or science. Science in some form or another may inform and play a huge role in secularist practice and culture. This does not, however, mean that individual secularists are not interested in activities and practices beyond science. As our research has shown, secularists are experimenting with or are supportive of a host of experiential and expressive activities—from appreciating music and art to contemplating and experiencing the marvels of nature, from meditating and practicing yoga to expressing one's self through the arts. Such activities do not necessarily compete with their understandings of science and their secularist practice but can actually complement them. For example, at services such as weddings, music is used to set the mood or meditate on the wonders of nature; at rallies, humor is employed in talks, lectures, and mockery; and many respondents pointed to the importance of the arts in their life and activism. Of course, why should this not be the case? Secularists are human after all. The fact that this has to be pointed out speaks to the fact that secularists often suffer from the same one-dimensional stereotypes they are so often accused of perpetuating against religion. Moreover, in looking at the recent literature, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that atheists have spent a far greater deal of time thinking and writing about religion than American religious interests ever have of atheists as a group. Atheists are always imagining what the world looks like from a believer's point of

view. Of course, American non-believers have had no choice but to try to understand religion given how religious the US is; that believers now occasionally are forced to consider the other side within this context speaks to some form of success. Rituals, in spite of rhetoric to the contrary, are an integral part of such success.

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Chapter 7
Believing to Belong: Non-religious Belief as a Path to Inclusion

Spencer Culham Bullivant

7.1 Introduction

In the United States there is a relatively small group of individuals that is engaging with their religious neighbours through a discourse focused on expressions of non-religious beliefs. Behind this phenomenon is the desire of these individuals to engage with the pervasive, but tacit religious influence in American society; gaining recognition and acceptance through that engagement. The evidence for this expression was established at an explicitly non-religious summer camp called Camp Quest where I spent a week over the summer of 2011. Based on my observations and experiences there, as well as over the course of several interviews, I argue that this expression of non-religious beliefs is a product of the particular social, political, and religious context of the United States, and is a phenomenon that, though not explicitly hostile to those who are not religious, evinces an environment where some non-religious Americans feel excluded and marginalized. Also, by utilizing a discourse that hinges on belief, the families at Camp Quest Montana are engaging in a complex process of identity formation that places them within American society while simultaneously distancing themselves from one of that society's assumed prerequisites: religious belief. They are struggling to express their sense of belonging to that America while rejecting, not the existence of religion per se, but the necessity of religious belief for that belonging to be recognized, thus creating an elastic space for non-religious belief as well as acceptance into and from the larger religious American society.

Below I discuss the problem of defining who non-religious individuals and groups are, provide primary data from Camp Quest participants that illustrate their

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feelings of exclusion, as well as demonstrating the foundation and form of their non-religious beliefs, and establish the religiously pervasive context of the United States. The ethnographic nature of this research means that, wherever possible, I have used my participants' own words.

7.2   The Problem of Definition and Methodology

When dealing with those who do not self-identify as religious there is a continuing problem of how to define what this term actually means as well as determining who does or can fit into this category.[1] Though attempts have been made to create pragmatic definitions, the fact remains that Americans who are not religious have not yet agreed on what to call themselves, nor do they really show any interest in doing so. One of the parents at Camp Quest referred to herself as a 'freethinker', saying:

> [I'm] free to believe, you know change my beliefs, have my beliefs change and . . . I wouldn't say evolve because I wouldn't say they get better necessarily, I kind of go through phases, so I think freethinker . . . I'm comfortable with because it's not defined, it's pretty open, which I try to be. Not so open minded that my brain falls out . . . [Laughter]

This was the preferred term for self-description at Camp Quest Montana with most of the people preferring it to the alternatives of skeptic, atheist, or agnostic. There was some contention as one parent thought that the term freethinker was perhaps a little redundant and just wanted to be thought of as a 'thinker'. Also, one of the teenage children openly and proudly claimed his identity as an 'atheist' while another teenager said "I definitely don't think that I'm an atheist, just because I feel like atheist is a harsh word and it's a title and I don't really like titles. So why should we have a title, we're just people that believe in what we believe in." Even in this relatively small group that evinced some agreement on the benefits of the term 'freethinker' there was quite a range of definitions that varied in use over the course of the camp.

No single and definitive term was consistently applied by those at Camp Quest Montana which is why throughout this chapter I will use the much more general terms, taken from the work of Lois Lee, 'non-religion' or 'non-religious', noting that these terms were not used explicitly by those at Camp Quest. Lee defines non-religion as "any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious" (Lee 2012, 131). In Lee's definition we move away from notions of hostility or indifference to religion, though these are still important and present in many non-religious groups and expressions, and focus on the ways in which the non-religious differentiate themselves from their religious peers (Lee 2012, 131). Lee's definition is useful because the people at Camp Quest reference religion in determining how

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[1]For a detailed discussion see Campbell (1971, 17).

to define themselves. Their non-religion is held up against the religious beliefs and practices of their neighbours as well as their conceptualization of religion as a whole. Lee's definition is also useful in light of the work on non-religion by Colin Campbell. Campbell encouraged those studying non-religion, or irreligion in his terms, to understand non-religious expression as a response to the religious environment (Campbell 1971, 21), or how that environment is perceived to be by the non-religious, allowing the non-religion found at Camp Quest Montana to act as a cypher through which an understanding of American society can be gained.

The methodology for this project is primarily ethnographic, which is the obtaining of data through first-hand cultural investigation (Spradley and McCurdy 1988, 3) in order to re-examine taken-for-granted features or characteristics of a given culture or group (Spradley and McCurdy 1988, 4). Utilizing ethnographic work required that I have actual discussions with non-religious individuals, a necessary step in gaining a current picture of the non-religion expressed by my participants. Efforts were made to ensure that the participants guided discussions and interviews rather than have them adhere to any set list of questions. An ethnographic approach provides an essential piece of the non-religious landscape through which individuals who identify themselves as belonging to some form of non-religious category actually understand that self-identification as well as providing on-the-ground data for how non-religious individuals form their own views, including but not limited to lived experiences, the influence of current or historical authors, friends, and family members.

An ethnographic study of non-religious ideas and the ways that non-religious Americans interact with those ideas can reveal the limitations of taking an ideological or philosophical approach to modern non-religion. These approaches are based on limited sources and tacitly assume all non-religious individuals to be antagonistic towards religious belief. Fomenting the popularity of these approaches are best-selling books by popular writers like Richard Dawkins and his somewhat unofficial cohort 'The Four Horsemen of Atheism'[2] who vocally promote their particular form of non-religion that displays a fierce antagonism towards religious belief and strongly questions the existence of God, gods, or goddesses. Dawkins, along with other modern non-religious authors, represent only a small fraction of the potential ways that non-religious beliefs can be communicated and incorporated into a non-religious life. It is unwarranted to discuss a whole group of individuals as if they exactly mirror a small but vocal portion of their community. My project uses ethnographic methods to find and analyse the current state of non-religious *life* and *practice* in the United States, what sources and influences inform and form the tapestry of this life, and how these lived experiences are communicated within burgeoning non-religious communities. If we were to continue to discuss and analyse non-religion based solely on the most visible forms of its expression, effectively ascribing these ideas to all non-religious groups and individuals, we would be inadvertently claiming that this entire diverse group is antagonistic to religion and religious belief when the actual practice of their non-religion remains unknown.

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[2]This group includes Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.

The ethical concerns were considerable seeing as this work involved teenagers and young children. Efforts had to be taken to ensure the informed consent of all participants, including the comfort of all people involved, the anonymity of the participants, should they choose to remain so, and the lack of any harm experienced by participants both during and after fieldwork. The eight adults who attended the camp were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could remove their consent, if given, at any time. These parents were also asked to sign consent forms on behalf of their children before any information gained from observation or conversation with these children could be used. The children themselves were broken up into two groups based on age. After consent was given by the parents, on their children's behalf, the six teenagers (aged 12–17) were asked to sign assent forms that had similar wording to the adult consent forms. The language was simplified in order to be easier to understand, but only slightly. For the four younger children, the assent forms were worded very simply in order for the contents of the assent forms to be understood. These assent forms informed the children that there would be no negative repercussions if they did not participate, nor would there be any camp activities that they could not participate in should they choose not to sign the forms. If they gave their assent to participate they were told that they could remove that assent at any time. All efforts were made to ensure that participants, regardless of their age, felt empowered and in control of the data being collected and that their camp experience would not be altered regardless of their decision to participate.

7.3   Camp Quest Montana

The primary data for this chapter was gathered at Camp Quest Montana where I spent a week interacting and participating with those in attendance during the summer of 2011. This particular camp is part of a network of Camp Quests which are explicitly non-religious summer camps formed for "the children of Atheists, Freethinkers, Humanists, Brights, or whatever other terms might be applied to those who hold a naturalistic, not supernatural world view" (Camp Quest Inc. 2011). The larger body that is Camp Quest Inc. is an organization consisting of numerous camps all over the United States, one in Canada, and several in Britain, with this overarching organization describing itself as an "independent educational not-for-profit organization" founded in 1996 in the United States which acts only as a guiding administrative body (SoFree.ca 2011).

Camp Quest Montana's camp format deviated slightly from Camp Quests in other areas where the standard practice is for children to be dropped off at the start of camp and then picked up in a week's time. This particular camp was created specifically as a family camp where both parents and children of all ages could come and stay for the entire week. At the time this was the only Camp Quest that followed this format. Though all ages of children are welcome, Camp Quest Montana consisted of children ranging from 7 to 16 years old. There were a total

of 18 individuals at the camp, including the parents, campers, and camp organizers. Activities held at the camp included nature walks, music parodies, making pastries over the fire, knee-boarding, swimming, eating, soap carving, jewelry making, kayaking, and tie-dying shirts. Along with these more traditional camp activities there were short presentations on the value of the scientific method, a group activity called Socrates Cafe that sought to challenge the children to engage their critical thinking faculties, as well as more formal talks by local non-religious individuals. These activities were loosely scheduled so as to foster a casual atmosphere where the children could come and go as they please, engaging in activities at their own discretion. Through the creation of this open and informal atmosphere, the children found that they were at ease and therefore felt open to discussing their non-religious beliefs with each other and with myself. This casual atmosphere also allowed for less intrusive observation than may have been the case with other camps, and created an attitude that was receptive to questions concerning what actually constitutes their non-religion.

For the first day much of the activity at Camp Quest consisted of standard conversations regarding the weather and scenery, handshaking as each new family arrived, the sprint or slow march towards acceptance that every child or adult goes through when faced with new people in a new place, as well as a general settling in after what, for most of the people at Camp Quest, was a long journey. After I had spent 2 days at camp and everyone had become more comfortable with each other, several issues began to emerge. The first of which was that the people at Camp Quest Montana felt that much of the American populace—their neighbours, teachers, random people that they met and had passing conversations with, or even friends and family members—perceived non-religious people in America to have a god-shaped hole in their lives where religious belief once existed or should exist. Essentially, they found that the religious Americans around them assumed emptiness when it came to specific non-religious beliefs and non-religious belief in general. I found that for the parents at Camp Quest this was the primary reason for bringing their children to an explicitly non-religious camp. For these parents Camp Quest offered a way to expose their children to other non-religious youths in the hope of showing them that it was possible to not believe in a god, or not hold religious beliefs, while still holding and communicating an affirmative set of beliefs and hopefully instilling these positive non-religious beliefs in the children.

7.4 Non-religious Beliefs

As a result of observations and interviews with those at Camp Quest a tentative system of non-religious belief can be conveyed. According to those observed at Camp Quest the use and understanding of science can lead a person to the subsequent beliefs that there is innate value shared by all humanity, a respect for the environment and connection to nature, as well as a belief in the importance of freedom of speech and conscience, and the importance of this life, stemming out of an agnostic stance towards the existence of an afterlife.

The individuals found at Camp Quest believe that through the use of scientific inquiry and the principles established by that inquiry moral tenets can be discerned that are equal to or better than those that are developed from religious teachings. The starting point for this is an interpretation of science, but what comes from that beginning is a set of beliefs formed out of the shared biological and chemical history of all things. The question of how to conceptualize belief arises, which is no simple task, and this may not be the place for a theoretical discussion. For our purposes I will refer to 'beliefs' as something that is thought to be true about the world. In the case of the non-religious, simply denying the existence of gods does not necessarily constitute a belief in and of itself (Eller 2010, 7). Regardless of how we conceptualize belief, the group that I encountered at Camp Quest Montana communicated that they did have beliefs as well as the need for those beliefs to be openly shared with each other and the larger American society. One parent discussed the need for these beliefs by saying:

> We're trying to teach them to speak in positive terms. One of the things that we notice when people ask them "You're an atheist, what does that mean?" We find them answering "It means I don't believe in anything". And we're trying to teach them to stop answering in the negative. To answer in the positive, to use positive language and to say "I believe in . . . " and "I believe we can find answers to what makes us sick. I believe that science can help me to discover . . . I believe that we can build a rocket that takes me to the edge of the universe." For them, unfortunately, the lingo that comes along with living in the public sphere teaches them to answer in the negative all the time. "I don't believe in anything. I don't believe in blah, blah, blah." Because their response is often to react to the religious language that permeates our everyday existence and that's unfortunate. It's in our literature, it's in our fiction, and its in everything. Even the most popular books that my children love, the Twilight series, the Vampires, the Werewolves, and we all love it and we all love to read it and we all love to be a part of it. Most of us grew up Catholic, unfortunately, and so its there, it's in our background. We relate to it and we're able to deal with it, but our kids aren't growing up that way. So the religious lingo doesn't have the same connotations. So they're responding negatively to it, so our goal here is to teach them to use positive language. That's a little bit difficult for us because we want them to say "I believe in good things, I believe in the power of nature."

Another parent at the camp discussed the ways that Camp Quest was not just a secular camp or a science camp, while also discussing how science can be used as a foundation for beliefs when he said:

> I guess, what I would say that [Camp Quest] offers that's different from a science camp . . . you know we're not really here so much to focus in large part on scientific experimentation in any rigorous way, to go through science projects over and over again, or to cover any specific science curriculum. Where the science fits in for me is to form a foundation upon which to have a belief system as I talked about before. In other words because we can explain things around us in the natural world, that I think leads us to a very special view of our existence here and I think it's also helpful at informing positive attributes that I want to encourage in the world, like compassion and social justice. That may seem like a leap but when considering, when a child can understand, truly understand, evolution then the natural extension of that is they understand how incredibly closely connected they are to one another and to their world. So it would seem that a natural extension of that is a respect for your environment, a recognition of how we may be contributing to global warming problems and how that may become important. A recognition of how since they're so biologically connected to everyone in our world how that makes it important to

be compassionate for people on the other side of the world that may not have the benefits that our children have, parents, food to eat, shelter. How we can recognize the importance of paying attention to issues of violence and suppression of women throughout the world because it seems to me that it's a natural extension of understanding how connected you are to everything to direct social dialogue in an appropriate way.

The final part of this quote shows that there is a distinct moral component to the beliefs being expressed at Camp Quest, including the treatment of women within religious traditions as well as a generally high level of compassion for the individual.

According to one parent at Camp Quest, the expression of non-religious beliefs is vital to gaining acceptance into American society. This perspective is due to their perception of the prevalent ideas in the US regarding the non-religious, namely, that they do not believe in anything, which carries a moral component and one that bars, restricts, or at the very least modifies the ability of non-religious people to have full membership in the larger American community. She stated that: "The idea of not believing is 'oh that means that we can do whatever we want because you don't have any beliefs whatsoever." Both the parents and older children at Camp Quest had experienced an overall perception from others that to be non-religious meant that they believed in nothing. This was exacerbated by a past experience at another non-religious camp held the previous year. I learned from the co-organizers of the camp that the motivating force behind the creation of this new Camp Quest in Montana was a somewhat negative experience at Camp Inquiry, another non-religious camp organized by the humanist organization Center for Inquiry. Describing his experience at Camp Inquiry one of the older children said:

Last camp, at Camp Inquiry, there was a lot of sitting around. Either sitting around doing nothing or sitting around listening to some guy who talks to adults and older people giving us the same speech and we're a lot younger, talking about some Chupacabra or something that we don't care about.

The organizers felt that Camp Inquiry, with its aggressive emphasis on intensive and unrelenting *doubt*, offered little for the children that was positive and relevant to the lives of an average non-religious youth in the United States. They left Camp Inquiry feeling that it had stripped their children down to hollow shells saying that they felt the children left Camp Inquiry with the mentality of "not believing in anything." Instead of this feeling of emptiness, the parents and organizers of Camp Quest Montana hoped to expose their children to ways that they could communicate a belief in something without the negative relationship with religion. Another parent at Camp Quest stated that he and his son "Prefer to talk about what we believe rather than what we do not believe." Also, during a presentation on the ways that science can provide things to believe in, the message that was communicated was that the children, instead of saying that they believed in nothing, should ask themselves "what do I believe" rather than "what don't I believe." The parent who ran this science presentation later said:

We can foster an environment where we do believe. I think that what happens to these kids a lot and even to us as adults is that we're … we have an easier time vocalizing what we don't believe in than we do verbalizing what we do believe in, and what I want to see our kids begin to experience is that not only do they have a lot to believe in, but they have a

lot to believe in that probably offers a more beautiful and more comprehensive and a more thorough approach to our day to day experience and the world and the universe than any conventional faith. So I don't want them to be left with "I don't believe in that." . . . So I want them to really shift their focus to those things that we do know, that explain our existence, that offer a beauty of day to day experience so that they can feel empowered with what they believe. They have a belief set too and their belief set is as valid, if not more valid, than those that they encounter in their day-to-day lives.

Rather than instilling a feeling of empty skepticism similar to the experience of Camp Inquiry, the children who attended Camp Quest Montana were encouraged to feel comfortable and confident talking about their beliefs without discussing religion or religious people at all.

Compounding the exclusionary forces that these non-religious families feel is the inability or difficulty that the non-religious have in expressing themselves. The non-religious people at Camp Quest Montana expressed feelings of connection with nature and with humanity but they live in a country where those same sentiments are most likely to be expressed using religious language. When talking about a group trip to Glacier National Park, Chantal, one of the co-organizers of the camp, said of the children:

They're struggling to find words where a religious person might say "I felt God, this is God's country." The children are struggling to explain how they felt connected and how they felt connected to the universe, how they felt connected to the planets. We've been stargazing, and they want to say that they feel connected to the rest of the planet, the rest of the universe and they don't know how to make it fit.

Part of Camp Quest Montana's purpose is to help fill in this vocabulary or wrest absolute control of belief discourses from the religious communities of the United States. However, the stigma attached to being non-religious has led some at the camp to express their beliefs using a negative terminology or pragmatic shorthand that often obscures the positive belief system held by many non-religious people. Parents at Camp Quest recounted how they and their children have responded to past questions regarding what their non-religion meant by saying "It means I don't believe in anything," and part of the experience gained at Camp Quest is to provide the tools necessary to formulate and effectively express what this group of non-religious individuals believe. In an environment where religious belief is perceived as normative, it is much easier to articulate what is not believed in, thus negatively defining yourself as "not those people," but that can only go so far in defining what a group or community actual is. Also, this technique may exacerbate feelings of exclusion when they wish to create feelings of inclusion. By creating a place where children and adults are exposed to other non-religious people who have non-religious beliefs, the families at Camp Quest Montana provide an opportunity for the children to determine for themselves what it is they believe in a nurturing and open environment and provide them with the tools to express those beliefs in ways that lead to integration rather than exclusion.

Those who attend Camp Quest are working toward expressing a belief system that is not religious, but is equally valid, and, from their perspective, more valid than the ones that they encounter in everyday America. It may seem contradictory for some non-religious people in the United States to start talking about beliefs.

However, the expression of beliefs, the particular beliefs themselves, and the reasoning behind this drive toward belief expose a new facet in how non-religious Americans are creating communities and working toward acceptance in American society. Many of the statements made at Camp Quest, though not explicitly religious, evoke what could easily be construed as religious language. An example, made by one of the teenagers, is as follows:

> Just thinking, looking up at the stars at night like we've done a couple times knowing that almost everything in your body is made up of the stuff from the stars . . . It makes you feel . . . connected to everything.

The sentiment expressed by this youth brought tears of joy to his mother and it shows that some non-religious people in the United States are using a kind of language that is not initially consistent with their non-religious self-identification. During my time there I heard this sentiment expressed over and over again, and the statement above is indicative of how this small group of non-religious individuals in the United States is expressing beliefs while differentiating those beliefs from any religious foundation.

7.5 Discussion

The expression of beliefs by those at Camp Quest is part of a reaction to the current religious and social contexts found in the United States. In America, more often than not, a person will self-identify as belonging to a religion or a religious group, that group will most likely fall into a Christian category, and these same Americans will be less accepting of those who do not self-identify with any religious groups. That is the environment that the non-religious people at Camp Quest, as well as other non-religious groups and individuals, navigate every day in the United States, so we should ask ourselves why the particular expression of non-religious beliefs has developed within this specific context.

The permeation and ubiquity of religious beliefs in American society is a contributing factor to assumptions regarding non-religious Americans, particularly the overwhelming influence of Christianity in general. This phenomenon also plays an important role in the shape and development of the non-religious expressions found at Camp Quest. Through daily interaction with religious Americans, the people who attended Camp Quest Montana expressed feelings that their non-religious identity was causing them to be excluded from the larger American identity; a phenomenon that correlates with many studies performed in the United States concerning the place of non-religious individuals in American society. Non-religious people are thought to be less trustworthy, less expected to share the same core values, and be far less likely than any other group to gain an American's vote for President.[3]

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[3]See Gervais et al. (2011); D'Andrea and Sprenger (2007); Ehrlich and Van Tubergen (1971); Harper (2007); Jenks (1986); and Newport (2006).

The United States is inarguably filled with Christians, or to be more precise, people who self-identify as belonging to what are recognized as Christian religions. A recent Pew report shows that over 70 % of Americans fall under this 'Christian' umbrella (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012, 13). However, this same study shows that the percentage of people in the United States that consider themselves 'Unaffiliated' has risen over the last 5 years while the number of people who consider themselves nominally Christian has gone down slowly over this same time. Though the 'Unaffiliated' category from this study does not include only non-religious individuals as I have defined them, this category is where non-religious individuals are inarguably located. What the Pew study also tells us is that the number of people in America who claim no religious affiliation or self-identify as atheist or agnostic is growing almost as fast as the Christian category is shrinking. This means that the growing numbers of those who are non-religious are far more likely to interact with Christians in their everyday life than Christians are to interact with the non-religious, though if trends continue this may not be the case in the future.

Gallup data from a 2006 article by Edgell et al. (2006, 215) showed that Americans displayed a distinct hesitation to vote for a qualified person who was an atheist and who matched their party affiliation to be their presidential candidate. The non-religious groups were compared to Catholics, Jews, African Americans, and homosexuals. Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartman's study shows that overall Americans are consistently becoming more accepting of those who are not exactly like themselves, at least in terms of being willing to vote for individuals from those groups for president. Data from 1999 show the values for acceptance of a Catholic, Jewish, or African American president had practically converged, with each exceeding 90 %. In that same period, Americans' willingness to vote for an atheist or a homosexual to be their president went up, but did not rise past 50 % and the gains that the atheist category saw were nearly parallel to the gains made by other groups. Though the findings show that Americans are more accepting of others, the net gain for atheists and other non-religious people relative to the other groups is essentially zero. Gaining acceptance in parallel with other groups does mean more acceptance of the non-religious in American society, but the increases are lessened when those same non-religious people are faced with a consistent and sizeable gap in acceptance between themselves and almost all other groups in the US. Admittedly, this data is outdated as it shows results from 1999, but a more recent Gallup poll reported very similar numbers. This 2012 Gallup poll shows that there is almost parity between several groups in the United States but two groups show a distinct gap between themselves and those of other groups, namely atheists and Muslims. More recent work continues to show that those who are openly not religious are distrusted in the US. From this data we can extrapolate that those who are considered to show an explicit rejection of religious belief are held in lower regard than those whose rejection of religion does not exist, or at least is not explicit.

The issue facing the parents and children at Camp Quest Montana, and a determining factor in their adoption of a discourse of belief, is that they live in a country where *religious* beliefs permeate the social, political, and cultural climate

to such a degree that the religious nature of the beliefs has become invisible. This phenomenon has significant and real world implications as religious belief comes to symbolize both historical and contemporary pathways to belonging and acceptance within American society, while also limiting membership to that same identity. The ubiquity of religious belief has created an environment where there is an assumption that to be American means that you have some form of religious belief. This assumption is understandable due to the reality that the majority of people in that country self-identify as religious believers, particularly Christian, or at the very least fit themselves into the larger and somewhat amorphous category of Judeo-Christian. Contributing to the assumption of religious belief and its role in determining American identity is the historical context of the United States, particularly following the Second World War. During the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the conflict was often portrayed as the God-fearing and freedom-loving United States fighting to stop the spread of the 'godless' Communists (Bullivant 2010, 113), but how does this affect those who do not self-identify as religious? Phil Zuckerman perhaps expressed it best when he stated in an article comparing non-religious orientations in the US and Scandinavian countries that:

> *religion is much more widespread and pervasive in the USA than it is in Scandinavia.* In the United States, religion is constantly broadcast on the television and radio; politicians wear their religion on their sleeves, fundamentalism is alive and well, Biblical literalism is prevalent, sports events begin with prayers, [and] children must recite a prayer-like declaration which includes a reference to God every morning in every public school . . . (Zuckerman 2012, 18 emphasis in original)

There is also evidence that religious Americans do not fully accept their non-religious neighbours due to an assumption of immorality and self-interest wherever religious beliefs are thought to be absent (Edgell et al. 2006, 227). We can see this in action every 4 years as hopeful presidential candidates have to 'check the religious box' and publicly attend the church of their choice in order to establish their religious membership. In the case of possible presidents there is an implicit need for them to be Christian, at least so far, but the denomination of Christian matters very little, although the campaign of Mitt Romney, a Mormon, for President demonstrates that a person's Christian denomination is still an issue in some demographics.

The assumption of religious belief in the United States has deep consequences regarding the everyday experience of non-religious individuals. Expressing and identifying with a religion or religious beliefs has become synonymous with proclaiming an American identity, causing tension between religious Americans and non-religious Americans. With an "increasing acceptance of religious diversity . . . [the] internal boundaries between religious groups may heighten awareness of the external boundar[ies] between the religious and the non-religious" (Ibid, 212) making non-religious Americans one of the only groups in America that can possibly be excluded from full membership in American society. This distrust that religious individuals feel towards the non-religious is founded on moral or symbolic grounds rather than any visible or material factors (Ibid, 211). Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartman argue that this is due to the tacit role that religion, particularly Christianity, has played in determining moral and cultural membership as well as

social solidarity. In other words, in the minds of most Americans being religious means that there exists a common set of values and that those who have those values can be expected to behave morally in society. Part of this may be the assumption that people of various religious faiths can be assumed to act in accordance with the dictates of their own deity (Gervais et al. 2011, 1191), but regardless of the reasons, a person self-identifying as religious has the effect of being labeled as moral in the United States, or, at the very least, is considered as sharing a moral vocabulary. In a country such as the United States morality has become synonymous with religious belief, which makes non-religious Americans appear as a moral wildcard (Ibid, 1202) to those Americans who believe morality is only derived from religion or God.

The fact that discrimination against the non-religious may be a factor of symbolic differences rather than those based on appearance or 'race' means that the enforcement of those boundaries has a dual function of excluding others who do not exhibit certain social traits while cementing together those who do (Edgell et al. 2006, 211). Factor this in with a growing sense of religious pluralism in the United States (Hout and Fischer 2002) and you get a system that is more likely to view religious believers as part of the whole while those who do not believe in recognizably religious ways become the only real group that can be considered outside of this norm (Edgell et al. 2006, 211). This process happens because as the area of difference between people of different faiths diminishes, in this case a group consisting of the majority of Americans, there is a concurrent broadening of the perceived difference between self-identified *religious* Americans and those who self-identify as non-religious (Cimino and Smith 2010, 151).

Within this particular American environment there is a range of ways that Americans can express their non-religious identity. The most obvious is the vocal and socially active explicitly atheist groups that use the legal system to keep religious ideas, themes, and messages out of government or public facilities (by public I mean tax-payer funded). These include groups that make legal cases to have giant stone plinths inscribed with the Ten Commandments taken off courthouse property (Associated Press 2005), or groups that reject the idea that a steel-girder cross from the wreckage of 9–11 should be part of the 9–11 memorial (CBS News 2012). There are also non-religious people who go about their day, not praying to anything or investing the world with supernatural significance. These people are essentially invisible to academic inquiry because they do not subscribe to explicitly non-religious magazines, belong to explicitly non-religious clubs, read explicitly non-religious books, or generally express their non-religious character openly. This makes them both difficult to contact and at least potentially disinterested in participating in academic studies. The people at Camp Quest fit somewhere in between these two groups because they are not aggressively acting against or denying religious ideas on a daily basis like in the previously mentioned litigious examples, but they also show no hesitation to belong to non-religious groups or participate in non-religious activities, and part of their participation in a non-religious summer camp is to find ways to express their non-religion publicly. They are a group that publicly wants to express their non-religion and part of that expression is one of non-religious beliefs. Their focus on expressing non-religious belief is part of a complex process that has facilitated the connection

of diverse *religious* faiths under the banner of 'believers' while also making this amalgamated category synonymous with morality, decency, and American life. By using a language that includes beliefs, the people at Camp Quest are challenging the notion that morality is inherently linked to religiosity, while also working toward higher levels of inclusion for themselves and other non-religious people within this religion-steeped environment.

The relatively new phenomena of non-religious individuals adopting and expressing a discourse that includes non-religious beliefs aids in our discussion because it is quite possible that the causes of increasing levels of acceptance for difference indicated by the Gallup data discussed earlier have also been acting on the non-religious Americans, but are essentially having the opposite effects. These same social processes that are equalizing acceptance of other religious groups in the US are also keeping the acceptance of the non-religious at low levels relative to these groups. As people in the United States become more accepting of others, particularly those of other religions, the ability to belong may have become reliant on the expression of a religious belief, a prerequisite that excludes attempts by non-religious individuals to belong.

The push towards an expression of belief has the non-religious people at Camp Quest balancing on a fine line between expressions that separate themselves from the majority of religious believers in the US while also trying to show that they belong as part of the larger American society. To be openly non-religious in the United States is to be exposed to social pressures that prefer all people to express religious belief. With more intense identification with ideas relating to the rejection of all religions there is a realistic expectation of more discrimination because the intensity of the identification poses a more overt challenge to the status quo (Cragon et al. 2012, 108). So how can a person be openly non-religious in the United States and still gain access to the full benefits of membership in American society? This is where the discourse regarding belief becomes central. By adopting the language of belief some non-religious individuals can take a different path to inclusion than those who openly oppose specific religious practices or religions in general. The difference lies in how non-religious groups are attempting to make a place for themselves within the larger American society. Those at Camp Quest are trying to find areas of similarity and a common parlance that allows them to feel that they are accepted by their religious neighbours or perhaps claim the right of acceptance on the terms already set by the American society at large. A discourse of non-religious belief becomes an implicit compromise made by non-religious Americans that enables them to enter into a religiously believing America while not including what non-religious Americans considered to be negative aspects of religious belief.

7.6 Conclusion

The families who attended Camp Quest Montana and non-religious Americans like them are living in a religiously normative United States that is tacitly intolerant or distrusting of those who are non-religious. Expressing non-religious belief narrows

the tolerance gap between themselves and religious groups that have high levels of acceptance within American society. That is not to say that non-religious people are strategically or intentionally starting to develop and express a discourse of belief in order to be accepted into American society. That would be placing causality where none may exist. Instead, I argue that non-religious people at Camp Quest are talking about non-religious beliefs because this kind of discourse, through historical and social processes, has become the lingua franca of the United States and a case can be made that in order to be considered a full member of American society a person or group must identify with labels that incorporate belief, particularly belief that has religion as its foundation. Expressing non-religious beliefs is an implicit response to the society that non-religious people exist in and the pressures that exist therein. Working toward acceptance into American society can also be considered a challenge to features of that society. The acceptance of religious believers into American society and the ubiquity of religious belief has allowed, or even facilitated, the notion that Creationism or Intelligent Design is a viable option for science curricula and the fact that in many states same-sex couples are not legally allowed to marry because it would challenge the 'traditional' idea of marriage, a 'tradition' that is steeped in religious belief (Bullivant 2010, 115). This trend has created the feeling, as articulated by those who attended Camp Quest Montana, that non-religious individuals cannot truly belong to the American cultural enterprise without expressing some form of religious belief. From this perspective, the ways that the non-religious individuals at Camp Quest are seeking to create or recreate an identity based on belief demonstrate an implicit struggle to belong to an American culture that has imposed an identity on them that accentuates a lack of belief (Farred qtd. in Cimino and Smith 2007, 422). By looking at non-religious people as being 'believers' of another form or alternative forms we can start to see that the difference between religious belief and non-religious belief is one of a spectrum rather than a stark dichotomy (Ysseldyk et al. 2011, 105).

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Chapter 8
A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Atheist Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them

Steven Tomlins

> *Um; [Laughter] we're a drinking club with an atheism problem*
>
> —James, 19, undergraduate student in Sociology

> *[I]f some people describe it as a drinking association with a godless problem then I guess I see it as another place for the expression of new ideas . . .*
>
> —Matthew, 21, undergraduate student in History

> *[I]f you're an atheist you usually have a kind of logic and, like, intelligence that I like in people so it's sort of easy to get along with people if they're sort of like-minded, so that's what I was sort of looking for – some friends who were like-minded.*
>
> —Heather, 22, Master's Student in History

On Human Rights Day, December 10th 2012, The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) published *Freedom of Thought 2012: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Nonreligious*. The report is a detailed study of 60 countries that have:

> laws that deny atheists' right to exist, curtail their freedom of belief and expression, revoke their right to citizenship, restrict their right to marry, obstruct their access to public education, prohibit them from holding public office, prevent them from working for the state, criminalize their criticism of religion, and execute them for leaving the religion of their parents. (IHEU 2012, 9)

Although the United States of America and the United Kingdom both made the list with discriminatory laws and specific cases of discrimination, for Canada the report mentions discrimination pertaining to the public funding of religious schools, but it does not mention any specific cases of discrimination. This is not to argue

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that Canada does not have cases of discrimination against atheists, but it does point to discrimination being considered to be of lesser frequency in Canada than in the two countries that have been the greatest influences on the historical, cultural, and political development of Canada, at least by the IHEU, which is a union consisting of over "120 Humanist, atheist, rationalist, secular, ethical culture, and freethought organizations from more than 40 countries" (IHEU 2012, 2).

It is not too difficult to conceive of why atheists who face constant, or occasional, discrimination might decide to join an atheist organization or community. On one level these communities may offer emotional support, on another level they could provide the power in numbers needed to push back against discrimination, be it through educational outlets or activism. Of course, the risks involved with joining an atheist community depend on location. In one of the seven countries noted by the IHEU where the state sanctifies the execution of atheists, joining an atheist community, even a virtual one, is a life or death decision. In countries such as the US and the UK, however, the decision to join an atheist community is less cutthroat, at least with regard to imprisonment or execution.

In the US in particular, discrimination against atheists has been noted by scholars, pollsters, and, of course, atheists themselves. An oft-cited national US survey, which points to atheists being the least likely to be accepted in the US than any other minorities (Edgell et al. 2006, 211), attests to this social reality, as does the fact that there are "still laws in several states preventing non-theists from holding office" (Cimino and Smith 2007, 407). In Canada, however, atheists are not as small a minority as are their southern equivalents.

According to Statistics Canada, in 1991 12 % of the residential population of Canada claimed on their census that they had no religion. In 2001, the "no religion" group accounted for 16 % of the population (Statistics Canada 2001). Ten years later, in 2011, those who have no religious affiliation accounted for "nearly one-quarter of Canada's population," at 23.9 % (Statistics Canada 2013). While the category of "no religion" includes more than atheists, the rise in individuals claiming to have no religion certainly points to an increase in atheism. Moreover, Statistics Canada's 2004 General Social Survey found that young adults are the most likely to have no religious affiliation, with 23 % of Canadians between 15 and 29 years of age identifying as such (Statistics Canada 2004). A question thus arises: if momentum is on the side of having no religion, and Canada is comparatively perceived as being less discriminatory against atheists then other Western countries, why are people joining atheist communities in Canada? Is it to create or maintain a push-back against an assumed societal normativity toward religion? Do atheists who are active in atheist communities tend to feel marginalized as a social group and therefore seek comfort in camaraderie? Have many 'active' or 'involved' atheists had negative experiences, including rejection, from 'coming out' as an atheist to loved ones, and subsequently seek the support and company of those who have had similar experiences, or is joining an atheist group simply a matter of shared interests? This chapter attempts to answer these questions when it comes to the membership of one atheist community.

The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (henceforth ACUO) was founded in August 2010 and according to its official club mandate it is "dedicated to the promotion of the irreligious community, skeptical discussion, free inquiry, church-state separation, and secular ideals at the University of Ottawa" (ACUO Constitution from email listserve 2012). While a sample of one university-based atheist community cannot produce any credible metanarratives pertaining to all atheists who are actively involved in atheist organizations, it can provide insight into why some young Canadian atheists in an urban centre have decided to join a particular atheist community, and what that community means to its members.

8.1 Demography and Scope

During the University of Ottawa's orientation week in September 2010 I chanced upon the ACUO's club recruitment table and spoke to a co-founder/the first club president about doing participant observation with the group. I subsequently joined. Since then their online (Facebook) membership has grown from a few members (approximately a dozen recruits from that initial orientation week) to just over a hundred. At any given club event, such as a club meeting, approximately 12–20 members usually make an appearance.

Since this is a university group, the ACUO primarily consists of young adults between the ages of 19–30, although there are a few older members and a few non-university members who are part of the online Facebook community.[1] The familiar faces that often show up to club events, however, all fall into the 19–30 year-old age range.

The club holds monthly or bi-monthly meetings (the scheduling has not been consistent), and has recently held its premiere movie night, which showcased Richard Dawkins' documentary *Faith School Menace* followed by the BBC's investigative report *British Schools, Islamic Rules*. Events such as these are often followed by a visit to a local pub or an impromptu house party. Conversing over alcohol has become a bit of a running joke amongst some of the members, with the co-founder authored meme "We're a drinking club with an atheism problem" making the rounds in person, on Facebook, and even into some of my interviews. Although a few of the members are certainly fond of social drinking, that does not tell the whole story, since non-drinking members often partake in these social gatherings as well.

Other events that the ACUO has either organized, co-organized, or have been involved in include public inter-faith dialogue discussions with Christians, Jews, and Muslims (on the topics Does God Exist? and The Founders of Religion), and visiting a Pentecostal church service on a Sunday morning after being invited by an

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[1]The Facebook forum, which is closed from viewing for non-members, offers the community a place where they can share ideas and articles as well as discuss issues which often relate to religious folly or intrusion, politics, and humour.

attendee. They have also held "Sexy Heathen" pub nights, and "Reason Week," the former's title denoting a sense of humour rather than a requirement; the latter being a weeklong atheism awareness event that the ACUO held in spring 2012. During Reason Week the community set up tables in a central building's foyer on campus, sold baked goods such as dinosaur cookies and "Darwin Fish" cupcakes, distributed pamphlets, held impromptu religion debates with passers-by, performed de-baptism ceremonies complete with a hair dryer and certificates, and showcased both serious and humorous videos advocating science, reason, and rationalism.

In the fall of 2011, the then president of the ACUO publicly debated a professional pro-life activist, arguing the pro-choice stance.[2] This was *not* an official club event, but he received a lot of support from the club in terms of both encouragement and prepping, and some members subsequently took an interest in countering the campus pro-life club's posters with counter-point/view posters of their own. At one point there was talk of going white-water rafting with a student Christian club, but when the Christian club clarified that it was to be a male-only event interest from the atheist side immediately started to decline, and the event failed to transpire.

Having not inquired into the online community's religious backgrounds, and basing my impression on testimonials given at club meetings and some of the discussions I have had with members, including interviews, the groups' membership consists primarily of those who have either been raised without a familial religion or those who were raised Christian. Considering the diversity of the University of Ottawa student body I had expected to find more of a religiously diverse background amongst the members, but this did not seem to be the case, with a few exceptions. Interestingly, two of the most active members have pagan backgrounds with a focus on Thor and Odin. One became pagan in high school but abandoned paganism in university; the other flirted with Thor-worship during high school, inspired by internet research and his discovery of Ásatrú, a Germanic religion with sects/kindreds across Canada, but he gave it up when he found his prayers to Thor to be ineffective at wish-fulfilment.

I chose to interview members from the ACUO who were physically active, often partaking in club meetings, pub nights, putting in the time to sit at a table during Reason Week or the university's orientation week, or organizing a movie night. Besides being familiar faces, these members were the most engaged with the club and they represented the most likely members to be at any given club event. Thought was not initially given to equal representation, but my sample turned out to nevertheless be a relatively accurate reflection of the club. I interviewed 19 members: 12 males and 7 females. Thirteen interviewees fell within the 19–23 age range; the remaining 6 were between 25 and 30 years old. Eleven of the students were in Arts (3 of which, interestingly, were in the International Development and Globalization program), and 6 were science students. Two were graduate students,

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[2]I have chosen to use the terms groups *themselves* identify with on this issue as opposed to how their opposition, or 'other', labels them, thus pro-life rather than anti-choice, and pro-choice rather than anti-life.

15 were undergraduates, 1 was not a student but became affiliated with the club through his brother, who is a student, and 1 is no longer a student having recently graduated from her Arts program.

Each interview took place in a quiet student room and scheduling was arranged to allow for an ample amount of time to answer all questions without fear of interruption or having to rush near the end. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 1½ h, depending on how talkative the interviewees were. Each interviewee was asked and responded to 18 main questions, although a 19th question was added after the third interview (Are there any influences, such as from pop culture, that you would say influenced you to either be an atheist or in how you approach atheism?). This chapter looks at the responses to two of these questions. These two questions are:

- Why did you decide to join an atheist community?
- Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?

After completing the 19 interviews, which were audio-recorded, they were transcribed and coded. What follows is a brief explanation of what I expected the results from these two questions to be and to indicate. Following that, the results are presented through examples of some of the most popular answers I received, and what patterns derived from an analysis of these answers may tell us about this particular grouping of people. The results are split into two sections, one for each question.

8.2   Expectations

Before conducting my research, my initial hypothesis for why some atheists *decide to join* atheist communities revolved around those atheists feeling isolated or rejected by some or all of their religious and/or spiritual family and friends after "coming out" as an atheist, and they believed an atheist community would offer them a focalized support network. I expected some to have had a vivacious religious past, and seeking commonality with other atheists would seem a logical response to re-fulfil a "gathering of those with a shared worldview"-shaped hole. I also expected societal marginalization of atheism to play a role in the sense that power from numbers could provide a bit of a push-back from perceived or real societal expectations of the "necessity of religion." My final assumption was that some members would conflate atheism with science and rationalism, in other words: an atheist community would serve as a partial-science club, acting against perceived or real assaults on science in Canada that stem from religious beliefs and/or doctrines. While elements of these assumptions may indeed play specific collective or individualistic roles, my findings suggest that they are *not* a significant or often cited reason for why atheists have created and joined the ACUO.

My pre-interview assumptions regarding what the atheist community *means to its members* were simply that it was a safe place whereby like-minded people could converse and plan ways to spread atheism, or at least prevent the grounds atheism has made in recent years from erosion.

Before highlighting some of my findings with examples from the interviews, it is worthwhile to first note that I am not arguing that there are not times when the interview subjects have experienced marginalization, biases, and in at least two cases, a perceived threat, for identifying openly as being atheist. I would argue, however, that every group with a religious or cultural affiliation has had members that have experienced such moments, and this speaks more to the imperfection of society than it does to a singling out of atheists. In fact, when asked how frequent receiving a negative reaction was, all but three of the atheists I interviewed replied in words that can best be summarized as "infrequent."[3] This includes reactions from family and friends, although it must also be stressed that this speaks to the life experiences of the young adult atheists I interviewed from this one particular university club; individual atheists not affiliated with this or any other club, or atheists of any age who are affiliated with another club, may well have had completely different experiences.

8.3   Results Part 1: Why Did You Decide to Join an Atheist Community?

The interviews I have conducted reveal a clear pattern of members joining first and foremost to enjoy a safe place where like-minded people can talk openly about controversial subjects without fear of being judged, or being deemed, offensive. While this may seem at first a rather obvious and predictable result, it does point to the dispelling of the atheist caricature as variations of being outspokenly intolerant and purposely offensive. It also points to a young atheist demography that is less concerned with offending adherents of religions as it is with enjoying a place where they may discuss the largest of topics without dealing with accusations of *being* deemed—and having *been* deemed—offensive by those who are religious.

In order to highlight and substantiate these findings, what follows are three short biographies (with an emphasis on religious background) from three representative interviewed members of the ACUO, along with their answers and a brief analysis of how their answers relate to those given by other interviewed members. The

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[3]One interviewee who did not reply in words that can best be summarized as infrequent explained that from her Christian family "it's fairly consistent" to get a negative reaction, "[e]specially, around the holidays, and any big, like religious holiday and stuff." The other explained: "[I]f you tell someone who's religious that you are an atheist you can see the emotions like even in their face, right? Right when you tell them, and I get that a lot, yeah." He described the facial emotions he gets from religious people as "kind of like stunned, wide-eyed, 'pull my eyebrows back from the back of my head'." The third explained that he "generally" does not "hang around fundamentalists anymore unless I'm like really prepared to get offended and prejudiced and stuff but, like, in that case sometimes it's fun, although I do feel prejudice and stuff [..] I was a fat kid, I sweated a lot so I smelt bad, I wear [rather distinct clothing] and I'm heterosexual – so I get ripped for all sorts of things." He also added: "I found there was a lot more shit given to me being a pagan then there was being an atheist because, you know, an atheist in Canada is harmless but everybody can agree that a pagan is a Satanist [last point said sarcastically]."

representative members are Belinda, James, and Edward. Pseudonyms are used for confidentiality and identifiable characteristics have been removed or replaced.

8.3.1 Belinda

Belinda is a 22-year-old third-year undergraduate student majoring in Economics. She moved to Ottawa from a major Western Canadian city in 2011 for school. She describes atheism as being important to her identity.

Belinda explained that her parents had no religion while she was growing up, but they both became Buddhist when she was in high school, at which point she was "at least an agnostic if not an atheist" and was not influenced to become Buddhist herself. When she was a child she did believe in God, but she is not sure why, hypothesizing "it was a society thing" and offering that she may have been influenced by a churchgoing friend. By high school she "actually" thought about the existence of God, and "decided there was no evidence." In hindsight she says she was agnostic for a while, but at the time she did not identify as anything. After reading Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Belinda began identifying as an atheist and began reading more about atheism. Today the majority of her friends are atheists, and she is an active participant in many ACUO social gatherings, as exemplified by her having recently prepared a vegetarian dish for an ACUO potluck party.

When asked "Why did you decide to join an atheist community?" Belinda replied:

> I've been interested in it, ah, for a bit, sort of just in the abstract; I thought it would be nice to – after I moved to Ottawa I thought it would be nice to meet some atheists here, um, actually I was just walking in the [University Centre building] and [the club president], and there was a bunch of them, they were just tabling, and he just asked me, "do you not believe in God?" I was like, "that's correct I do not believe in God," and so I learned about the club and decided to see what it was like. [...] I didn't necessarily have a particular interest in doing sort of advocacy or you know awareness or anything; I just wanted the social aspect, to meet like-minded people I guess.

Belinda's response here is quite common, particularly the emphasis on meeting "like-minded people." Ten of the 19 individuals I interviewed used the actual phrase "like-minded;" 5 with regard to why they joined and 5 separate interviewees when answering the second question about what the community means to them. If you include phrases such as people who "think like me," or "think like I do," then 10 of the interviewees cited meeting or engaging with like-minded people with regard to just the first question, making meeting like-minded people the most commonly cited reason for joining the ACUO. If you factor in similar phrases in response to the second question and do not double-count any individuals who answered similarly to both questions than 12 of the 19 members either joined because of a desire to meet like-minded people or find meaning in the community from associating with like-minded people. Belinda's introduction to the club is also common in that she did not seek out an atheist community to join, but rather, discovered the group accidently,

became interested because of a desire to socialize with like-minded people, and subsequently decided to join. This is not the only narrative, however. Others actively sought out a university atheist club to join, albeit for similar reasons. Belinda's answer is atypical in that she also mentioned not necessarily having a particular interest in doing advocacy work or raising awareness, assumedly relating to atheism. While her response clearly articulates a lack of interest in advocacy and awareness, it should be noted that only two interviewees gave answers that relate to having a desire to do advocacy work or raise awareness for atheism or atheism-related causes (one mentioned activism in response to the question about meaning, referring primarily to Reason Week, the other mentioned advocacy for why he joined but he subsequently found it lacking in the group; both used the term "like-minded people" before mentioning either activism or advocacy).

8.3.2 James

James is a 19 year-old second year sociology student at the University of Ottawa. He is a Canadian of South Asian ethnicity who grew up in and around Toronto.

Most of James's family is religious; his parents and younger sister are church-going members of the Syrian Orthodox Church. Prior to immigrating to Canada, in South Asia his parents were members of the Syrian Orthodox Church, but after moving to Canada the family converted to Mormonism for a few years before converting back to Syrian Orthodoxy. His aunt is a Jehovah's Witness and his family counts a bishop amongst their close friends.

James attended Catholic high school, and describes himself as having been a "really fundamentalist Christian" between the ages of 12 and 14, at which time he was also an alter server. He started to doubt his religion as a teenager, considered Buddhism for a short period before dismissing it, and began identifying as sceptical, then agnostic, and finally as an atheist. He heard about the ACUO through a friend who is also an atheist. He joined because he liked the idea of meeting people who were open to talking and joking about religion. Over the last 2 years he has been a frequent attendee of club meetings and events, including taking on table duties during Reason Week.

James's response to the question "Why did you decide to join an atheist community?" was as follows:

> I joined the club here because, mostly because [another member] told me there was an atheist club and I said, "oh I didn't know that," and I came to the meetings and realized that everyone's the same as me. [By "same as me" James later explained that they "like the atheist memes, that sort of thing, reddit r/atheism is sort of huge for that" and they like "joking about religion."] I've never really had people to joke around with, because I went to Catholic school, and a lot of them were also pretty religious. There were some like, non-religious people at Catholic school who you could talk to but also they'd try to be respectful about it, but yeah, here is like the first time I've had sort of community to talk about this openly, which is pretty great.

James was curious about the ACUO once he heard from a friend that the club existed. He attended a few meetings and decided to join when he realized the members shared his sense of humour pertaining to religion, and he liked the forum it provided for discussing religion. In this sense, the ACUO offers a safe space for like-minded people to talk about religion, even disrespectfully, where the risk of offending religious people is minimized. His past experiences discussing religion openly as a student were limited to treating religion respectfully amongst a backdrop of Catholicism, but in the ACUO he now has the ability to express himself without the consequence of being judged negatively. James is not the only one who found a shared sense of humour to be an attribute of the atheist community; it was also mentioned by two other interviewees as a response to the second question.

8.3.3   Edward

Edward is a 30 year-old PhD Candidate with an interest in international relations and historical imperialism. He has lived in Ottawa "pretty much" all of his life. He describes himself as an atheist and offers three tenants of atheism (the numbers have been added):

1. "you don't believe in God or some sort of supernatural power, instead you believe that human beings shape their own destiny";
2. "an atheist also believes in the division between church and state, or church or mosque and state or synagogue and state, and the reason why they believe that is because they believe that the state's law is not to enforce morality and enforce morality on others, but instead the state's role is to protect everybody's rights regardless of whether they are religious or not religious", and;
3. "the source of morality is human reason."

Edward's father grew up in a Southern European country and attended a strict Catholic boarding school. By the time he left that school he had abandoned Catholicism and become "quite anti-religious" toward the general idea of religion, but not to "the people who believe in a particular religious faith." His mother is also an atheist, having been since her childhood, and Edward has identified as an atheist since he was 8 or 9. One of his earlier experiences with religion was being read stories from the Bible by his grandmother from his mother's side, but he felt uncomfortable with the moral ambiguity of stories such as Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. When he was 13 or 14 he went through a religious phase brought on as repose from "insecurity, depression" and the inability to find "solace in the company of friends, or even within family." During this short phase he did not attend any organized religious services but he did consider God to be on his side, even though he still found it difficult to fully believe in God "because there wasn't anything concrete to actually back up that conviction." When he received a D on a science midterm examination he abandoned trying to believe in God: "I realized that believing in God does not lead to a reward in the end." He compared his religious

phase to trying to prove that communism works, explaining that, "you can't really do it."

On why he decided to join the ACUO, Edward replied:

> I sort of like the idea where there's this club where you can say all of these things, where you can say whatever you want about religion or not believing in God and you don't offend anybody, so that's sort of a good thing. Because I think in Canadian society we have a tendency to avoid controversial subjects even if they're important, we don't like controversy. I think there's some sort of tendency to be averse to controversy in Canadian society, so we don't go deep into things, we don't have deep meaningful discussions about meaningful issues because we don't want to make anyone upset. And so the advantage of the atheist club is that you get to have these meaningful issues [discussions], and then you get to learn more, and you don't have to worry about upsetting anybody, and I think that's a good thing.

Here Edward is clear that the ACUO provides him with a community in which he can speak freely about religion, God, and other "meaningful issues" without offending anyone or "upsetting anybody." Far from being a community whose goal is to offend, Edward's answer points to the opposite, a desire toward free expression without being offensive. This is similar to James's mentioning of the community being one in which he can talk openly, and the use of the actual word "offend" in the context of the ACUO being a place where controversial (anti-religious) ideas can be shared in an 'offensiveness free zone', or a place whereby causing offence is minimized, was also quite common amongst responders to this question. Four individuals mentioned not causing offence as their primary reason for joining (2 using the actual word "offend," others using appropriations), and an additional 4 separate individuals mentioned being able to discuss things openly without causing offence to anyone as something the community means to them (again, with 2 using the actual word "offend" and others using appropriations), which means 8 of the 19 interviewees found not causing offense to be important to them. For Edward, he joined the ACUO because he wanted a safe space where ideas could be shared without fear of reprisal; his main motivation was not to be antagonistic or become an atheist activist, it was to converse about meaningful and sometimes controversial subjects and issues. It is also worth highlighting that Edward's assessment or conception of Canadians as "averse to controversy" is one that 'seems' to be commonly held in the group. I use the word 'seems' here purposely, since many of the responses the interviewees gave to a further question, "Do you think atheists and atheism is well understood by the public or the media in Canada?" hint rather than state as such, by commonly comparing their perception of atheism in Canada to atheism in the US. These comparisons often paint Canada as more tolerant than its southern neighbor due to it being officially multicultural, which means, as one interviewee said, that in Canada "atheism is just like another thing [. . .] we're all doing a different thing so it doesn't matter." This concept—that multiculturalism means that atheism is not singled out but rather just another idea amongst many ideas—will be further addressed in the conclusion.

8.4   Results Part 2: Could You Describe What the Atheist Community Means to You?

Answers to the question "Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?" further reflected the notion that the ACUO is a safe space for like-minded people to engage in conversation. Considering that the ACUO has been engaged with the issue of abortion, and members have tried to raise awareness of atheism through tabling and Reason Week, it would not have been surprising to find the answers reflecting some of these activities. Perhaps surprisingly, however, no interviewees mentioned awareness or the spreading or preserving of atheism in response to that question, and only one mentioned activism, albeit after mentioning it being "a group of like-minded individuals."

As with the previous section, what follows are three short biographies from three representative interviewed members of the ACUO, along with their answers and a brief analysis of how their answers relate to those given by other interviewed members. The representative members are Donovan, Brendon, and Sylvia.

8.4.1   Donovan

Donovan is a 20 year-old undergraduate majoring in Philosophy. He has lived in Ottawa his entire life. Donovan was raised in a family he describes as not being very religious. His mother was raised Catholic but "sort of just floated off that boat," and considers herself spiritual. He is not really sure what his father's religious beliefs are, although he does recall his father once telling him that "once you realize they're all the same they're all just bullshit." As a child he attended a Catholic church every Sunday with his parents and sibling, but he explains that it was only due to his and his sibling's insistence that his parents took them, and their interest in church was due to their enjoyment of singing in the choir, not because of any religious beliefs; to his parents going to church was a chore. He claims to have never had any friends that were really into religion, although in high school he did have a friend who was an atheist who was a big influence on him; prior to their friendship he had not thought about religion much. He says his "last step" before identifying as an atheist was an experimentation with Norse Mythology because he "wanted to believe in something." He prayed to Norse gods in earnest, even looking up how to properly pray to Thor on the internet. Further conversations with his atheist friend about other religions helped convince him that Norse mythology also "doesn't make any sense at all," and when he received no responses to his prayers, his interest in Norse mythology fizzled out.

When asked, "Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?" Donovan replied:

> To me, honestly, I think it's just a place that you can go and talk to like-minded people and not have to worry about saying something which would really upset somebody else, and

they'd go on this whole shebang, because as fun as it is to talk to religious people and try to convince them otherwise it's very taxing, like, it's still very . . . like, "boy, God, this is hard to talk to you right now because you're so ridiculous," but when you can go and hang out with a bunch of buddies and you know that they all think the same way as you it's sort of like – it's a comforting feeling to know that you're part of a bunch of other people who sort of think the same way as you and are not ridiculous.

Donovan's response includes the often cited phrase "like-minded people," as well as the notion that the ACUO is a place where the risk of offending people is minimized, or to use his words, a place where you "do not have to worry about saying something which would really upset somebody else." The notion that the ACUO is a place for like-minded people to get together is the most common response to this question, as it was to the previous question, followed by the notion that it is a 'safe place' to engage in discussion. Donovan further explained, however, that talking to religious people is fun, but taxing; this is a response unique to him. The other interviewees who mentioned the desire not to offend people did not explain why that was important to them, perhaps considering it self-evident that causing offense is an undesirable thing and not in need of further explanation. The ACUO also offers Donovan a place where his views can be reinforced, as evident by his explanation of the comfort one gets from knowing that "you're part of a bunch of other people who sort of think the same way as you and are not ridiculous." In his case, it may not be empathy that drives his desire for a safe place free from unsettling, upsetting, or offending others, but rather a welcomed break from dealing with the perceived ridiculousness of the religious, and the frustrating task of attempting to convert them. Donovan is an outspoken individual who enjoys engaging with religious adherents in friendly, and sometimes not so friendly, debates. It is not so much that he wishes not to upset them as it is that he wishes they would not get upset—that they would just "get it"—and he can find repose in the ACUO where he is with people who already understand his position on religion, which in turn gives him the comfort of knowing he is not alone, therefore reinforcing his views on religion.

8.4.2 Brendon

Brendon is a 26 year-old undergraduate student working toward a major in Biology. He is in his final year. He grew up in Southern Ontario just outside of a major city and moved to Ottawa for school in 2007.

Brendon was raised in what he calls a "secular" family. As a youth he attended Christian camps, which made him curious about Christianity, and when he was about 12 or 13 years old, upon returning from a Christian camp, he asked his mother if they could start going to church: "[S]he just looked at me and said, 'no.' And I could tell on her face that she was, ah, that she was not a fan of the idea, so I just left it at that and walked away." He explains his interest in going to church was due to looking-up to the older (19, 20 year-old) camp councillors, rather than

any religious beliefs, and claims that shortly after that incident he maintained "no religious convictions." He fondly recalls being in a debate on the existence of God in a grade 12 philosophy class in which he came out "guns ablaze" on the side against God's existence. This was his first time arguing against religious belief publicly, and from that point onward his perspective on religion shifted from "I'm not really religious, but religious people, they're quaint and they're sincere and I respect them" to what he calls a more "intolerant perspective" where he does not like putting up with "bogus religious nonsense."

When asked what the atheist community means to him, Brendon explained:

> It's ah, yeah, it's exactly that: a community. It's a bunch of, ah, it's a bunch of friends getting together, and they can have, you know, they can have discourse; they can have the kinds of conversations that they probably wish they could have with everyone, where they can attempt to have these conversations, because a lot of the time if you want to talk about, you know science, or philosophy or religion it's a conversation stopper, right? You can only go so far with somebody who's convinced that the Earth was created in seven days, but, you know... If you want to talk to someone about evolution, or ah, or, you know, any of those other topics, um, homosexuality, that are kind of taboo in the religious framework, it's a good place to meet up with people and discuss, so yeah.

For Brendon the ACUO is a safe place for engaging in discussions on topics which in other spaces are controversial. Brendon can talk about science, evolution, homosexuality, and religion with people who generally agree on these topics, or at least are willing to discuss them, whereas with religious people he finds these topics to be a "conversation stopper." Brendon sees the community as principally a place for socializing with an emphasis on discussing important but controversial topics. It is also worth noting that he sees it as a place where a "bunch of friends" get together. While there is nothing surprising about that in and of itself, it is interesting that friendship is the first thing that came to his mind when asked about what the group means to him, and he does not mention things such as advocacy, activism, or awareness campaigns at all—things that are often associated with atheist organizations, especially following the Atheist Bus Campaign. Friendship, of course, is one of the potential benefits of joining any group. In at least one case a member met and befriended his present roommate through the club, and more than a few romantic relationships have also been sparked through the meeting of people at club events. While the ACUO does engage in some activism, it seems clear from this interview—and virtually every interview—that its principle "meaning" has more to do with socializing in a context where speaking freely is encouraged, rather than a forum for spreading atheism or getting under the skin of religious believers.

8.4.3 Sylvia

Sylvia is a 20 year-old third-year undergraduate student studying Physics. Before coming to the University of Ottawa she lived in Northern Ontario, where most of her immediate family still resides.

Sylvia's mother is a devout fundamentalist Baptist and her father is an atheist. Her sister is a Baptist, but her brother and most of her extended family are atheists. Sylvia went to a Baptist church every Sunday until she was 12, with the exception of the occasional time when she was able to spend her Sundays flying or fishing with her father, or working on her grandparents' farm. Through the church she attended a weekly youth group and an annual summer Bible Camp. She claims to have been skeptical of the beliefs of her church at an early age, and after arguing over the matter with her mother, stopped going to church once she turned 12. She was critical of the way science was being portrayed in her church youth group; she had learned a few things about the subject from her physicist uncle and was peeved at the unscientific way the Big Bang was explained and dismissed by a youth group facilitator.

Through her older brother she discovered Pastafarianism and identified with that sarcastic parody religion before coming to identify as an atheist. Sylvia joined the ACUO in order to meet new people with whom she could "discuss ideas freely" without religious beliefs being factored into the conversations. She has been a member of the group for 2 years and has often partaken in club meetings and events, including Reason Week and Sexy Heathen pub nights. Her response to the question of what the atheist community she belongs to means to her is as follows:

> [T]he community here is more so of a resource to meet, like I said, like-minded people, so most of us are all skeptics. It's good, you have some, you know – if I ever needed some sort of extreme support I know that I can go to the atheist community and not have God shoved down my throat. [. . .] It's a place that I know if I needed some sort of secular support for something – which I'm sure some day I will; but, it's there.

Here again we have an answer that includes the ability to meet like-minded people, described in this case as those who are skeptics. Sylvia's response is atypical, however, in her mentioning that it is a place where she can find "secular support" should she eventually have such a need. She is one of only two interviewees who mentioned support as an attribute of the club, the other explained that she thinks it offers support to those who need it, but she did not need any herself. The absence of this notion—support—from the majority of members' answers is quite interesting; one would assume that if a main reason for joining the community was to seek support, especially of the emotional kind, that would have been mentioned in response to either of the two questions being addressed in this chapter, yet it was only mentioned in terms of it being a potentiality, or, in the case of the one responder, as something she thinks others get from the group, but not her. This corresponds, however, with what one of the co-founders of the community mentioned in another interview when explaining why he co-founded the ACUO. He mentioned that he had met a lot of people "who are on the brink and maybe don't have anyone to reach out to," but before finishing that thought he added "I'm not sure if that's been the case with the club, in fact probably not [. . .] We've never really had anyone come to the club saying, you know, 'I'm trying to make up my mind,' but that would be nice to see, that would definitely be a, I think a worthwhile reason to have started it." It should also be noted that although it may not have been afforded the opportunity to provide communal support face-to-face, at least not in any noticeable or obvious

way, the ACUO does indeed offer support to its members through its Facebook page. While this page has mostly been used for vigorous debate, discussions, and the sharing of interesting and sometimes humorous articles, there have occasionally been posts by members who explain that they are dealing with an issue such as a religious family member who has difficulty accepting their atheism, and respondents often offer advice and a mixture of emotional and motivational support in return. In other words, while the ACUO does offer support to those who need it, the majority of responses to questions pertaining to why they joined the club and what the club means to them does not support the conclusion that seeking out support was a major motivating factor for joining the community, nor is it a commonly cited attribute of what the community means to its members.

8.5   Conclusion

What is ultimately interesting about these results are the stories that they do not tell. They do not tell of a community of young Canadian atheists who are concerned with being marginalized, biased against, or threatened because of their irreligion. They do not tell of young atheists worried about increasing or defending their numbers. Instead they point to a group of like-minded people getting together to discuss shared interests—a simple proposition but one that hints at atheism playing an increasingly equal role in the ongoing performance that is Canada's multicultural mosaic.

One of the ways many Western countries, including Canada, have come to deal with the increasing diversity of their populations is through the politicization of multiculturalism. While Canadian politicians have long cited "tolerance"[4] as a defining characteristic of Canada, it was the Liberal government of Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau who declared multiculturalism an official policy in 1977, and the *Canadian Multicultural Act* became enacted under the direction of Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in 1988. As Augie Feras and Jean Leonard Elliot explain, multiculturalism as a practice—as mixed cultures living in close proximity—is a social reality in Canada, but as a political theory advocating equality and civility between cultures it is a social experiment and the degrees of its

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[4]For example, in 1867, a Father of Canadian Federation, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, told a large crowd in Ottawa that "We must qualify ourselves to fulfill the spirit of tolerance and forbearance. It is our only means to make a great nation of a small people" (Gwyn 2011, 56–57). See also Ajzenstat et al. (2003, 327–353), in which the editors explain, in their introduction to the section on Canada's founding debates on "Minorities and Minority Rights," that, "[a]lthough they may not wish to *encourage* diversity, the legislators adamantly believe it should be *tolerated*. Some of them describe it as ineradicable. Many of them are religious men who wish to see the particular institutions they cherish continue, and understand very well that they must in turn respect the religion and tradition of others. Hence the repeated praise for religious liberty in these debates" (Ajzenstat et al. 2003, 327, emphasis in original).

effectiveness are debatable (Fleras and Elliot 2002). According to Michael Adams the experiment of multiculturalism is a success, with four out of five Canadians surveyed agreeing that multiculturalism "has contributed positively to the national identity" (Adams 2008, 86). Although Adams paints Canadian multiculturalism in a somewhat rosy light, when it comes to putting theory into practice it is not without its trials. This is especially evident when looking at the European situation, which has exhibited symptoms of a 'multicultural backlash' in recent years.

There is currently a great deal of discussion on the effectiveness of multicultural policy, particularly in Europe. Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf have addressed European criticisms of multiculturalism in their edited collection *The Multiculturalism Backlash: European Discourses, Policies and Practices*, which addresses simplified assessments of multiculturalism in practice (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010). Vertovec and Wessendorf argue that while there has been an increased public "backlash discourse" against multiculturalism in Europe, that discourse has not manifested in a policy shift toward assimilation. The shift has been toward downplaying the term 'multiculturalism', but by and large the principles behind it—such as the value of cultural/ethnic accommodation—remain in place. This, however, does not mean that the backlash against multiculturalism, especially post-9/11, has not had some negative effects:

> Relentless attacks on multiculturalism – and thereby on basic principles of accommodating cultural and religious difference – might not have changed the basis of policies radically, but they have certainly fomented a negative atmosphere surrounding immigrants, ethnic minorities and particularly Muslims. (Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010, 27)

Examples of that negative atmosphere can be found throughout Europe, such as the French ban on the hijab and the rise of Dutch nationalist political parties, as well as through public discourse concerning immigration and questions of identity in many countries, such as Germany and England.

Returning to Canada, Will Kymlicka argues that the European backlash, while a legitimate concern overseas, does not accurately translate into an equivalent or prediction of Canada's present or future relations with multicultural policies (Kymlicka 2010). In fact, he argues that it is misleading to devise parallels from these differing situations:

> [L]ong-time critics of multiculturalism have jumped on the European anti-multiculturalist bandwagon and have hoped to ride it into Canada, desperately looking for any shred of evidence that can be (mis)interpreted as proof that Canada is falling into European-style patterns of ethnic animosity and division. If we look at the evidence dispassionately, however, it is clear that ethnic relations in Toronto are not like those in Paris, Amsterdam or Bradford. (Kymlicka 2010, 17, brackets around "mis" in original)

Kymlicka's positive opinion of Canadian multiculturalism is due to the "growing evidence that immigrants to Canada and visible or religious minorities fare better than most, if not all, other Western democracies" (Kymlicka 2010, 7). As evidence he points to research that has shown:

> 1) Pride: "Canadians view immigrants and demographic diversity as key parts of their own Canadian identity. Compared to every other Western democracy, Canadians are more likely

to say that immigration is beneficial, [. . .] and more likely to support multiculturalism and to view it as a source of pride" (Kymlicka 2010, 17);

2) Success in integration: "[C]ompared to every other Western democracy, immigrants in Canada are (much) more likely to become citizens [. . .] Compared to other countries, these naturalized immigrants are more likely to actually participate in the political process as voters, party members or even candidates for political office" (Kymlicka 2010, 18, brackets around "much" in original);

3) A high success rate of children of immigrants: "The children of immigrants have better educational outcomes in Canada than in any other Western democracy. Indeed, uniquely among Western countries, second-generation immigrants in Canada actually outperform children of non-immigrant parents" (Kymlicka 2010, 18), and;

4) A lack of minority ghettos: "There is an almost complete absence of immigrant or visible or religious minority ghettos in Canada. Today, as throughout Canadian history, immigrants often choose to live in neighbourhoods where co-ethnics already reside". (Kymlicka 2010, 18)

While these strengths are principally related to the cultural or ethnic aspects of multiculturalism, they do also point to the integration in Canadian society of religious minorities, as in the lack of religious minority ghettos and the notion that demographic diversity is a key part of Canadian identity. Kymlicka does not paint an entirely utopian picture of Canadian multiculturalism, however; he also acknowledges that multiculturalism does indeed have some issues that still need to be worked through. The most relevant of these to atheism is the concept's inclusion of religious identity as one of its aspects. Kymlicka notes: "The heated debates on religious family law arbitration and the funding of religious schools in Ontario, and the reasonable accommodation debate in Québec, show that religion is now the most controversial domain of multiculturalism" (Kymlicka 2010, 18). Indeed, it is often where religious freedoms meet secular restrictions that multiculturalism finds its most contentious debates. Many atheists are certainly engaged with these issues, since they often have an interest in church-state relationships, but when it comes to religion being "the most controversial domain of multiculturalism" it is not usually atheism that the major controversies revolve around. The debates Kymlicka highlights have to do with the reasonable accommodation of religions; debates related specifically to the reasonable accommodation of atheists, as far as media headlines suggest, are at present mostly limited to the removal or continued inclusion of the mentioning of God in the National Anthem and the Preamble to the Constitution, opening prayers in government settings, and the display of religious icons (the crucifix) in the courtroom.

Multiculturalism assumes diversity,[5] and many Canadians believe diversity is not only beneficial but vital to the country's identity. According to Rudyard Griffiths:

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[5]It is worth noting that "multiculturalism" is a problematic term in that "culture" itself is a difficult term to define. Jean-François Bayart argues convincingly that culture is imagined, politics acts on this *imaginaire*, and nationalism itself is an "imagined community" (Bayart 2005, 137). Multiculturalism is thus a product of an *imaginaire* that refers in large part to diversity, a diversity of ever-shifting *imaginaires*.

> In a 2005 Dominion Institute Survey, one in four Canadians said that diversity was what "makes Canada unique as a country." Personal freedom was a distant second choice, with only one in ten Canadians choosing it as the value that makes Canada unique. Two other defining features – our geography and our health care system – were given top rank by only one in twenty and one in fifty respondents respectively. (Griffiths 2009, 39)

In the context of multiculturalism and diversity, atheism should ideally play an equal role alongside other cultures in terms of freedom and legal rights. Although there are cases which call into question this notion of equality for atheists, these cases do not threaten an atheist's legal ability to run for public office as they do in some US states. There certainly are incidents whereby discrimination specifically against atheists occurs, but these seem to be on the level of the personal (i.e. one on one conversation) rather than institutional, and the same can be said for any member of an identifiable group. If atheism in Canada is considered 'just another idea', this may explain why some individuals who join atheist communities in Canada do so in order to engage with like-minded people, and not, as in the case of the US, primarily in order to engage in advocacy or activism.[6] In other words, if there is at least a *perception* that atheism is on the same equal playing field as religions, the need for activism is minimized, and the role of an atheist community should reflect this. In the case of the ACUO, whereby only 1 of the 19 members interviewed mentioned advocacy as a reason for joining the club (and none mentioned activism or awareness to that question), and only one member mentioned activism in the context of what the club meant to him (with none mentioning advocacy or awareness to that question), this seems to be the case. It also explains why only two interviewees mentioned support as an attribute of the ACUO, with neither claiming to need or to have ever needed any from the atheist community. Moreover, the importance of not causing offense to others, which was brought up by 8 of 19 interviewees, not only perpetuates the typical stereotype that Canadians are 'nice', but it also hints at a lack of will on the part of some members to push for a change in their social status as atheists in Canadian society. To extend this conclusion to other Canadian atheist communities, however, is problematic. One consideration is the age of the ACUO's membership. Age may well be a or even *the* major factor in how the status of atheism in Canada is perceived, with the assumption being that atheists of a younger generation may feel that atheism has less of a stigma attached to it than those of older generations who grew up in different religious and political climates. Another factor may be geography. Ottawa is a major urban city, the capital

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[6]Research conducted by Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith regarding atheists in the US, using interviews and observations of atheist groups, has found that American atheists are experiencing a relatively high level of exclusion despite the so-called dominance of the secular (Cimino and Smith 2007). Cimino and Smith argue that modern atheists in the US are employing three strategies to grow and protect themselves within what Cimino and Smith term a "highly religious" society (Cimino and Smith 2007, 432). These strategies are competing with other atheist groups in order to attract people looking for "communities of meaning," borrowing elements from evangelical Protestants in the US, and engaging in minority discourse and identity politics (Cimino and Smith 2007, 411).

of Canada; the experiences of atheists in less diverse more rural areas may be quite different, assumedly more negative, which would be reflected in the reasons rural atheists may join local atheist communities and the meaning those communities have for them. Likewise, it may be the case that discrimination against atheists is more common in other, non-university, settings, such as the workplace.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in a detailed comparison of atheist communities across Canada, the results from this singular snapshot of one university atheist community points to at least one form of "Canadianized atheism" whereby the desire not to be offensive merges with the desire to engage in discussions with like-minded individuals on topics pertaining to religion that are often controversial. This in turn points to the important role political responses to diversity, such as multiculturalism in Canada, play in the shaping of how atheist communities are understood and how they understand themselves. In the US, for example, where the notion of the melting pot provides incentive to share a common national identity that includes a normative belief in God, it logically follows that those without such a belief would experience various degrees of marginalization. In Europe, where the multicultural backlash intensifies relations between those of various belief systems, the politicized nature of the multicultural debate surely leads atheist communities to raise different questions about their own statuses than those raised in the Canadian context. These statements regarding how multiculturalism, the melting pot, and the multicultural backlash may factor into the demography of atheist communities is admittedly speculative, but when considering the differences between atheists of different cultural contexts it is well worth questioning how official public policy, and common social imaginations, may play a role in the self-understanding and expression of each atheist community.

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Chapter 9
From Atheist to Spiritual But Not Religious: A Punctuated Continuum of Identities among the Second Generation of Post-1970 Immigrants in Canada

Peter Beyer

9.1 Introduction: Lived and Systemic Atheism/Religion

Analogous to social forms that operatively fall under the category of "religion," atheism can be understood and analyzed on at least two levels: the level of the individual; and the social, normative, or institutional level. Therefore, parallel to current debates about religion and its cognates such as spirituality, we can call the first level "lived atheism," how individuals constitute atheism through their personal activity and consciousness (see Zuckerman, 2008); and the second "systemic atheism," how the activity of people together contributes to the construction of atheism as movement, as organization,[1] and as institution, that is, as social system. Atheism as an analytical category is of course implicated in both of these levels of observation, but the social forms of atheism constitute more than just the category; they emerge from the use of the category in social communication (cf. Luhmann 2012, 22ff). They are in that sense socially operative; they are not just descriptive but also prescriptive for how people perceive, feel, think, and behave. In that context, it is important to underline that, although the two levels do not necessarily coincide, they are always related: the action or communication in which individuals engage is a necessary condition for the very possibility of social institutions, just as the reverse is also the case. As recent literature on "lived religion," however, emphasizes (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2005), observing religion at the level of

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[1] A significant portion of current research on atheism is in fact about the organized variety, small as it usually is. See, as examples, Cimino and Smith (2007, 2011), Quack (2012), Smith (2011).

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the individual can reveal rather different constructions of religion (however defined more precisely) than concentrating on the level of authoritative religious institutions. Indeed, much has been made recently of a possibly renewed shift of "doing religion" to this level of the individual in our society (Heelas et al. 2005; Hervieu-Léger 1999; Roof 1999; Taylor 2007, 473ff.). Nonetheless, this shift is usually not seen as implying the de-institutionalization of religion: individual religion most often— but of course by that token not always—also contributes to the social construction of systemic or institutional religion. The latter has the former as a condition for its possibility; but in most cases one can also say the reverse: individual religion depends on systemic religion or at least on those social structures that contain what we as observers call religion. The two are invariably in a kind of dialogical relationship to each other, which is entirely an expression of the fact that individuals and society exist only in this kind of relation.

The relation between the two levels, the mutual determination of the lived and the systemic, has methodological implications for researching this atheism: even though lived atheism and systemic atheism are not identical, it is difficult to assess and analyze either without the substantial inclusion of data generated from individually initiated and attributed communication, that is, from the lived level. Moreover, given the possibility of the just-mentioned shift in our society to religion—and therefore arguably atheism, which forms itself over and usually against religion—being located more at the individual level than that of authoritative institutions, it would be difficult to argue that an elite group of "authoritative" individuals—say the leaders of humanist organizations or authors like Richard Dawkins—could be the primary source of such data, unless of course one were to find that their communication of atheism seems to have a determinative influence on how "ordinary" atheists construct their lived atheism. But that would just mean that one would still have to start with these "ordinary" atheists in order to find such possibly authoritative atheism.

9.2   From Atheism to Religion: A Punctuated Continuum

In this article, I present and analyze just such individual level data drawn from two relatively recent research projects carried out over the last decade in Canada. The aim is twofold: first, to explore the individual construction of atheism, in part with an eye for either convergence that might well point to institutionalization, or a lack thereof, which would point in the opposite direction. The second aim is to see what relation such convergent construction (or lack of) might have to the "other side" of all atheist form, namely "religion" and its ambiguous cognates like "spirituality" and "culture." "Spirituality" often arises especially to express the current supposed shift in emphasis towards "doing religion" in a "lived" and non-institutionalized direction. The two aims are related in that one might expect convergences in the construction of atheism to be analogous to constructions of religion, given their mutually identifying character. And in that regard one might

also hypothesize that transformations or variability in the construction of religion would be reflected in similar variability in the construction of atheism. In other words, atheism's imagining and construction will in key respects mirror religion's (re)imagining and (re)construction.

A brief description of the research projects from which the individual level data are drawn will serve as a first step in concretizing these considerations. The data consist of 300 semi-structured individual interviews conducted in major Canadian cities between 2004 and 2010. Participants were recruited explicitly for projects about religion, not atheism; they came from a wide variety of religious and cultural backgrounds and all came from immigrant families, namely those in which at least one parent was an immigrant to Canada.[2] Almost all were either born in Canada or substantially raised in Canada. They ranged in age from 18 to their early 30s, mostly at the younger end of this scale. They were in majority women and the great majority was at the time of their interviews enrolled in postsecondary education.[3]

In terms of outcomes, a minority, but still a significant number, in spite of being recruited for projects about religion, declared themselves to be atheists. A much larger number located themselves as from moderately to heavily identified and involved with institutionalized religion, for instance, as from somewhat to highly involved Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus. Another significant minority, however, located themselves as somewhere "in-between": they were by their own declarations not religious, but also not atheists either. This range of identities with respect to religion and atheism speaks directly to the core questions I am addressing here, above all in that, at the observational level of "lived religion," there appears to be no clear dividing line between "religion" and "atheism," where the first ends and the second begins; and this speaks to parallel ways of constructing them at this level. Some people live and identify as clear atheists; some people live and identify as exclusively and entirely religious, and as practitioners and adherents of specific religions. But there is a great swath of people who are neither, but also not within some other clear, socially operative category, such as for instance "spirituality." The identities of the interviewees, through their own self-descriptions, suggest that, at the lived religion level, one should speak more of a continuum of identities ranging from one socially operative category to another—here atheism and religion—than of an arrangement of people into a delimited set of such categories, whether two or more. Even further, it is arguably not even adequate to speak of a continuum, if by that one means a two-dimensional scale on which one moves from pure atheism through a progressive mixture of atheism and religion until one arrives at the pure religion end. Such a two-dimensional orientation to the phenomenon

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[2]In most respects, even though the sample consists of 1.5 and second generation children of immigrants, there is little in the data to suggest that they are not similar in their outlooks, orientations, and patterns of identity construction to almost anyone in Canada of their cohort and age groups. For the purposes of the present analysis, therefore, I treat them as "normal young adult Canadians."

[3]For details and reports on these projects, see Beyer (2014), Beyer and Ramji (2013), Lefebvre and Triki Yamani (2013).

is evident in a significant portion of the literature on atheism, with categorizations moving directly from the pure (atheist) to less pure (more and more theist).[4] The situation, however, is more complex than such a strategy allows, for instance in that other lived and socially operative categories of identity, especially spirituality or culture, can enter into the mix: people may be "spiritual but not religious," but also "spiritual and religious," "atheist and spiritual," "culturally religious and atheist," and so forth. At the lived level, if not the institutional, atheism, these data suggest, needs to be understood in a complex field of alternative and complementary identity terms, all of which together render the whole idea of atheism, along with religion, more ambiguous and above all not dichotomous. The work of Cotter and Lee on "non-religion" arrives at very similar conclusions (Cotter 2011; Lee 2012).

In this light, I would like to suggest that, with respect to the research I am reporting, we speak of a *punctuated continuum* of individual or lived religious identities in which the difference and distance between being atheist and being religious is occupied by a continuum of differing degrees of both atheism and religiousness as well as being punctuated by the inclusion—again in varying degrees and in different combinations—of other related or cognate identity categories, notably spirituality, but also culture.[5] To translate this idea of a punctuated continuum into more specific terms, in the following presentation of an illustrative sample of the participants in our studies, I use a series of classifications which name a few of the possible "locations" along the continuum. At the one end, there is the "anti-religious atheist" who identifies a kind of "pure" atheism that rejects everything that is understood as religion. Here people are "atheist and definitely not religious" (ADNR).[6] Next are those who are "atheist but not religious" (ABNR); they are characterized by some openness or more positive attitude to what they regard as religion. They are not so concerned about being or defining themselves so strictly over and against whatever it is that counts as religion. From here we merge into those who are "agnostic": they are in a sense both atheist and open to religion. Then we have the "apatheists," a group which is simply neutral about the whole question and who are more clearly neither atheist nor religious. In a sense, they are not on the continuum at all since they relate neither positively nor negatively to the core categories of "non-religion" or "religion." From here we move to the

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[4]See, for instance, Cragun et al. (2012) who classify according to "atheist, hard agnostic, soft agnostic, deist, theist"; or Baker and Smith (2009) who use a simpler "atheist, agnostic, unchurched believer" classification. See also Sherkat (2008). Colin Campbell's "range of irreligiousness" is also more or less a one-dimensional continuum from which the sort of "punctuations" that I suggest here, under headings like quasi-religiousness or secularity are excluded. See Campbell (1971).

[5]Other important categories of individual identity could also be analyzed in this regard, notably gender and sexual orientation. Here I do not have the space to do that adequately and so leave it for another occasion. For an excellent overview of other attempts at the sort of typological classification that I am doing here, see Cotter (2011).

[6]I am borrowing and adapting here from the work of Siobhan Chandler, who distinguishes between the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) and the "spiritual definitely not religious" (SDNR). See Chandler (2008).

classifications that include some sort of religiosity, but in a distancing fashion which calls it spirituality rather than religion—these are the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR). This category shows the degree to which the idea of spirituality can also operate "over and against" religion, much like atheism, but recognizing a stronger affinity with religion. Beyond these classifications are those who identify as being within a particular religion, but in varying ways and to varying degrees. On the one end of the religiously identified are the "culturally religious," a group that has a kind of default religious identity as a result of their family membership, but which does or believes very little that they consider as manifesting that religion, and when they do perform religion, it may even be largely devoid of religious belief or commitment. The ordering of the SBNR and the culturally religious on the continuum with relation to atheism—that is, which one puts more on the atheism or more on the religion side—is a bit ambiguous because neither does much that it considers religious. In any case, these blend into those who are perhaps more consistently religious. There are the "occasionally religious" and the "flexibly religious." They are flexible and variable in what they include in their religiousness, practicing, for instance *religion à la carte*, picking and choosing from the religion with which they identify. We finally arrive at the clear other end of the continuum, where we find the exclusively and highly religious, many of whom are nevertheless accepting of other religions, but others, even farther along the continuum, who are ardently and exclusively religious: they belong in their understanding totally and exclusively to one religion and they practice that religion as completely as they can, rejecting all others and, at an extreme, even rejecting the validity or value of any other religion. The following represents a diagrammatic version of this punctuated continuum, although to represent it adequately one would have to create a multidimensional model. The diagram serves visually to help orient the reader.

Atheism   Religion

ADNR   ABNR   Agnostic   Apatheist   SBNR   [Culturally Religious   Occasional   Flexible Religious   Highly Religious   Exclusive Religious]

9.3   Individual Profiles: From ADNR to SBNR

In turning now to a series of interviews that illustrate this continuum in identity construction, I limit myself only to the first few categories, namely those that show varieties of non-religiousness. This is in keeping with the focus of this article on atheism. Accordingly, in what follows, I discuss the first five categories only, presenting one or more examples for those that appeared meaningfully in the interview samples, but with an emphasis on the fluidity between them, the lack of clear boundaries as one moves from one to another. Accordingly, I move from ADNR to SBNR. The first declares itself anti-religious and the last is the final one that declares itself as not-religious in some sense. Along the way, some of the key strategies or components of non-religious identity construction will become clear.

In different words, the varieties of atheism/non-religiousness will always be explicitly or implicitly understood *with relation to religion*, albeit in a negative way (Lee 2012). In particular, it will be important to notice the positive components of the non-religious identities, those positive constructs that they put in place of religion that are understood as "not religion." These include, of course, the notions of "spirituality" and sometimes "culture," but they are not limited to these rough cognates of religion. As Cotter has argued in his review of various categorizations of this kind, various categories can condition or specify what atheism means to people who so identify, namely as whole range of "secular" categories like science, family, philosophy, nature, and humanity (as in "humanism") (Cotter 2011).

I begin with three instances of those that are clear atheists without the admixture of or even openness to anything deemed in any sense religious. These are ADNRs. Thereafter, I will present an example that already begins to soften the "definitely" and suggest a "but" (ABNR).

S.W.[7] was at the time of his interview 20 years old. He came from a Chinese and European family and declared himself an atheist. He was not raised in a household where religion had much importance, but he also rejected religion explicitly because he felt it was not scientific, meaning of course that he found science, by contrast, believable or "rational." Here the category of science punctuates the continuum. S.W. is one of about four interviewees who expressed an anti-religious position on this basis. It is probably not insignificant that he was ethnically Chinese: among the 300 interviewees, the highest incidence of atheists, especially those who reject what they consider as religion because it is unscientific (or, irrational) or "superstitious," occurs among those with this cultural background. The situation demonstrates how the category of culture may inflect that of religion; in this case, again, how "culture" punctuates the continuum. Here is how S.W identified himself:

> I would definitely categorize myself as an atheist, . . . because as I got more and more educated, I started to see, like, the philosophical side and the metaphysical reasons why people believe in God and I just decided it was really weak on that side. . . . It's just the fact that it actually kind of has a lack of direct evidence and God is no longer falsifiable because we've explored like all kinds of things with science and we haven't found anything like that. So like, obviously in the Bible, heaven is the sky . . . right? But now we've pretty much explored as much of the sky as we think . . . there is and we don't find a God or a Heaven or anything like that. . . . It's just not logical, not for me, no.

A second example is K.L, a 22 year-old man from an Ismaili Muslim family. His atheism is significantly more anti-religion. He is also quite clear about the difference between religion and his atheist position:

> . . . [religion is] a form of a moral didacticism, it's . . . pretty controlling, it's something that . . . manipulated you into being a kind of person that . . . they want. Like they want to have like a whole set of, like, thousands of people, to be, like, this one kind of person . . . .

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[7] I use the participants' real initials, but of course, leave out anything with which anyone could identify the person concerned.

> I mean it may be great for some people, I understand that; but not so much for me. . . . And
> [I] reject all of it. Pretty much anything having to do with metaphysics I would reject . . . I
> mean anything that can't be proven as a science or a form of human nature, I would pretty
> much quarrel with.

He was also raised in a religiously practicing household, but here is what he says
about his experience participating as a teenager at his family's *jamatkhana*: "Well,
like, just a lot of the things that would . . . be said. Like, it was never anything
opinionated, it was all very neutral things. But you know, some ideas about, like . . .
you know, God, and like, you know what God would want you to do, like, it's just
ridiculous, it just seemed utterly, utterly ridiculous." What is noteworthy here is that
K.L. did not become an atheist after having been religious; it is clear that religion or
what he calls "metaphysics" has never had much appeal; he appears to have found it
"ridiculous" in spite of a religious upbringing. Until his teen years, he participated in
religion because his parents required it—family culture punctuating the continuum;
but at a certain point he simply refused to continue because, from his perspective,
he *was* an atheist who could not, in good conscience, continue.

Moving just slightly away from these uncompromisingly atheist positions, A.A.
was 19 years old at the time of the interview; she comes from a Hindu family,
and she is a self-declared atheist. She explained how she progressively realized her
position as an atheist:

> I just started asking more questions and nobody really had the answers and then [. . .] I
> came up with my own conclusions and then events in my life were kind of supported by
> them and then what other people would say to me or my teachers, y'know, the way they
> would talk to us and stuff like that, everything just kind of supported the fact that I don't
> believe that there's a higher power.

What is notable here is that there is, as with K.L., no sudden or even gradual
transition to an atheist position from a religious one. In spite of having grown
up in a practicing Hindu household—and still occasionally participating in family
rituals, but only to please her parents—she apparently has not and does not feel
any resonance with a religious orientation, which she clearly identifies in terms of
a belief in a higher power, that is, in terms of a natural/supernatural distinction. She
goes on: "I don't believe in a higher power, I don't believe in luck or superstition or
anything like that. I just believe that we are what we are because of evolution and
natural causes, . . . spontaneity and just . . . chance, I guess. I don't believe in fate
or anything."

Among the provisional conclusions one might be able to draw from these three
illustrations is that these "clear" atheists may not be strongly against religion; it is
more that religion does not resonate with the meaningful world that they inhabit.
Religion, it seems, for them is not so much bad, let alone necessarily dangerous,
as it is silly: it is illogical, irrational, a crutch, manipulative, illusory, and infantile.
These are, of course, among the classical critiques of religion that date at least from
the European enlightenment and Chinese philosophy. A fourth case, however, shows
that atheism can also be identified in less than such "clear" terms.

Somewhat in contrast to these three clear atheists, the last of which was at least willing to participate occasionally in religious activity for non-religious reasons, S.O. represents an atheist position that moves a bit farther from the one end of the continuum. He is one that we can call atheist, *but* not religious. At the time of his interview, he was 24 years old, of a Peruvian Roman Catholic family living in Montréal. He was also a self-declared atheist. His way of expressing this is very similar to the previous two examples, although here we have perhaps more of an admission of having been religious up until a certain point in his life: "At the moment, I consider myself to be an atheist. Until the age of 19 or 20, I still went to church with my parents, but at a certain point I realized that I have no more need for religion; and since that time, I consider myself to be an atheist." The basis of his atheism is similar to the previous three, namely that religious realities are or have become for him unbelievable. He relates an incident at his Catholic high school's graduation ceremonies that makes his rejection of religious rationality quite clear:

> I came across their program in which there were printed things that the graduates were supposed to say, things like "Thank you, Lord, for having granted us the presence of your spirit to complete our examinations." When I read that, I was like, gimme a break! It's not because someone up above decided that they were going to get good marks; it's because they made an effort and worked hard! Because of seeing stuff like that, I started to ask myself, what is religion, a kind of crutch to face difficulties instead of rolling up one's sleeves and saying to oneself that I think it's time to get up and do something? After seeing stuff like that, I basically started to be an atheist.

Nonetheless, S.O.'s distancing from matters religious, or at least spiritual, is not complete. He goes on to say, "I'm not going to identify myself as being spiritual, but I am aware of that, even in my atheism, there could be a certain dose of spirituality in the fact that I'm a moral person." Although only slightly, the boundaries at the edge of atheism are beginning to be elided here: he is not religious, but atheist; and yet he still considers part of his identity, his morality, to be in the realm of that conceptual cousin of religion, namely spirituality.

From this kind of minimal opening, three further cases illustrate how varied the next punctuations of the continuum can be. These interviewees might be seen as somewhat atheist, somewhat agnostic, or even ambiguously spiritual, but they typically do not identify with this last term.

A.R. is a 21-year old woman from a Punjabi Sikh family. She declares herself to be "not religious," much like her mother, but unlike her father, who she says is religious and a Sikh. Her distancing from religion she expresses as follows: "I think [all religions are] pretty problematic, so I wouldn't venture to say that anyone is better than the other. ... I mean fundamentalism is more overtly contentious, I think. So, I'd say yes, it has its troubling aspects, as opposed to just traditional or moderate, conventional versions of the religion." Already in her phrasing, one can detect a more positive orientation; and she expresses this herself in terms of her own development:

> I guess as I grow older it's less of a looking down on religion or people who follow it, you know, religiously; less looking down on them, more trying to understand their position,

> sympathizing with them–whatever experience, you know, has led them to that. I guess it's less opposing that and just trying to understand it. I might not necessarily adopt whatever beliefs they have, but it's less hostile.

A.R. is therefore not a declared atheist, but also not religious, yet with a (developing) sympathy for religion. She is not an explicit agnostic, but appears to adopt an identity that is very similar.

The complexity of this zone in the continuum that is not clearly atheist but not religious either—it is what the idea of "punctuated" is meant to convey—is further illustrated by two examples where the difference between religiousness and non-religiousness depends on how one draws the boundaries between the two.

N.T. is a 30-year-old woman from a Vietnamese Buddhist family. She is a self-declared atheist, but she incorporates into her atheist identity what she recognizes as, in certain respects, religious or spiritual. The issue centres on the status of Vipassana meditation, a form of Buddhism that eschews the title of Buddhism and of religion, but in belief and practice has the features of other forms that do recognize themselves as both.[8] In terms of the categories along the continuum that I am using here, she can be located as somewhere along the line between agnosticism and spiritual-but-not-religious, although more toward the agnostic side. She expresses her position in this respect quite nicely. When asked what her religion is, she said: "I don't have a defined religion as such . . . I don't know if I would define myself as atheist, but [pause] . . . [interviewer suggests: agnostic?] . . . That's it; someone who believes in a superior being or presence, but who doesn't define exactly what that presence is or give it a name. That sort of thing. I think I'd go more for [being] atheist."

N.T. declares herself influenced by Buddhist values, through the Vipassana meditation that she learned from her father, but in saying this, locates herself as being neither spiritual nor religious. The core of these values, for her, are that "everything is impermanent and fleeting . . . It's that . . . all the emotions that you feel, that's fine, but you mustn't get attached, it's impermanent." Complicating the issue further is that she feels herself surrounded by religion, but she still does not identify with it personally. Here is how she relates her position with respect to this combination:

> Yes, because spiritual for me is to believe in, to see or to visualize, a power or a person or a vague force; and I don't really visualize that. It's funny, even if I say I'm not religious, religion is everywhere, its omnipresent. I didn't believe this in the past because I totally denied religion. Religion is a social control imposed from above, and so on. But religion is everywhere. My boyfriend, he's super religious; he's practicing. I see my father. I see others that I knew, who were Mormons, Catholics, people who practiced a certain religion. . . . Your social network, the people that you meet, that influences how you are, what you feel about yourself. In that sense, [religion] is important, but for myself personally, it isn't all that important.

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[8]For a thorough treatment of this issue with respect to Vipassana Buddhism, see Thibeault (2013). With respect to the issue of atheism, see also Taira (2012).

Like A.R., then, N.T. is non-religious, maybe even atheist, but includes in her identity an openness to both religion and spirituality as a valid reality in others, and perhaps one that in a certain sense she thinks "rubs off on her."

Moving somewhat further along the line than these two suggest, C.F. is a 25-year-old man from a Sri Lankan Buddhist family, and a declared atheist, but by his own admission also Buddhist. In the course of his interview, in light of what he was saying about himself, we asked if one could be atheist and religious at the same time. He answered, "I'd say yes. Because I'd consider myself, like, not overtly religious, but I do value my upbringing in this; but I also definitely consider myself an atheist. So I don't believe in any higher life form or guidance or divine being or anything like that. Like, I do believe in the precepts and the value system of Buddhism." The content of this Buddhism, however, somewhat similar to the orientation expressed by S.O. above, consists mostly of ethical norms, for which C.F. uses the very Buddhist term, mindfulness. His way of putting it is like this:

> I find, because I have a Buddhist upbringing, ... all the precepts and values of Buddhism, I find I like to follow or want to follow because it's just good moral value: like don't kill, don't steal, don't lie ... right [laughs] .... So that's where I consider myself only in the core idea of Buddhism, which is mindfulness, like y'know respect everyone, value life.

Notably, elsewhere in the interview, C.F. avers that his Buddhism is a cultural inheritance, and therefore one could surmise that the category of culture is operating here as a substitute for religion in a way analogous to the way spirituality can and does do this, as we shall see. That said, C.F. does not consider himself spiritual, thereby pushing him again more toward the atheist end of the continuum.

Perhaps oddly, the identity categories of "agnostic" and "apatheist" are barely present in our sample of 300 interviews. In the latter case, this is likely because the term refers precisely to those who have little resonance with the entire continuum from atheist to religious; another punctuation in the sense that I am using that word here. S.W., one of the atheists presented above, described the idea of apatheism, albeit referring to his girlfriend and not himself: "she ... is kind of what people call an apatheist, where she's an atheist methodologically, 'cause she never had a belief in God and she kind of doesn't care." Given that both research projects recruited their participants explicitly to talk about religion, those who "don't care" could not be expected to volunteer in noticeable number. More surprising is the relative absence of self-described agnostics.

To get a more solid idea of what the next portion of the continuum looks like, therefore, we look at two ambiguous cases that locate themselves just a bit more toward the spiritual/religious end. T.M., a 19-year-old woman from a Honduran Roman Catholic family. She is critical of religion but, significantly, also feels the need to put something in religion's place; although she does not know what that might be. Here is how she expresses this ambiguity:

> For myself, if I had the choice, I would abolish religions. I don't know if it's religion that is the problem, but I think it creates conflict for nothing. In the end we all want the same thing, I suppose: live well, be happy, love the person next to one, some [go] to heaven,

> some reincarnate as a frog – I don't know. I think about this, and there's nothing that I could replace it with, but it's necessary anyway. That's it; not a [form of] control, but a spiritual guide.

The in-between aspect here is that she rejects religion without being quite able to identify a suitable replacement: it is necessary to have what religion claims to provide, but religion is not the way to provide it. What remains is a gap for which the word spiritual seems to offer the best label. Significant in this regard, therefore, is that T.M. does indeed consider herself more spiritual than religious. Almost as if putting herself on this portion of our continuum, she said: "On a scale of [where] 10 [is] religious and 1 [is] spiritual, I would say that I'm more of a 4 ... I'm more spiritual than religious." That said, she also did not recount much in the way of content, practice and beliefs that would express that spirituality. As with the immediately previous cases, this area would be more occupied by moral norms and a sense of doing what is right.

A similar case, but moving more toward the spiritual and even religious end of the scale, is L.J., a 20-year-old woman from a Haitian Protestant Christian family. She identifies herself as Christian. She says, "I'm a Christian." Yet she is also quite critical of religion. She says, "I'm a Christian, but I don't believe in a religion, because religion always divides; religions always creates wars. Therefore I don't believe in a religion. Therefore I don't believe one religion is better than another. Personally, for me, we should all be Buddhists." In assigning a non-religious status to Buddhism, L.J. is likely expressing her own leaning toward spirituality. A little later she said, "I am not religious, but I consider myself definitely more spiritual;" and then explained what she meant: "I define myself as spiritual even though I can't really say what that means. It's that I always try to work on my spiritual side ... I try to reach a higher level, not intellectual at the level of knowledge, but to really seek out the deeper meaning in things, not just at the level of rational knowledge, but above all at the level of the irrational, like intuition [or] imagination." L.J. participates in the activities of the Christian community to which her family belongs, including religious ones. She loves Gospel music and enjoys hearing sermons if they are inspiring; but her approach is very personal, with her own particular idea of what counts as being a Christian.

The case of S.K., a 30-year-old woman of mixed Christian and Muslim family, provides further illustration of this region that moves into more clearly spiritual but not religious identities. She was not raised in a religious household, but she now searches for a kind of spiritual/religious connection. When asked if she considered herself spiritual or religious, she said:

> I think I'm spiritual but I would like to be religious . . . . I think that I'm not [religious] because – I didn't start out in a community, in like a religious community. And, and now I have conditions [laughs]; about like, about coming into a religion as an equal person, as a spiritual person on the same level as other people. And then I do feel that, as a lesbian, that that doesn't happen in many different contexts . . . . And so, the only communal way I've explored spirituality has been in the gay and lesbian community.

The association between religion and community on the one hand and spirituality and the individual on the other she makes quite clear elsewhere in the interview:

> I think that religion is the communal part, of like, exploring divinity or whatever. It's the communal but it's also formal in the sense that, on some level people have agreed about the rules or how things are done. Spirituality is more like the internal impulse or like the seeker. It can't really be regulated and I think that religion is one of the ways we share and connect around our spirituality but then if you're off on your own you can still sort of have a spiritual life. And I think that when people say someone has a rich spiritual life, they're really always talking about the internal or that personal relationship. And when you say you have a rich religious life they're talking about community and sort of celebrations and prayer and mass or scripture or whatever in that particular religion.

S.K. is not too specific about how she expresses her spirituality, only that she engages in "spiritual explorations" in the context of the gay and lesbian community in which she participates. Yet it is clear that with her we have definitively left the non-religious end of the continuum, but we have done so in a sort of continuous fashion, without a clear break from non-religious to religious except in that "spiritual" appears to stand for that in-between region. A final illustration will help to underscore this fluidity further, above all in that the spiritual and religious are now both present, but still with a priority given to the spiritual.

H.M. was 24 years old at the time of his interview. He comes from a Caribbean Hindu family, and is in some ways, the classical "seeker." His seeking, however, has included both religion and spirituality, virtually seamlessly. He relates that he has experienced what he describes as spiritual/religious realities since he was a young boy. His seeker journey began in earnest in his early teens and started with religion, only later yielding more to spirituality. Here is part of what he told us:

> I was interested in this character Jesus. . . . And I remember watching Jesus videos. . . . Jesus as a boy, and those always fascinated me, like how this man is god. That whole concept is fascinating. So yes, when I was 13 [my brother] barged into my room and he handed me a small Bible and he said, read this, I want you to read this and he opened to the book of John, and I read it and I found it fascinating. And I don't know if you'd believe me, but I felt something burst into my heart. It was like an explosion and it was a fantastic feeling and I knelt by my bed, . . . and I prayed to God and I prayed, 'I feel you and I know you're real, please show me the way.' And I felt something lift from my shoulders, it was like all this time I was weighted down by something and then something just came and lifted it away and I felt so free and so alive, it was an amazing feeling.

H.M. spent most of his teen years as a devout and practicing Christian, but toward the end of that period he felt the need for something more. Thus his search began anew:

> I spent a lot of time on the net, numerous hours at night searching the net for various religions, for various faiths, because I felt that something had to be more united, had to be more personal, more mystical . . . .I came across several books, [but one in particular] that . . . just revolutionized the way I looked at it . . . . Basically it was the eastern flux . . . which ultimately says we are all part and parcel of the one god. We are all one; there is no divisions; the mind creates the divisions.

In consequence, H.M. went on to explore various directions including, for instance, the Subud movement and alchemy. Interestingly, in this context, he was never really

attracted to the religion of his family, except tangentially through his "eastern flux," as he put it. Nonetheless, in terms of the punctuated continuum between atheism and religion, he clearly represents a position that is far from being non-religious and also definitely beyond the "spiritual but not religious" category. If anything, he is spiritual and religious, but not in exclusive or clear terms as identifying with one clear religion. It is that which distinguishes him from the "religious" end of the continuum, from "cultural" to "exclusive." It also marks the end of my illustrations as we have arrived at the portion of the sample that considers itself to be explicitly religious in identity.

9.4 Discussion and Conclusion

At this point in the analysis, it will likely have become obvious that what is virtually absent from any of the "lived religion" profiles just examined is even a hint of institutional or systemic atheism. It is not that the clearly atheist identities might not include or be influenced by such institutional atheism; it is more that the atheist and other non-religious identities are not primarily or even visibly constructed in terms of or with reference to it. Indeed, what most, if not all, of these illustrative cases seem to show is that the entire spectrum of the continuum that is non or not religious largely lacks institutional or systemic reference. It is this, among other characteristics, that appears rather to distinguish it from the religious end which, if space permitted, could easily be demonstrated to identify itself primarily with reference to just such institutional or systemic religion, specifically Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism in the case of the research projects from which the illustrative cases are drawn. What this observation implies is that the concepts of atheism and spirituality—and culture, although again space does not permit the justification of this inclusion—operate in the contemporary societal context as names for what, for lack of a better term, one might call non-institutionalized religiousness. Another way of saying this is that, with the possible exception of the apatheist position—which, be it noted again, had no representative in our sample—atheism and spirituality are socially operative and meaningful terms of identity only because institutional (and lived) religion solidly exists in their social environment. As Lee insists (Lee 2012), the unifying moment in all this is the distancing from religion, the non-religiousness, not something positive like clear shared characteristics.

From this observation, it is possible to arrive at another: in a strong sense, it may be that the idea of institutionalized or systemic atheism is something akin to an oxymoron. That, among other reasons, is why it does not seem to appear in the data from which I have drawn the above illustrations. It is not that such an atheism cannot exist, but likely that where it does—as has so often been observed from analyses of atheism and those systems identified in terms of it, notably communism in the twentieth century (see, from among many, Gibson 1972; McFarland 1998)—it will seem to take on the characteristics of institutional religion because it identifies

itself in terms of and occupies the semantic and socio-structural place of religion. The same can be said for spirituality,[9] but not that much more polysemous term, culture. To the degree, therefore, that religion is yielding to spirituality—if this is happening in our society—this would be equivalent to the de-institutionalization of religion. Viewed in this way, the reason that the interviews seem to arrange themselves along a continuum from atheism to religion by way of spirituality (and culture) is because of this mutual relation among the terms, and this in the way that people actually incorporate them into their lived identities, not just because I have imposed them in this way for analytic purposes. On the other hand, however, the punctuated character of this continuum—that it is not smooth, with less atheism meaning more religion and vice versa—points to the contingency and non-necessity of this particular continuum: we could do this identity formation, this meaning making, in ways that do not involve these concepts at all (cf. Cotter 2011). And without doubt, many people do and many societies have. This leads me to a final and concluding observation: what has not appeared in this analysis and also not in the data on which I have based it is another, seemingly closely related distinction, that between the religious and the secular.[10] This absence may be significant, but reflection on it will have to be left to another occasion.

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[9]In this regard it may be significant that those who Siobhan Chandler identified in her research as the "Spiritual Definitely not Religious" seemed to converge in their beliefs and practices almost as if they implicitly formed an identifiable religion. See Chandler (2008).

[10]In this regard it may be significant that Lee's work on such typologization also rejects defining the area of non-religion as "secular" because the latter is too broad of a term. See Lee (2012).

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Chapter 10
Living Non-religious Identity in London

Lorna Mumford

In this chapter I consider three aspects of lived non-religious experience identified though fieldwork among members of local non-religious meeting groups in London, England. My first consideration is the significance of emotional events and experiences in some participants' accounts of what motivated them to reject religious belief and to assert their non-religious position. While a non-religious stance is often characterised as a rational, reasoned viewpoint based on intellectual disagreement with theological propositions and contradictions between scriptural narratives and scientific knowledge, evidence from my participants suggests that the rejection of religious beliefs may often be initially motivated by an individual's emotional response to a specific event or experience within their lives. The perception that decisions based on reason and evidence are considered more valid than those based on emotional reactions may explain why so many people subsequently frame their rejection of religious beliefs in reference to scientific discoveries and historical evidence.

The second aspect for consideration is how British political engagement with religious institutions impacts upon my participants' understanding of their own non-religious self-identity. I suggest that the influence of religious ideas and organizations within the public and political spheres contributes to a perception that religious affiliation is considered normative by wider society. This perception leads some non-religious people to conceal their lack of religious faith, either partially or completely, in order to avoid provoking familial rejection, conflict in their professional lives, negative reactions from others, or out of concern for the feelings of others.

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Lastly, I will consider the ways my participants express their opposition to religious influences within public and political life. Based on the evidence gathered through my research, I argue that most of my participants demonstrate little opposition to individuals holding private, personal religious beliefs. Instead, what concerns them most is their view that some religious ideas and practices can have a detrimental impact on the lives and happiness of others. Therefore I contend that opposition to religious influences on public and political life stem more from a perceived clash between their own 'sacred' values and some religious ideas and practices, rather than purely disagreement with theological propositions.

The research data contained within this paper is the result of two periods of fieldwork conducted between April and June 2011 and from April 2012 to June 2013. Both periods of research involved participant observation at the meetings of three local non-religious groups, one for atheists, one for humanists and one for ex-Muslims. While the meetings of all three groups primarily function as social gatherings among 'like-minded people', with regular social meets as well as one-off events such as theatre trips, summer picnics and comedy nights, each of the groups embodies a slightly different ethos and aim. The atheist group promotes itself as an activist organization and encourages members to become involved in activities and campaigns promoting secularism; the humanist group regularly hosts events with guest speakers on current social and political issues and also runs a monthly book club, reflecting a concern with knowledge, education and current affairs; while the ex-Muslim group views itself as a support network for members struggling with the difficulties of rejecting Islamic teachings and traditions. Despite the differing aims of each group, they share many members in common and often organize joint events.

To supplement data gathered during group meetings I have also conducted an online survey and a number of one-on-one interviews, monitored the discussion boards of two web forums related to atheist issues, spent time observing the work of the staff at the British Humanist Association (BHA), and subscribed to newsletters produced by the BHA, National Secular Society and Atheism, UK.

Although non-religious individuals comprise a wide continuum of identities and standpoints and we should be wary of treating them as a monolithic group (Cotter et al. 2012); the people I met during my field research share many common experiences and opinions which form the basis of this chapter's analysis. However, it must be noted at the outset that this research project was designed to specifically target individuals who actively assert their non-religious stance through membership of local meeting groups, online forums or national organizations. Lee (2012, 131) defines non-religion to be "anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion." The purpose of these groups and organizations is to cater for the needs and concerns of non-religious people, placing them, and by extension their membership, firmly within the remit of this definition. Further research will be necessary to determine whether any of the conclusions contained in this chapter have relevance among those individuals who do not consider their lack of religious faith to be a significant aspect of their lives or identity. Furthermore, this field research was conducted solely in the central London area and caution should be used regarding the applicability of my findings beyond that specific geographical location.

10.1   Accounts of Emotional Experiences Influencing My Informants' Decisions to Reject Religious Faith

One legacy of the Western Enlightenment, with its desire for human affairs to be guided by rationality and reason rather than by faith, superstition, or revelation (Outram 1995, 3), is a perceived hierarchical opposition between reason and emotion, intellect and instinct, scientific knowledge and religious belief. A hierarchy in which decisions resulting from rational judgements based on evidence are often considered more valid than those which stem from emotional responses.

Researchers exploring the emotional dimensions of religious experience challenge the idea that decisions can be made solely through reason and deliberation alone, uninfluenced by emotional responses. Taking the view that the human condition of 'being in the world' is simultaneously embodied, cognitive and evaluative (Merleau-Ponty and Bien 1973), Riis and Woodhead (2010, 27–30) argue that it is through emotions that humans first make judgements about situations, and that our emotional stance shapes our identity, actions, experiences and thoughts. Mitchell (1997, 80–85), in his discussion of religious experience in Malta, states that while criticism of 'logocentrist' approaches to belief within anthropology gave rise to a focus on embodiment and practice, "Anthropologists . . . keen to collapse the Cartesian duality of mind and body . . . have been less willing to interrogate a similar duality between cognition and emotion." Mitchell argues that emotional knowledge, created through feelings, should be considered equally valid as knowledge acquired through other forms of cognition.

Campbell (1971) made a similar criticism regarding the assumption that the increase of non-religious individuals in Western society was just part of an ongoing intellectualising process. He pointed to the feelings of awe, euphoria and despair, described by many nineteenth century freethinkers as accompanying their loss of faith, as evidence of the emotional dimensions of 'irreligious experience'. In a more recent publication, Bullivant (2008) examines contemporary reports of emotional 'irreligious experience' posted on a popular atheist web forum. Most of these accounts describe the rejection of a former religion as a positive experience; contributors recount feeling "joy" or "euphoria," a sense of "liberation" or "freedom from guilt," but a few found their loss of faith to be a negative experience and wrote of being "scared," "upset," "isolated" or "desolate."

However, Bullivant notes that it is only a small proportion of contributors to the online forum that describe their loss of faith in reference to emotional experiences. The majority cite intellectual disagreement with propositional religious beliefs as the motive for their non-religious stance. This concurs with other research which has highlighted the prevalence of intellectual doubts regarding the validity of religious teachings in individuals' explanations for their rejection of religious belief (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Caldwell-Harris et al. 2010).

In my own research, I initially found participants would cite their motivation for rejecting religious beliefs in reference to intellectually reasoned arguments and the contradictions between religious teachings, modern scientific discoveries and

historical evidence. I often heard people discuss how through science, religion has been shown to be "false," or just "myth" and "superstition." However, as my research progressed I began to notice the influence of emotional events and experiences on some participants' decisions to reject their former religion or to move from a non-theist position, comprising simply of an absence of belief in supernatural agents, to a strong atheist one, involving a moral opposition to religious beliefs and values (Lanman 2011, 38).

One participant, Jane, had been raised Roman Catholic and referred to herself as a "very religious child." During our initial informal conversations, she discussed her reasons for no longer believing in God with reference to contradictions between scientific and historical evidence and the biblical narrative. But during an in-depth interview she recounted to me the specific moment when she realised she was unable to accept the teachings of her religious faith:

> I was in midnight mass, I was 14 and I liked going to church . . . it was Christmas Eve and I just realised that everything that was being said I was spoofing it . . . ran a complete satire in my head the whole time. Really upset me because I actually believed . . . that sense of being part of something you didn't understand, I loved that . . . so I went home and sobbed my heart out.

While Jane justified her rejection of religious belief through intellectual arguments, her initial loss of faith did not stem from a rational assessment of available evidence but from what she describes as: "sudden and instant insight, thinking this is all a bit silly."

Another participant, Peter, is an ex-clergyman, who now works as a humanist celebrant. He is very well read on the subjects of science, philosophy and obviously theology, and many of his arguments against religion are intellectual in nature. However, Peter himself recognises that it was his emotional response to a specific event which led him to reject religion and leave the clergy. Peter was raised in a very religious family, but he explained that even at a very young age he noticed inconsistencies in religious teachings. Rather than leading to a rejection of religion Peter's doubts led him on a quest for answers; he became very involved with Sunday school and church discussion groups, and later went on to study a degree in theology. Yet his doubts remained; he told me, "by the time I was ordained it was questionable whether they should have ordained me . . . [I] took the line [that] God is entirely a human construction . . . [That] religion is a good thing but entirely a human construction."

Despite not believing in God, he still considered the church to be a valuable social institution and feels he would have probably continued in his profession had it not been for the death of a very close friend, who had fought against the restriction on female clergy to become ordained.

> Within 18 months of her priesting she was found to have cancer and died. I sat with her through a lot of her last illness. I remember holding her hand as she was lying in bed and she said 'where is God in all this?' And I said 'you know what I think, there is no answer to that question' . . . and she'd given her whole life to fighting for it [to be ordained] . . . that was a terrifically painful experience.

In Peter's case it is not accurate to talk of a loss of faith as such, he already held intellectual doubts about the existence of God; but it was the emotional experience of losing a close friend that motivated his decision to leave the clergy and reject his religious identity in favour of an openly non-religious one.

Emotional responses to particular events were not only given by participants describing their loss of a former religious faith, but also by individuals who had never been religious but had taken the decision to move from a previously non-theist position to an active atheist one. Mike, a gay man in his mid-thirties, was raised in a non-religious home. He said:

> Always knew I was an atheist . . . not too keen on God idea and all this but that was about it, no militant side . . . until we [Mike and his partner] got given *The God Delusion*. 'Read *The God Delusion* and got really upset, annoyed by all the stuff I was unaware . . . I knew being gay . . . the pope, condoms etc., etc. . . . but didn't feel that strongly . . . *God Delusion* woke us up.

Mike's reaction to Dawkins' (2006) book was not just an enlightened understanding of intellectual arguments against the existence of God, reading it made him feel "upset" and "annoyed" and it was this emotional response that motivated his decision to join the local humanist group.

Another of my participants, Bob, had never believed in God and always considered religion to have no relevance in his day-to-day life. For Bob it was the sense of anger, shock and sadness he felt over the terror attacks in New York and London which motivated him to research non-religious organizations and join the BHA. He explained "[The] events of 9/11 and the London bombings . . . [I] felt something had to be done about this, trawled the internet . . . found the BHA." Emotional responses to people dying in terror attacks or wars often appeared to stimulate doubts regarding religious belief. At meetings of the atheist group I heard members refer to 9/11 and 7/7, the genocide in Bosnia, the troubles in Northern Ireland and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as motivating factors in their questioning of religious faith.

"Emotions are both feelings and cognitive constructions, linking person, action and sociological milieu" (Rosaldo 1984, 304) and it is our emotional stance which "renders life meaningful or meaningless" (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 28). My participants' emotional responses to particular events and experiences in their lives became cognitively interpreted in relation to their understanding of, and attitudes toward, religious beliefs. This "emotional knowledge" (Mitchell 1997, 80) then functioned as the initial motivation for the rejection of their former religious beliefs, or their assertion of a more active atheist identity.

Expression of this identity can subsequently be seen to be validated through engagement with intellectual arguments regarding the contradictions of modern science and religious beliefs; "Just as Christian belief can be, and often is, founded on an emotional response in a given situation, to be confirmed later by intellectually satisfying 'evidences'" (Royle 1968, 130). The perception that decisions based on reason are considered more legitimate than judgements stemming from emotional instinct possibly explains why so many people prefer to explain their lack of faith in reference to intellectual arguments, especially given the popular characterisation of atheism constituting a rational, reasoned stance.

10.2   The Influence of Religious Ideas and Institutions in the Public and Political Spheres Contributes to Participants' Understanding of Their Status as 'Non-religious People'

Secularism as a political ideology emerged in response to the specific political, economic and religious conditions of early modern European states. However, there is no one model of secularism; each modern secular nation-state has developed its own approach to the relationship between religious and state authority. Some states adopt a pluralist approach to religion by officially recognising multiple religious institutions. Some see religious belief and practice as an entirely private matter, and offer no state support, financial or otherwise. Others predominantly support one main religious institution but do not prevent or hinder the practices or beliefs of other faiths. Secularism is therefore " . . . not a simple matter of absence of 'religion' in the public life of the modern nation-state. For even in modern secular countries the place of religion varies" (Asad 2003, 5–6).

In Britain, the Church of England maintains its position as the official English national religion, with the monarch as Supreme Governor, 26 Church of England bishops hold seats in the House of Lords by right of office, faith schools are subsidised via state taxation, a daily act of collective worship is required in state maintained schools, faith representatives hold seats on regional assemblies, and the remit of the All-Party Parliamentary Interfaith Group is to raise awareness among MPs of the religious dimensions of current issues. Additionally faith communities are seen as "key containers" of social capital (Furbey et al. 2006, 2) and multi-faith and interfaith community initiatives are encouraged and financed by central government.

While, in a multi-faith society such as Britain, it is clearly necessary to respect the beliefs and practices of religious individuals, many of my participants believed that the opinions and concerns of non-religious people were not accorded similar respect. One respondent to my online survey wrote "I feel that I should respect their [religious people's] beliefs, but do not feel they have to respect mine," while another stated they felt the "present government gives the clear impression of being pro-religion."

The purpose of this survey was to explore the level and forms of participants' engagement with non-religious organizations, social groups and online discussion forums, and to explore opinions and attitudes regarding the role and influence of religion in British society. The survey included a mixture of check box selection questions and open-ended text input type questions. Initially the survey was advertised on the discussion boards of the three participating groups. However, group members circulated the survey link via social media and email, and just under a quarter of responses came from individuals who indicated they were not members of any non-religious social group.

One question asked respondents to indicate their opinions regarding the role of religion in society, politics and the media by selecting from a range of

pre-designed statements. Of 265 survey respondents 91 % agreed with the statement "religious organizations have too much influence on politics," with 72 % agreeing "life in Britain is too influenced by religion." Only 2 % agreed with the statement "I am happy with the place of religion in British society." Shore and Wright (1997, 4) contend that political policies codify social norms and values; they give authority to certain discourses and ascribe status to particular lifestyles. Political engagement with religious groups and institutions creates the impression, among my participants, that within wider society (and within political circles especially) having a religious faith is generally considered to be a positive personal attribute which is socially beneficial.

Lois Lee (2011a) discusses the emerging 'post-neutrality' view of secularism which contends that secularist policies are actually anti-religious; advocating the complete privatisation of religion and upholding the dominance of secular views. Proponents of this view point to the expectations imposed upon religious people to keep their opinions and beliefs out of the public domain.

> In the name of freedom, individual autonomy, tolerance, and cultural pluralism, religious people – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – are being asked to keep their religious beliefs, identities and norms 'private' so that they do not disturb the project of a modern, secular, enlightened Europe (Berger et al. 2008, 66–67.)

In Britain the conflict between the secular values of society and the right of individuals to live according to their personal, religious convictions has been highlighted in a number of recent court cases. These cases include: the British Airways worker prevented from wearing a cross visibly over her uniform (Moore 2009), the teenager banned from wearing a chastity ring at school (The Guardian 2007), and the teaching assistant suspended for refusing to remove her *niqab* in front of male colleagues (BBC News 2006).

However, Lee's (2011a) argument is that both religious and non-religious people sometimes feel expected to make compromises in order to uphold the secular peace. During her field research among non-religious individuals in Britain, she found that people engaged in a complex negotiation of self-defining labels and would sometimes conceal their non-religious identity and opinions, for fear of causing offence or being seen in a negative light. My own field research supports this argument. My participants often described situations where they felt it would be prudent to conceal their lack of religious faith, either partially or completely, in order to "fit in" or avoid upsetting others.

For some people concern that being non-religious might detrimentally impact on their professional lives led them to publicly profess a religious affiliation. One participant stated "I applied for a job at a Catholic school and felt I would be better off lying on the form to say I was religious"; another wrote "Hard to 'come out' in army – stuck to C of E as 'flag of convenience'." A couple of the atheist group members are reluctant to be photographed at events and meetings in case their employers come across the pictures on the group's website. Another member spoke of being cautious about posting anti-religious material on his Facebook profile in case it jeopardised his career in the civil service.

For other participants, the importance of maintaining family relationships led them to keep their loss of faith a secret. Atheist group member George told me he had been a staunch believer for 30 years before becoming an atheist, but he has still not told his parents for fear of "hurting and upsetting them." One survey respondent stated he "married in church to please wife and wife's father." And in the ex-Muslim group there are quite a few members who continue to engage in religious practices, rather than risk familial disapproval or rejection.

Even those people who preferred to be completely candid about not having a religious faith sometimes displayed concern about how their non-religious position might be interpreted by others. My interviewee Steve describes himself as a "hard-line atheist." Steve was a police officer for 15 years and he explained to me how the first time he publicly expressed his atheist standpoint was when he was called to give evidence in court and, rather than take the oath on the Bible, he asked to take the affirmation. He told me "it caused a bit of a fuss . . . people went 'ooh, are you a bad person?'." Of course the people in the courtroom did not literally ask if he was a bad person; this was Steve's impression of how he thought they would react to his atheism, and his perception that being atheist might cast doubt on his integrity as a police officer.

More recently a member of the local humanist group, who is completely open about being non-religious, discussed attending a meeting for people interested in setting up entrepreneurial initiatives. He had been very impressed by the number of wealthy attendees who proposed initiatives based on philosophies which could be described as humanist. Nevertheless, as this was not a humanist event, he still felt it inappropriate to discuss his own humanist stance. In line with other research in this field (Lee 2011a; Pasquale 2007), I noted that many of my participants were reluctant to openly describe themselves as 'atheists' due to its negative associations and meanings. My participant Peter raised this issue during our interview, he told me:

> A friend [and fellow celebrant] was virtually chucked out from doing a funeral when she used [the word] atheist to the family . . . there are very, very negative connotations around . . . it's to do with if you're atheist . . . no morals . . . likely to be a wife-beater, child murderer, really nasty person . . . it's fairly common among the celebrants that I know that there is some negative experience and they are careful not to use the word.

While most people I spoke to accepted the term 'atheism' as a description of their philosophical position vis-à-vis religion, they often preferred to use alternative terms when describing their identity, such as humanist, rationalist, bright, agnostic, secularist, freethinker, anti-theist, and naturalist.

It could be argued that sometimes concealing a non-religious stance, or interpreting a social interaction as hostile or negative, may result from internalised self-disapproval (West et al. 2011); that the anticipation of hostile reactions leads to avoidant measures being taken, and that what is assumed to be hostility from others is actually just curiosity (Jones, personal communication via email, 2012). In some instances this may well be true; people who perceive their lack of religious faith to be viewed negatively by wider society will be more likely to be reticent about expressing their atheism, and to react more sensitively to questions regarding their non-belief, perhaps unnecessarily.

Certainly it must be noted that these sentiments were not shared by all of my participants. One of my interviewees is particularly active in civic and community initiatives in his local area, some of which regularly bring him into contact with politicians and senior civil servants, and he does not consider that his lack of a religious faith is in any way disadvantageous.

However, for some participants the open admittance of a non-religious stance had provoked actual negative, and sometimes quite distressing, reactions. In my survey I asked "Have you ever encountered a negative reaction when someone found out you were atheist or humanist?" Most responses mentioned just having experienced general disapproval, expressions of concern for their immortal soul or questions about their perceived lack of morality. But some respondents recounted specific incidents of rejection and discrimination. One wrote about his "experience of being physically assaulted in order to force me to pray for my soul," another had been "abandoned by family, faced death threats, friends won't speak to me." One person wrote of how his future mother-in-law had broken up his relationship with his fiancée when she found out he was an atheist. Another person recalled being thrown out of Boys' Brigade, aged 10, because he admitted he did not believe in God, and one person had even experienced being "told my disability was a punishment from god."

At a meeting of the atheist group, Anthony, who settled in Britain from abroad many years ago, spoke of a constant stream of family members flying in to visit him from his home nation with the express intent of re-converting him back to their religious faith; while Joan, a lady in her late fifties who belongs to the local humanist group, finds it difficult to deal with the disagreements caused by conflict between her own non-religious views and those of her very religious sister.

Whether reluctance to admit a non-religious position stems from internalised self-disapproval or results from previous personal experience of a negative encounter, it is clear from the evidence of my participants that openly admitting a non-religious stance is not always the straightforward assertion of individual identity and opinion that might be expected in a society which endorses the values of secularism and pluralism. It is likely that there are many more non-religious individuals in Britain who currently conceal their lack of faith, or continue to outwardly profess religious affiliation, rather than risk being judged negatively by family or wider society. The tendency of participants to conceal their lack of religious belief within particular contexts suggests an internal self-assessment of their own non-religious identity as externally judged to be, at the very least, 'different' and possibly even socially inferior or deviant.

While the political engagement with religious beliefs and institutions is unlikely to be the sole cause of this perception, I would argue it certainly contributes to my participants' understanding of the status of non-religious people in British society. Gey (2007) argues that although Western, liberal, secular, democratic governments have come a long way from the persecution and denial of rights to atheists, they still tend to favour religious belief, and that this can lead to the marginalisation and "quasi-legal ostracism" of atheists; this is echoed in the words of one of my participants who simply stated, "As an atheist I feel like a second class citizen."

10.3 Opposition to the Influence of Religious Ideas on Public and Political Life Results from a Perceived Conflict of Values, Rather than Purely Intellectual Disagreement over Propositional Beliefs

The secularization thesis, which predicted the decline and eventual demise of religious belief as an inevitable consequence of modernity, was for a long time a dominant and largely unquestioned paradigm within the social sciences. However, the increased visibility of religion in the public sphere, and the emergence of new religions and new forms of religiosity, has raised doubts over the accuracy of this thesis (Lee 2011a); and among academics this narrative of straightforward declining religiosity has largely fallen out of favour.

> For a time some thought that the onslaught of science, comparative religion, uncertainty, and the rest – in a word, the onslaught of modernity – meant or would mean the gradual decline and disappearance of the religious tradition. This no longer seems obvious. (Smith 1991, 3)

Yet among my participants I sensed a confidence that secularization, in the form of a complete separation of religious and political authority, would still happen, but that it was now no longer an inevitable consequence of modernity and instead was something that needed to be striven for. Court cases challenging the presence of religious beliefs in public life, such as a recent High Court ruling outlawing the holding of prayers during local council meetings, provide evidence of this drive for secularization.

Most of the members of the groups I work with are engaged in some form of campaigning for increased secularization, whether that involves actively joining demonstrations and marches such as the one organized by the Secular Europe Campaign (2011), or just being a paid up member of a campaigning organization like the BHA or National Secular Society. However, I often heard members state that they were not concerned about personal, private expressions of religious faith. It was when religious beliefs and institutions appear to exert influence over social or political issues that they became a source of anxiety and a target of campaigning. My interviewee Jane expressed this view, she told me "It's the relationship between church and state I want to break . . . I'm not interested in spitting at Christians"; while Mike said he would "Definitely campaign so they [religious people] get out of my life. Political life should not be religious . . . schools should not be religious" but he went on to say "I won't campaign for the end of a religion . . . just to stay in their own world."

While it is a matter of debate as to whether secularization really leads to a religiously neutral public and political space, or whether it is just the official endorsement of one particular viewpoint (Scanlon 1998, 64), my participants see secularization as the only way to ensure both freedom from religion and freedom of religion. They argue that only in a completely secular state, where religiosity is treated as entirely a private matter, can citizens be both protected from coercive religious practices and have the right to freely follow whichever faith they choose.

Some of this opposition to religion's presence in the public sphere stems from irritation over the 'unwanted intrusion' of religion into their own personal lives. At an atheist group meeting one attendee told me, "I'm not bothered about the man praying in his house, it's just when religion affects my life, stops me doing things I want to do." Emma, who volunteers as an organizer for the local humanist group, defended her stance opposing religion in public life by explaining she would "happily leave religion alone, if religion would just leave me alone." However, the desire for the increased secularization of social and political life is not exclusively self-serving. The influence of religion in society not only prevents them from living the religion-free life they desire, but they also view it as a way of legitimizing ideas and practices they believe would be deemed unacceptable in any other context; i.e. objections to same-sex marriage, infant circumcision, attempts to deny women access to contraception and abortion services.

I contend that we can better understand my participants' opposition to religion in the public sphere if we see it as resulting from a perceived clash between their own deeply held, 'sacred' values and the ideas and practices of some religious ideologies; rather than purely stemming from a disagreement with propositional religious beliefs.

This assertion is borne out by statements made by my participants; such as the member of the atheist group who told me that if people were just "free to believe any old thing they liked it would be fine," it's when "they act on those beliefs it becomes a problem." Or the claim by one interviewee that he has no desire to "destroy harmless religious beliefs," suggesting a value judgement is invoked to distinguish beliefs considered harmless from those which have social consequences perceived to be harmful.

In his analysis of atheist literature and publications LeDrew (2012) identifies a divergence within official atheist discourses between those which take a scientific approach to critiquing religious claims, and those which favour a humanistic one. The discourse of scientific (or 'New') atheism emphasises the importance of evidence, knowledge and education; often views religion as a by-product of evolutionary psychology; and focuses on the lack of evidence for God's existence. While humanistic atheism is more concerned with issues of human well-being, it sees religion as socio-culturally produced, and focuses on the harm which has been caused by organized religion.

My participants appear to equally engage with both forms of official atheist discourse but they interpret and utilise them in different ways and in response to different contexts. The scientific discourse is utilised as a response to the theological propositions contained within Holy Texts. It supports the rejection of religious claims regarding the existence of God, and the refutation of scriptural explanations for how the Earth was formed and how humans were created. Through a scientific critique of religious 'truth' claims, this discourse legitimizes my participants' personal decision to reject propositional religious beliefs, and supports their opinion that religious believers must be misguided, uninformed or in need of educating. But on their own, these religious individuals, and their beliefs, do not appear to constitute

any great source of anxiety. It is only when religious beliefs and ideas extend beyond the individual and appear to exert influence at the level of the social that they become a cause of anxiety and a target of active campaigning.

When discussing their reasons for objecting to the influence of religion in public and political life my participants are far more likely to advance arguments based upon the humanistic atheist discourse, than the scientific one. This discourse is less concerned with what people actually believe focusing instead on how those beliefs become translated into social practices, and the impact those practices have on the lives of individuals in society, particularly what they see to be religion's violation of moral principles such as human rights, equality and individual freedom.

A number of recent publications (Anttonen 2000; Knott 2010, 2013; Lynch 2012) have put forward the notion of the "secular sacred," or "sacred forms" as a concept through which we can understand people's commitment to the non-negotiable fundamental principles of modern secular life; such as freedom, human rights, equality and justice. The "non-negotiable matters of belief and value that do not derive from formally religious sources but that occur within the domain of 'non-religion'" (Knott 2010, 14).

Rejecting ontological theories of the sacred in favour of cultural sociological ones, Lynch (2012) argues that sacred forms are both culturally constructed and historically contingent. He states that the sacred is "a particular form of cultural signification in which symbols, objects, sentiments, and practices are experienced as expressions of a normative, absolute reality" (16). These "sacred forms" are more than just what we might consider to be 'good', they form the basis of our most fundamental assumptions; "children simply are precious. It is always honourable to die for one's nation," he explains (28). Lynch contends that social life is mostly conducted in the realm of the 'mundane', which he defines to be the logics, practices and aesthetics of everyday life, and that it is often only when sacred forms become threatened by the 'profane', those things that threaten to pollute or transgress a sacred form (134), that they come to figure in the foreground of consciousness (28).

Cotter's (2012) research among "notionally non-religious" students in Edinburgh highlights this. He mentions that among his participants "'being non-religious' was generally unimportant and had little impact upon day-to-day life" but that "most claimed that their non-religiosity came to the fore when challenged by particular situations . . . particularly when their sacred values are challenged." Similarly, Catto and Eccles' (2013) study of young British atheists employs the term "secular sacred" to describe the non-negotiable beliefs and values of non-religious people, in particular the values of equality, reason, freedom and science. They note that while such values are not exclusive to non-religious people they consider the "repeated combined articulation of them in related discourse to be distinctive and definitional" (55).

Central to my participants' sacred values is the notion that humans only have one life. Consequently they believe that every individual must be free to determine, and pursue, their own conception of what constitutes a good life, as long as it does not detrimentally impact on the lives of others. They demonstrate a strong

commitment to human rights, justice, tolerance, and equality for all, and view individual autonomy and personal freedom as essential for leading a fulfilled and happy life. When the ideas or practices of a religion impact on people's lives in ways conceived to be harmful, or likely to curtail their ability to fulfil their own conception of a good life, they are judged to be violating these sacred values. In a reversal of traditional ideas about what constitutes the sacred, it is religion itself that becomes conceptualised as profane.

For example, the most oft-mentioned concerns about 'religion' raised during meetings included discriminatory attitudes towards women and homosexuals, the physical and psychological harm caused by infant circumcision, the socially divisive nature of faith schools, the detrimental influence religious ideas may have on political debates about abortion limits and the legalisation of assisted dying, the consequences of abstinence-only sex education, and the negative impact that teaching creationist beliefs and arguments from authority in schools might have on the development of children's ability to think critically and independently.

It is not purely because these practices are religious that they provoke objections, rather it is because they are perceived to transgress the values of tolerance, equality, social cohesion, individual freedom, personal autonomy and the protection of children. Rather than simply an intellectual disagreement with theological propositions generating an opposition to religion in all forms, it is the violation of their non-negotiable, fundamental, sacred values by particular religious ideas and practices that motivates my participants' desire to campaign for increased secularization. As my interviewee Peter explained it: "the fact that the things we are against are motivated by religion is a side effect. It is the things we are against I want tackled."

10.4   Conclusion

In this chapter I have addressed three significant aspects of non-religious lived experience that I identified through my discussions with members of non-religious meeting groups. I have noted that asserting a non-religious stance is not always the result of reasoned intellectual deliberation, but may often stem from an individual's emotional response to personal or public events. The assertion of this stance subsequently appears to become validated in reference to the arguments of the scientific atheist discourse, possibly due to the perception that decisions based on reason and evidence are more valid than those stemming from emotional responses. Further research is needed to ascertain how prevalent emotional responses are in the assertion of a non-religious identity, and how we account for differences between people who express an emotional narrative and those who maintain their motivations are purely intellectual in nature.

Having made the decision to assert a non-religious stance and identity, these individuals then find it necessary to develop ways to express and negotiate their new non-religious status within society. While some encounter no difficulties in expressing their non-religious identity, many find the presence of religion in the

public sphere uncomfortable and engage in complex negotiations of self-definition and expression, often involving the concealment of their non-religious stance within specific contexts in order to avoid familial rejection, professional complications, public censure or offence.

While the official role of institutionalized religion in society and politics is unlikely to be the sole cause of an individual's reticence to openly admit a non-religious stance in particular situations I would argue that it does endorse a perception of religious affiliation as normative. Identities exist and are acquired, claimed and allocated within power relations (Jenkins 2004, 23) and an individual's identity "is partly shaped by its recognition, or misrecognition; it is damaging if society mirrors back a confining or demeaning picture" (Taylor 1994, 26).

Furthermore, it is this official status of religion in society that my participants are most opposed to, arguing that a complete separation of political and religious authority is the only way to ensure every individual is able to pursue his or her own conception of what constitutes a good and fulfilling life, whether that includes religious belief or not.

Almost all of my participants insist they have no objection to individuals holding private religious beliefs, indeed many would argue that they fully support their right to do so; what concerns them is when religion extends beyond the private realm and exerts influence on society and politics. In particular they demonstrate concern over those religious ideas and practices they assess as detrimentally impacting on people's lives. I have argued that this indicates that their opposition to religion stems more from their perception that some religious beliefs and practices violate the sacred values they hold dear; rather than an outright objection to all forms of religious belief *per se*.

One question this raises is whether the identification of religion as a transgressor of secular sacred values emerges as a result of an individual adopting a non-religious stance, or whether it can operate as a motivating force in their initial assertion of this stance. The transgression of sacred values is often experienced as an emotional response such as anger, outrage or despair, invoking a desire for action or retribution; exemplified by those of my participants who spoke of their emotional response to terror attacks, wars or instances of discrimination or persecution as motivating their decision to assert their non-religious stance and to join a non-religious group.

In similar research to my own, involving participant observation and interviews with members of atheist meeting groups in the United States, Smith (2011, 224–225) noted that intellectual reservations regarding the likely existence of God did not independently result in the assertion of an atheist stance. While clearly lacking a belief in God is a necessary component of an atheist viewpoint, Smith contends that "…doubts about God alone are not sufficient for participants to adopt an atheist identity." Instead he noted that moral issues were of central importance to his participants' decisions to reject religion and assert their atheism.

Does being non-religious lead people to identify religion as a transgressor of certain sacred values, or does an assessment of religion as 'harmful' lead to the assertion of a non-religious stance? Most likely it is a complex interaction of a variety of factors, but one I consider would be worth further investigation.

The final question I feel this chapter should address is why does any of this matter? The 2011 census of England and Wales reported a significant rise in the number of individuals identifying as having no religion; 25 % of respondents selected this option, a rise of 10 % from the previous census a decade before. In the same time period the number of individuals who identified as Christian dropped from 72 % in the previous census to 59 % this time ('2011 Census' 2012), a figure much more in keeping with other surveys measuring religious affiliation in the UK (Lee 2011b). Moreover, this changing religious landscape cannot be fully explained as simply the result of cohort replacement. Voas (2012) estimates that 13 % of those individuals who identified as Christian in the 2001 census, and who were still alive at the time of the 2011 census, no longer chose to select this option. While some of these individuals are likely to have identified as having a different religious affiliation it is reasonable to deduce that a large percentage are now accounted for within the no religion category.

Of course identifying as having no religion does not equate to having no religious beliefs. But whether we view this as evidence of the accuracy of the secularization narrative (Bruce 2002), or the impact of new and different forms of religiosity (Woodhead 2012, 27), what it does show is a significant decline in the number of individuals that indicate affiliation to organized, institutional religions. This is particularly impacting on those religious institutions which currently receive political endorsement and state financial support.

The no religion category now accounts for a quarter of the population of England and Wales; it is the second largest 'faith' group, after Christianity. And within this group an increasing number of people are choosing to assert their non-religious stance via membership of local groups, such as the ones I work with. The local humanist group has increased its membership from 1,349 to 1, 871 in the past year alone. Actual meeting attendance rarely reflects these figures; very few meetings achieve even a 10 % attendance rate, but this does not indicate that a large number of members are 'non-active' often different members will choose to turn up to different types of meetings. Furthermore, just within this geographical location alone there are a number of alternative non-religious groups, such as the Skeptics in the Pub, and groups like these exist in most regions throughout the country.

Religious beliefs have been shown to influence people's value systems and operate as a source of social and political attitudes (Andersen et al. 2005; Kotler-Berkowitz 2001; Lee 2011b). Religiosity is strongly linked to opinions on a wide range of social issues, such as abortion (McAndrew 2010), and remains a significant determinant in British electoral behaviour (Kotler-Berkowitz 2001, 525). Changes in the levels, and forms, of religiosity in Britain are likely to be accompanied by, and contribute to, changes in attitude on a wide range of issues (Lee 2011b, 174).

The increasing number of individuals choosing to express their non-religious stance through membership of local groups and national organizations, through which they become engaged with arguments and campaigns for greater secularization, is likely to create implications for future party political and government policies, and the role of institutionalized religion within British society. Consequently gaining a greater understanding of the lived experiences of non-religious

people, and identifying what motivates and underlies their moral and political judgements, is essential for our understanding of the ongoing relationship between religion and politics in British society throughout the twenty-first century. In the oft-quoted words of Bainbridge (2005, 24), it is only "By learning more about the lack of faith, [that] we can understand better the role of faith in modern society."

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Chapter 11
Without God yet Not Without Nuance: A Qualitative Study of Atheism and Non-religion Among Scottish University Students

Christopher R. Cotter

> *The closer people's worldviews are probed – even among self-described secular or nonreligious individuals – the more difficult it is to neatly place many into the major categories that frame Western discourse on "theism" and "atheism" or "religion" or "irreligion".*

> (Pasquale 2010, 63)

If the academic study of religion in recent years has taught us anything, it is that despite prevalent scholarly "preference for sharply dualistic or oppositional classes" (Smith 2000, 38–39), social reality rarely conforms to these rhetorical constructions. Unsurprisingly, this is also the case in the study of religion's 'other', the "semantically parasitic" category of "non-religion" (Fitzgerald 2007a, 54) and its related-yet-distinct cousin 'atheism'. This chapter presents the results of a small-scale research project (Cotter 2011c)[1] which focused on the narratives of undergraduate students and problematizes simplistic either/or understandings of these categories. Along the way, I discuss various definitional issues associated with the term 'atheism', and suggest an alternative strategy for understanding (non)religiosity which is ideal-typical, independent of religion-related categories (Quack 2012a, 26), and supported by contemporary academic discourse on the non-ontological 'sacred' (Lynch 2012; Knott 2013). This chapter represents part of a growing effort to further the in-depth and qualitative understanding of non-religious

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[1] This project could not have happened without the selfless support of dozens of colleagues, friends and informants. I am particularly grateful to my former supervisor, Dr Steven J. Sutcliffe, who went above-and-beyond the call of duty to provide support and sound academic critique at every stage.

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people in their own right (Bullivant and Lee 2012; Cotter 2011b; Cotter et al. 2012; Pasquale 2012) and to recognize:

> that the 'in between' is a position which finds frequent attestation in the real world, and that this is not predominantly inconsistent, blurred or inconsequential, but a substantial and legitimate phenomenon which informs, and is informed by, a multitude of intersecting social identities. (Day et al. 2013, 6)

11.1 Introduction

The work on which this chapter is based was carried out in 2010–2011 amongst undergraduate students at the University of Edinburgh via electronic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, and took a grounded theoretical approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Engler 2011). The study was initially motivated by recognising a substantial gap in existing literature concerning the non-religious,[2] who do not easily fit within standard models in the academic study of religion.[3] Although there are a number of well-known sociological (Campbell 1971; Demerath 1969; Demerath and Thiessen 1966; Vernon 1968) and historical (Berman 1988; Budd 1977; Thrower 1979, 1980, 2000) exceptions to the rule, Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee trace a historical neglect of 'non-religion' to the non-religiosity of many of the social sciences' early pioneers who, in trying to understand why so many people could believe in something 'so absurd', "arguably failed to recognize that their own lack of belief might itself be amenable to similar research" (2012, 20). However, they also point to extensive interest in the anomaly of 'unbelief' from Catholic social scientists throughout the 1950s and 1960s (see Caporale and Grumelli 1971). From whichever camp, it is clear that "Much of the early research that mentions the non-religious has included non-religious individuals as a comparison group, a statistical outlier, or an afterthought" or, indeed, as a *problem* to be dealt with (Pasquale 2012). As a result, terminology used to refer to the non-religious in the social science of religion has often been ambiguous, imprecise, and even biased and derogatory (Cragun and Hammer 2011), and it is not uncommon to find 'non-religious' people

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[2]As a subject in their own right. If one turns to debate on 'secularization', the 'non-religious' generally remains as an insubstantial category of individuals who 'lack' the variable that authors are interested in, or, in Rational Choice Theory approaches, as a temporary transitional stage 'between' religious positions (Lee 2012a, 31).

[3]My recognition of this was coincidentally shared with many others around the same time. Two key research groups were established in the early 2000s – the *Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture* (ISSSC) at Trinity College, Massachusetts, and the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) – and each maintains a vibrant online presence. That these groups joined together to launch the journal *Secularism and Nonreligon* in August 2011, combined with a special edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* on 'Non-religion and Secularity' (Vol. 27 No. 1, 2012), testifies to the growing interest in this area.

castigated for believing "anything rather than nothing" (Percy 2004, 39) or for holding nothing to be "sacred or holy" (Paden 1988, 48–49; cited in Thomas 2004, 51).

Against this backdrop, my main concern when conceiving the study was to avoid imposing preconceived categories onto informants (see Day 2009a, b, 2011), and this included an aversion to naively engaging with 'non-religious' organizations as if they served as mere substitutes for conventionally-understood religious institutions (Campbell 1971, 42). I proceeded by adapting Lois Lee's concise definition of 'non-religion'—"anything which is *primarily* defined by a relationship of difference to religion" (2012b, 131 emphasis in original)[4]—and pragmatically took advantage of the dependence of this definition upon a substantial definition of 'religion' by placing this issue at the feet of my informants. In the context of this chapter, I set aside the issue of primacy and take 'non-religion' to refer to aspects of my informants' practices, beliefs, attitudes and identity which were *self-described* as *different* from their individual *self-definitions of religion.*

Concisely, the aims of this study were to: break open and demonstrate variety in the category 'non-religious', whilst critiquing the inadequacy of attempts to do this in terms of dimensions of religiosity (*non*-belief, *non*-affiliation*, non*-attendance, etc.); provide 'non-religious' informants with a narrative platform from which to speak in a non-prescriptive fashion about what mattered to them, and to digress on certain issues if they chose (cf. Day 2009a, 93); and to provide an alternative conceptualization of non-religion in the form of a typology that prioritized these individual narratives. It was hoped that by constructing questionnaires and interview schedules which allowed informants to express themselves in a manner which was not constrained by a priori definitions of religion, I would gain access to real-life subjective articulations of different ways of being (non)religious.

To briefly contextualize my sample, the University of Edinburgh boasts around 30,000 students, and is based in Edinburgh (population approx. 477,000), the capital city of Scotland (population approx. 5,300,000) (National Records of Scotland 2012). Scotland itself is a distinct nation within the United Kingdom[5] yet, while retaining notably higher levels of church attendance (Guest et al. 2012, 64), shares with England and Wales (and more broadly, Western Europe) an undeniable narrative of declining church attendance and loss of normative Christian culture,

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[4]The jury is still out on how useful this definition is to the academic study of religion. Lee has stated herself that one of the key conceptual issues we face is that 'religion' serves as both a first- and second-order definitional category, meaning that a much wider reformation in academic discourse may be necessary (Lee 2012a, 4–5). She has also acknowledged that 'non-religion studies' will have failed if the term is still being employed in 10 years (Lee 2012c). Ultimately, the study of the non-religious may contribute to the contemporary deconstruction of the category 'religion' (Fitzgerald 2000, 2007a, b; McCutcheon 1997, 2007). I believe the term to be rhetorically useful, in this context, for focusing attention on an otherwise neglected constituency. For further problematization of the term in Religious Studies see Connelly et al. (2012).

[5]Along with England, Wales and Northern Ireland. However, the forthcoming (at the time of writing) referendum on Scottish Independence (September 2014) may change this situation.

particularly since the 1960s (Brown 1992, 75–76; Brown 2001; Brown and Lynch 2012, 344; Bruce 2013, 371).[6] In 2011, 93 % of the Scottish population answered a question on the Scottish decennial census which asked "What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?" According to the National Records of Scotland,

> 54 per cent of the population stated they belonged to a Christian denomination (a decrease of 11 percentage points from 2001) whilst the proportion who stated that they had 'No religion' was 37 per cent (an increase of 9 percentage points from 2001). All other religions made up the remaining 3 per cent, an increase from 2 per cent from 2001. (2013, 4)

Turning to other factors, it is worth noting that whereas in 1900 Scotland had around 3,600 Presbyterian clergy (the national Church of Scotland is Presbyterian), this had fallen to around 900 in the year 2000 (Bruce 2013, 374, drawing on Brierley 1989, 55). It is also significant that Scotland has been alone in the UK in granting 'humanist' weddings legal status since 2005. In 2009 there were more humanist weddings in Scotland than those conducted by all churches except Roman Catholic and Church of Scotland (Brown and Lynch 2012, 339). Of course, there are enormous regional variations across Scotland in terms of religious practice and affiliation, with conservative Protestantism remaining strong in remote fishing villages in the north east (see Webster 2013), and Catholic/Protestant sectarianism, "particularly in the west (around Glasgow)" and "strongly linked to the footballing rivalry between the Glasgow teams of Celtic and Rangers," remaining a major social and political issue (Nye and Weller 2012, 37). In Edinburgh, 45 % of the population selected 'No religion' on the 2011 Census (8 % higher than the national average), in comparison with 48 % for all other religious identifications combined (National Records of Scotland 2013, 33), and although some Christian congregations (see Roxburgh 2012) and other religious identifications are growing, the situation remains one of clear decline. Although these are by no means the only potential measures of 'religion' or 'religiousness', this brief discussion indicates that Scotland, and Edinburgh in particular, are sites in which a growing and significant section of the population self-describe as being other than 'religious'.

The decision to utilize undergraduate students at the university at which I was based was unashamedly pragmatic, but was supported by existing research which suggested a strong correlation between low levels of individual religiosity, youth (Collins-Mayo and Dandelion 2010; Brierley 2006), and higher education (Hayes 2000; Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Guest and Sharma 2011). It was also significant that up until this point, with the notable exception of Bullivant (2008), Catto and Eccles (2013), and Tomlins in this volume, existing studies tended to focus upon 'religious' students[7] and give little attention or nuance to those with low religiosity (which is itself a relative measure that promotes a normative religiosity (Pasquale 2007)). Due

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[6]Although other 'religious' and 'spiritual' phenomena have 'always' existed in Scotland (see Brown 2010, 138–142), the dominant narrative of 'Christianity' suffices for illustrative purposes in this context.

[7]For example, Bryant (2006, 2007), Dutton (2008), Gilliat-Ray (2000), Rees (1967).

to university regulations,[8] it was impossible to conduct a university-wide survey, or one which extended beyond a single 'school' (faculty). With the exploratory nature of this research meaning that I deemed it of greatest importance to maximize the response rate, I disseminated electronic questionnaires to 17 student societies ('clubs') that were selected to provide a broad cross-section of the ideological and 'faith-based' perspectives represented on campus,[9] in line with Edward Dutton's theory that student societies act as locations where students "assert or find a strong identity" as a means of coping with the 'liminal' nature of the university experience (2008, 83).

Questionnaires were designed with the intention of allowing students to provide as much information as they wished, with many question being left open-ended. When respondents were asked about which (non)religious terms they 'identified' with, they could choose as many as they desired, answer 'none of the above', and/or specify other terms if they wished. Ultimately I cast a wide net over the 'non-religion' side of the religion/non-religion dichotomy, rejecting only those students who did not self-identify themselves as 'non-religious' in their own terms *and* who scored highly on self-declared measures of what would traditionally be labelled 'religious' attitudes, beliefs and practices. This resulted in a subject group of 48 students, with an average age of 21, just under two-thirds of whom were female. Following an initial survey of the data, a loose interview schedule was constructed and 11 interviews of 60–80 min took place with a cross-section of respondents. This method resulted in a rich set of narrative data upon which the rest of this chapter is based.

11.2   What does this have to do with Atheism?

The term 'atheism' has taken on a variety of meanings throughout its long history, being used to refer to disbelief in specific divinities, and as a derogatory and accusatory term for those (deemed to be) outside the dominant religion (McGrath 2005; Hyman 2007). It is only in the past couple of 100 years that the term has become more widely utilized as a term of self-identification, beginning in France in the mid-eighteenth century and expanding to Britain and beyond shortly after (Thrower 2000; Quack 2012b).

To the best of my knowledge, there are currently three main understandings of the term 'atheist': (1) a person who *does not believe* in God—who takes 'a principled and informed decision to *reject* belief in God'(McGrath 2005, 175); (2) a person who *believes that* there is no God (see Shermer 1999, 256); (3) a

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[8]See: http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/academic-services/committees/student-survey-ethics/applications

[9]For example, the Young Greens, Scottish Nationalist Association, Humanist Society, Catholic Students Union, and Yoga Society.

person who "simply and unproblematically *lack[s]* gods" (Eller 2010a, 3), where "lack" should be interpreted in a strictly neutral and descriptive sense (Bullivant 2011, 1 fn.). Each of these definitions demonstrates variations on the theme of the non-existence of a deity. However, a lack of belief does not necessarily imply an opinion on whether this deity exists or not. Realising this, Michael Martin makes a distinction between **"**negative atheism" which exemplifies the etymologically rooted "someone without a belief in God" and "positive atheism" as "the belief that there is no God" (Martin 2007, 1; cf. Cotter 2011a, 79). Atheism can be viewed as immutably "inscribed" with theism (Hyman 2010, xviii), as *not* "parasitic on religion"(Baggini 2003, 9–10) or, through following Eller's reasoning and acknowledging the Western, theistic origins of the term, as "*the most common form of religion*"(Eller 2010b, 3). From this discussion, it seems reasonable to suggest that the academic definition of an atheist should simply be a person who does not have a belief in a theistic god. However, settling on this understanding still leaves much ambiguity. The designation 'atheist' could apply to individuals who identify with a 'World Religion', who self-identify as 'atheist', who self-identify as 'agnostic', or who attempt to exempt themselves from this discussion altogether; atheism is *not the opposite of* religion (Lee 2012a). There are likely to be major differences between someone being an atheist in the technical sense, and someone consciously identifying herself as an atheist. Much like someone can identify as 'Christian' for a variety of meaningful reasons (see Day 2011), yet give little thought to the existence of—or actively disbelieve in—a god, so too someone can identify as an 'atheist' and yet when we delve beneath the surface things get much more complicated. The recognition of this dynamic is important for any investigation which purports to study 'atheism', but need not be a hindrance to research which provides a precise definition of the term from the outset. As for this chapter, the study which forms its empirical basis did not set out to engage only with atheists (however defined), but with a wider and more diffuse group of 'non-religious' individuals. However, the majority of participants in this study *did* explicitly self-identify as 'atheists' and, as shall be detailed below, even those who did not utilize this term, or who openly distanced themselves from the term, did not claim to believe in a *theistic* god. Therefore, every student involved in this study can be considered, at least at the level of the minimal definition suggested above, as 'atheists'. My contention throughout the rest of this chapter[10] is that if we look beyond this categorization these students have much more to say about the distinct-yet-related phenomenon of 'non-religion'.[11]

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[10]Although this study did engage with practice, beliefs, values, and other dimensions of religiosity, the methods employed, and the space available, mean that the following account might appear somewhat intellectualized and identity-focused. See Cotter (2011c) for other notable trends and characteristics.

[11]Where 'non-religion' should be understood as a contextually useful rhetorical device, and not as an umbrella term to subsume 'atheism' (cf. Quillen 2012).

11.3 Taking a Closer Look

Midway through the questionnaire, the 48 eligible participants in this study were presented with a list of 33 common (non)religious terms and asked the question *"Do you consider any of the following terms to apply to you?"* The numbers selecting each term were as follows Fig. 11.1.

'Atheist' was by far the most frequently used term amongst these students, with variations on all three definitions discussed above being provided upon further questioning. The most common of these was the 'does not believe' approach, exemplified by one student defining atheist as "literally one who does not believe in a god."[12] However, this frequency of use is not necessarily reflected in other contexts. Courtney, who self-identified as an 'atheist' (amongst other things) stated in her interview that she would not use this as a self-descriptor when completing the Scottish census because she did not think atheism was a religion.[13] Conversely, another 'atheist' claimed to have ceased regularly identifying with this term because they "realized that to many [people] this [...] was a faith system in its own right." Although all definitions of the term appeared to exclude belief in a theistic god, the questionnaire returned examples of two 'Catholics', a 'Jew' and a practising 'Buddhist' who also self-described as 'atheists'. Others added clarifying phrases such as "believes purely in science" to their definition, suggesting that 'atheism' can also be associated with positive 'belief-in' type stances. However, beyond this basic position of 'lacking belief', box-ticking on questionnaires tells us little else about the individuals involved. The situation was somewhat similar with the terms 'non-religious' and 'agnostic', whilst the other 'traditionally non-religious' terms—'freethinker', 'humanist', 'materialist', 'rationalist', 'sceptic' and 'secularist'—seemed, in this context, not to be inherently non-religious—i.e. they

Atheist	32	Spiritual	8	Protestant	2
Non-religious	24	Bright	4	Anglican	1
Agnostic	16	Catholic	4	Buddhist	1
Humanist	16	Roman Catholic	3	Pagan	1
Freethinker	15	Christian	3	Presbyterian	1
Rationalist	13	Jew	2	Spiritualist	1
Sceptic	11	Materialist	2	Zoroastrian	1
Secularist	11	None of the above	2		

Fig. 11.1 Number of students selecting 'religious' and 'non-religious' self-descriptors (One shunned all labels; the other identified as a 'feminist')

[12]Where questionnaire respondents are quoted, no pseudonyms shall be provided. Where an interviewee is quoted, their assigned pseudonym accompanies the quotation.

[13]The Scottish 2011 census occurred contemporaneously with the interview phase of this project. Interviewees were shown the 'religion question'—'What religion, religious denomination or body do you belong to?'—at the conclusion of the interview and asked about how they would/did complete it, and for their thought process.

can be deployed with both 'religious' and 'non-religious' intent (cf. Campbell 1971, 18). This terminological ambiguity is further illustrated if we consider the 33 students who self-identified utilising more than one (non)religious term.[14]

11.3.1 Multiple Identification

For many individuals, the adoption of multiple (non)religious terms causes no obvious definitional conflict. For instance, when asked whether any of his seven selected terms—atheist, freethinker, humanist, non-religious, rationalist, sceptic, secularist—had greater prominence than others, Patrick answered: "I kinda consider them all sort of a nebulous group of things; they're all kind of similar, and [I'm] sort of just a mix of all them really . . ." Whilst this type of multiple self-identification might be somewhat uncontroversial, there were others who self-identified using multiple terms in a manner which *appears* inconsistent to the external observer.[15] For example, ten students selected both 'atheist' and 'agnostic'—with some self-defining as 'atheist-agnostic'. Fundamentally this dual terminology originates in an understanding of the terms in which *both* become types of 'negative' atheism—where the agnostic genuinely claims to reserve judgement, yet lives as if they did not believe in god(s) (Eller 2010a, 9). For some, there is a clear reluctance surrounding the term 'agnostic'; it is adopted because it is seen as the scientifically honest position, but is adopted *reluctantly* because it gives the impression of 'sitting on the fence'. For others, 'agnostic' plays a central role in their self-identification, demonstrating an openness to phenomena "other than what we can see or detect" (Malcolm) and, occasionally, towards 'religion' and 'spirituality'.

The key point here is that apart from those students who openly embraced the *inconsistency* of their position (discussed below), the (non)religious terms selected by respondents were compatible at a subjective level. For example, one male student selected 'agnostic', 'atheist', 'Buddhist', 'freethinker', 'humanist', 'non-religious', 'sceptic' and 'spiritual'. This individual self-identifies as 'Buddhist' and 'spiritual', claims to believe in reincarnation, and designates "the Buddhist philosophy" as one of his most valuable beliefs. However, elsewhere in the questionnaire he conceptualizes religion as the "belief in a higher entity (God) and [the worship of] that entity." Hence his assertion that he is 'non-religious' and, indeed, an 'atheist'. Within his narrative, the 'humanist' element clearly related to the high priority he places on the well-being of other human beings, whilst 'agnostic', 'freethinker' and 'sceptic' all revolve around a fundamental attitude of questioning and challenging established thought. This individual demonstrates that, to adapt Swatos' position, "it is quite possible to hold to more than one

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[14]It would have been interesting to know which term these individuals would have picked if only allowed one choice.

[15]Not that consistency is to be expected in human beings.

'religion' [. . . or indeed 'non-religion'] simultaneously" (Swatos 2003, 50). He is also illustrative of the way in which the individuals in this study negotiated the semantic minefield of 'non-religious' terminology in a pragmatic manner which is consistent throughout their contextually-constructed narratives.

As I have already suggested, this convenient kind of explanation did not easily map on to all instances of multiple (non)religious self-identifications. Other students attested to frequent contextual fluctuation between terms, in two overlapping forms: pragmatic self-representation utilising different terms on different occasions; and self-perceived changes in (non)religiosity. Some of the pragmatic reasons which individuals cite are quite mundane: for instance, Courtney described how she generally considers herself an 'atheist', and likes the ideas behind 'humanism', yet "secularist and non-religious seem like answers I'd put down on a census." For others, however, this alternating of terminology was rooted in memorable—and *emotional* (see Mumford in this volume)—life-experiences. For example, one student suggested that although she would 'identify' as a secularist or atheist "in political debate, among friends, colleagues etc.", she "avoid[s] the issue" with family because of the offence caused to Christian family members; Iona, who normally enjoys "atheist chat" is "really sensitive with people who actually are religious" because she is conscious of upsetting those in her life who use religion "as a way to cope"; and Séverine, who is a staunch atheist under normal circumstances, fondly said "I'm not gonna have an argument with a very old lady, [. . .] I don't think I'm an atheist for my grandmother." These observations suggest a pragmatism which prioritizes certain aspects of identity in specific contexts, and downplays or even denies them in others. Such manoeuvring understandably requires a significant amount of cognitive effort (cf. Bering 2010, 167) and the maintenance of differentiated narratives for differing contexts.

Other students suggested that their own understanding of their personal (non)religiosity frequently changed in more than a nominal manner. Although Scott had initially selected the term 'atheist' on the questionnaire preceding his interview, by the end of the interview he was reconsidering his position. Scott could not remember why he had not ticked 'agnostic', and surmised that he had been "feeling a little more defiant" at the time of completion, and not wishing to seem unsure. In the past, he had seen "the idea of an agnostic [as] not just somebody who doesn't know [about the existence of a deity etc.] but somebody who doesn't care," and he continued: "I don't think of it in such extreme ways just now, I'd be more happy to say that I'm open to doubt, and that's what agnosticism is trying to get at." It is clear from Scott's account that he does not see his 'non-religiosity' as a constant, and postulates different emotional circumstances which might have been affecting him at the time. Niamh's selection of 'agnostic', 'atheist', 'Catholic', 'freethinker', 'humanist' and 'non-religious' prompted her to respond: "Yeah, I think I ticked quite a few contradictory [terms] because like I fluctuate all over the place." She describes an intricate relationship between all of these terms—from enjoying reading *The God Delusion*, to finding herself in church when personal circumstances are causing anxiety. In her own words: "I swing from not really knowing if there's a God or not, to being adamant there isn't, to finding myself

praying when I hit rock bottom." Scott and Niamh's accounts demonstrate that (non)religious self-identification can be fluid and dynamic. That individuals can struggle with their 'non-religiosity'—for example, moving from one 'non-religious' belief to another, or lapsing into 'religious' belief—should serve as a caution against the reification of both 'religious' and 'non-religious' self-identifications as constants or, indeed, as 'default' positions.

11.3.2   'Nominal Christians'

A final relevant sub-group of these students who self-identify using multiple (non)religious terms are those who might, in another context, be referred to as 'nominal Christians'. Given Abby Day's *Believing in Belonging* thesis (2011), and recent scholarly comment on the results of the 2011 UK Census results (Chryssides et al. 2012), it is perhaps unsurprising that a number of students, who appeared 'non-religious' on other measures of (non)religiosity, claimed to self-describe themselves using 'religious' terms. Three interviewees—Gordon, Niamh, and Rose—provide useful examples of how complicated such 'nominal religiosity' can be.

For all intents and purposes Gordon is Roman Catholic—he is a member a Catholic students' group, self-identifies as Catholic, attends religious services weekly and declares "I am not an atheist. I believe in God." However, this is far from the full picture. He states:

> I am from what I would call a [solidly] Christian family background [. . .]. But when I say "solidly" . . . [I mean . . .] very much as people who would mark it on the census, and would turn up at [. . .] Christmas, Easter, births, weddings and deaths, but [. . .] wouldn't perhaps go every week.

Upon arriving at university, he decided to get confirmed—something which he now sees as "a reaction to leaving home" and feels that "if I had left it [for a while] I wouldn't have done it." He went through an "existential crisis" in his second year of study before arriving back where he had started, self-describing as a "Catholic-Agnostic" who believes "in something out there, [. . .] some sort of concept of deism, and [. . .] that this guy Jesus was a particularly inspired guy. [. . .] I am completely agnostic about an afterlife, [. . .] I have no proof [. . .] if it happens, it happens . . . if it doesn't it doesn't." Yet despite a clearly ambiguous relationship with Catholicism, Christianity and 'religion' in general, and the fact that he "might not agree with the majority of what [the Church] say[s]," Gordon describes "a kind of identity-culture thing": his agnosticism is a Catholic-Agnosticism and consequently he would "identify" as 'Roman Catholic' or 'Christian' on a census.

Niamh is a young, first-year student from the north of England, with a complicated family history relating to religion. Basically her mother's side of the family is Roman Catholic (and Irish) whilst her father's is Protestant. She describes her relationship with 'religion' as follows: "it was always about family relationships

and politics, basically. It was never about faith." For Niamh, Catholicism is rooted in her familial situation:

> You can't escape your childhood really and I still . . . I would put myself as a Catholic mostly because I don't want to be associated with my Grandma . . . and that sounds horrible, but [. . .] I don't want to be like her in any way because she's . . . done so much damage [. . .] and so if I identify myself as something, I identify myself as a Catholic because of that . . .

As discussed above, Niamh acknowledges fluctuating enormously in her personal (non)religiosity. She stopped regularly attending religious services aged 14 (having previously attended Catholic and Methodist services), is unsure how she feels about life after death, acknowledges that religion has "done a lot of bad things in the world" and concludes, laughing: "when I think about it I'm an atheist; when I'm in trouble I'm not." However, regardless of her fluctuation and familial history, she would select Roman Catholic on the census because "I can't think what else I would have put. I wouldn't have put 'no religion'."

The third student was Rose, who self-identified as 'Christian' and 'spiritual', meditates and practises yoga on a daily basis, yet was interviewed because some of her questionnaire answers suggested a complex interplay of 'religious' and 'non-religious' attitudes, practices and beliefs. At many points Rose's position conflicts with common interpretations of Christian doctrine, and twice in her interview she stated "I'm not religious." Rose describes her relationship with Christianity as follows:

> I celebrate Christmas and I don't [. . .] relate to any other religion [. . .]. My Mum's [and] my Dad's parents are all Christian and Protestant so [. . .] in that respect I do relate to it. [. . . and] I did go to church and [. . .] spent five years of my life going to chapel every day. [. . . But] it doesn't mean anything. [. . .] I guess I'm a Christian, but that just means that I have a day off on the 25th of December [. . .] which is great, you get presents, but you know there's not a whole lot of meaning behind it.

Turning to her immediate family, her mother "was definitely not religious"; her father "might say he'll go to church like at midnight on Christmas Eve" and then decide "Oh, I'm not that bothered"; all in all "there's nothing, we're just not a religious family." However, Rose clearly *does not* see herself as an atheist or agnostic, and cannot relate to people who do. When presented with the 'census question' she answered: "[I'd p]robably go with 'Other Christian' and then write in Protestant, just because of my family. No other reason. Just because [. . .] I suppose you feel the need to label yourself with something, but . . . totally not practising."

Are these three individuals to be classified as 'non-religious' or 'religious'? Perhaps Rose could be seen as somewhere between Day's "natal" and "ethnic" Christian nominalism (2011) due to her identification with her extended family's vague religiosity, and her opposition to the non-spiritual 'other'—'atheists' and 'agnostics'. However, it is unclear why scholars should consider these students to be nominally 'religious' rather than nominally 'non-religious'. Dependent upon the context and manner of investigation, an argument can be made that they are either/or,

or both/and. What can be said, however, is that these individuals comfortably negotiate multiple 'religious' and 'non-religious' self-representations in a pragmatic manner which appears consistent to them. Their very existence is testimony to the porosity of the boundary between 'religion' and 'non-religion' and demonstrates that scholars must listen attentively to what individuals have to say if they hope to understand the dynamics involved in this terminological melting pot.

My account so far has suggested that whether we distinguish between the 'religious' and 'non-religious' in terms of identity, practice, beliefs etc., or any combination of these, we will very quickly run into trouble. Survey methodologies force people's hands and produce answers which do not mirror reality, which might be more complex, or might shift depending on the time and context of questioning. Whether someone is an 'atheist' or not tells us little about their (non)religiosity, their (non)religious history, or what (non)religion means to them in the real world.

11.4   Moving Forward

The working typology presented here cuts across 'dimensions' of religiosity, and categorizes according to the narratives through which participants claimed to interact with (non)religion. Given the discussion above, I determined that I needed to divorce my study from 'dimensions' of (non)religiosity—e.g. differentiating according to belief, affiliation, or practice—so as to not be guilty of reifying single dimensions. Narratives from the interview phase of this study played a dominant role in the construction of this typology, whilst questionnaire respondents provided useful insights and the theoretical thrust of the interviews. Through a process of (re)reading, (re)listening, and (re)coding of questionnaire and interview data, it emerged clearly that the participants in this study were articulating the 'important', 'significant' or perhaps (more contentiously) 'sacred' themes by which they differentiate regarding questions relating to 'religion', resulting in the emergence of a typology consisting of five 'non-religious' types: the *naturalistic*, *humanistic*, *spiritual*, *philosophical* and *familial*. These ideal narrative types cannot be assumed to be constant, and must be understood as firmly rooted in the context in which they were constructed, through a grounded theoretical approach. They represent the best fit from the information available, based upon a critical close reading, with individual students utilizing any number of types, and none exemplifying the ideal case. The intention here is not to reify a 'protestantized' non-religion based upon the 'interiority' of one's 'personal unbelief', but simply to reflect the way in which students placed particular 'importance' or 'significance' on certain themes in their narratives, which formed the data for the study.[16]

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[16]Had this study focused more upon practice than narrative this typology might have been very different. Another approach was taken by Lee (2012a) who typologized according to three broad 'epistemological cultures'.

11.4.1   The Naturalistic Type

Naturalistic narratives are exemplified by an emphasis upon science and the scientific method, and an enthusiasm for the unhindered pursuit of knowledge. This 'naturalism' should be understood as a worldview where 'patterns' in nature are attributable to "properties that are intrinsic to the nature of the physical universe" (Pasquale 2010, 63). Typical statements emphasize the importance of 'science' and, in some cases, 'faith' in 'science' which "is capable of making one feel incredibly special and valuable." This emphasis correlates with prime importance being placed upon accuracy, intelligibility and evidence: "Beliefs [. . .] do not require (and do not have) any hard evidence"; "I don't think I can say how the entire cosmos is ordered without evidence" (Malcolm). These factors contribute to a distinct *naturalistic* form of non-religion, which has three further key characteristics.

Firstly, a negative attitude to the idea of 'faith': statements such as "[I] don't really like the word faith" or "I don't value faith" were common, and appear to be rooted in an understanding of 'religious faith' as being different from the 'faith' or 'trust' which is placed in scientists, for example, who have "proved themselves in some way" (Sarah). Secondly, a 'materialistic' outlook, where "biological existence is the beginning and end" of human life, and "the 'real world' itself is the wholly natural, physical one" (Malcolm). Questions of what happens after death were generally met with a simple "nothing," whilst some added that "the equivalent of a soul would be recycled the way we are biologically" or that after death we "rot." Thirdly, an attitude of agnosticism concerning the existence of a deity, rooted in lack of (the possibility of) definitive evidence—an atheistic position adopted as "probably true [without claiming] that it's the absolute fact" (Malcolm).

The pursuit of knowledge and 'ideas' emphasized in this type of narrative extend far beyond the 'scientific' realm to include learning about 'religion' as well: "I think it's a good thing to [. . .] guard against bigotry, [. . .] I think it's always got to be good to open people's minds a little bit" (Sarah). The emphasis on knowledge can also manifest itself as a justification for anti-religious attitudes. 'Religion' can be portrayed as a purveyor of false 'knowledge' and a barrier to the acquisition of knowledge, persuading people "to bypass actual evidence and get[ting] them to propagate these ideas." In summary, *naturalist* narratives will be dominated by an emphasis on science, evidence, and a pursuit of knowledge which inevitably clashes with constructions of 'religion'. *Naturalistic* statements also exemplify the central characteristics that Johannes Quack encountered amongst a group of Indian rationalists: "the basic conviction [. . .] that in principle all human problems and questions can be solved and answered through science," and what Quack refers to as an "ideology of doubt" (2012a, 429–430).

11.4.2   The Humanistic Type

A central theme throughout the vision espoused by the British Humanist Association (BHA) is "shared human values": "We take responsibility for our actions and base

our ethics on the goals of human welfare, happiness and fulfilment" (BHA 2011). This focus on the fellow human, and a passion for human rights and freedoms is the dominant theme in *humanistic* narratives. When the students were asked about the focus of their 'faith' and their most valuable beliefs, *humanistic* statements typically focused on 'people', 'humanity', or 'virtues' such as kindness and selflessness. Typical responses would be "I put my faith in people and their own judgement of what is right and what is wrong," or the less optimistic, if no less heartfelt "I have faith in humanity ... to be humanity and nothing else" (Courtney). This 'belief' or 'faith' in humanity correlates with the profession of humanitarian ideals, participation in charity- and/or activism-based societies, and/or placing importance upon consideration of others. *Humanistic* narratives tend to echo the BHA's mission to promote "equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief" (BHA 2011) and, in relation to the humanitarian endeavours which are a core emphasis in these narratives, 'religion' can be seen as "the willingness to believe in something good."

However, such attitudes towards 'religion' should not be confused with *prominence* in *humanistic* narratives. Generally, the default position will be one of basic disinterest in (non)religion, for example: "identifying as a non-believers means that I'm not really interested in it ... at all" (Iona). (Non)religious issues and identities are not a frequent topic of conversation in everyday life, and subjective 'non-religiosity' may be suppressed or even denied in order to avoid conflicts. That being said, this 'disinterest' or 'lack of importance' does not equate to neutrality. Due to the emphasis of these narratives, discourse is wont to become noticeably hostile when 'religion' is considered in conjunction with humanitarian issues. 'Biblical' morals, for example, are viewed as "contradictory and [responsible for] a lot of conflict in the society we live in right now" (Iona), with 'religion' being seen as something with positive potential that "often turns out to be despotic and oppressive." Concurrently, and perhaps unexpectedly, whilst *humanistic* narratives may suggest substantive non-religiosity in terms of belief, practice and attitudes, they characteristically emphasize a fundamental respect for individual freedoms, which extends to the freedom to hold religious beliefs and act accordingly. Whereas a *naturalistic* objection to 'faith schools' might focus on their perceived effects upon knowledge, a *humanistic* one might focus on the potential impact of segregation: "they [end up] being not just a separation in terms of religion but in terms sometimes of class" (Harriet).[17]

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[17]*Humanistic* and *naturalistic* narratives can effectively be conceptualized as occupying idealized sides of the critique embodied by contemporary atheism – with the *humanistic* focusing upon 'religious' inspiration for violence and perceived moral culpability, and the *naturalistic* on 'religion' as an 'authoritarian barrier to knowledge and progress' (Cotter 2011a, 83–86).

11.4.3 The Spiritual Type

It is well established that 'spirituality' is a particularly 'fuzzy' concept (Voas 2010, 206). As Anna King writes, "People can detach spirituality from institutionalized religion or regard it as its essence. They can define the spiritual in opposition to the material, the corporeal, the rational, the scientific, the secular or stress their fusion and interconnectedness" (1996, 345). Consequently, my use of the term 'spiritual' should not be invested with unintended significance relating to the contested terminological boundary between (non)religion and 'spirituality', but simply seen as the most useful term for distinguishing characteristics associated with this specific narrative type.

   Spiritual narratives are rooted in a variety of experiential phenomena including "love and kinship," "friends and family" and "the great outdoors," accompanied by a *humanistic* altruism, and an anti-materialism that would typically be associated with "spirituality" (Van der Veer 2008, 792). *Spiritual* narratives include identification with the term 'spiritual' and/or expressions of a positive attitude regarding 'spirituality', exemplifying "individualized syncretic—even eclectic—combinations" of 'religious' beliefs and practices (Rose 2001, 205). 'Religious' issues are a frequent topic of conversation, and participation in prayer, meditation, or "other associated healing/therapeutic activities" might be alluded to. A typical response came from a student who "dabbled" in Buddhism "because I was interested in meditation. I am proud of being agnostic." This more 'seeker-like' agnosticism distinguishes *spiritual* narratives from the others, and is reflected in subjective understandings of 'religion' which are less evaluative: "I'm not religious. [. . .] I think that you can believe what you want to believe, um, as long as you don't hurt anyone, but I don't do anything very religious at all" (Rose).

   However, this openness does not extend to 'institutional' religion which *spiritual* narratives can portray as "boring," a barrier to friendship, and something which "ultimately is dangerous." This kind of 'religion' is portrayed as something which exerts unwanted authority over individual subjective experiences (cf. Knoblauch 2010, 30). *Spiritual* discourse can be summarized as anti-institutional and anti-hierarchical, characterized by its distance from institutional forms of (non)religion. This distance "must not be understood [as] opposition to religion" (Knoblauch 2010, 29; cf. Roof et al. 1999, 252) in general, although it is significant that 'religion' acts as the foil against which these students differentiate themselves when speaking in these terms.

11.4.4 The Familial Type

Throughout my work, I operate under the assumption that individual self-representations are informed by "persistent networks – of family, friends and colleagues – that continue to shape our identities as we develop throughout our

lives" (Guest 2010, 176). With this in mind, although 'family' and 'relationships' are themes which are likely to emerge throughout (non)religious narratives, their importance is much more evident in *familial* statements. In such narratives, beliefs, faith and values will frequently be located in the family unit, with a concern for their well-being that 'bleeds over' into concern for human beings in general. Niamh was particularly emotive on this issue, stating that "you don't give up on relationships [. . .] even if they're going to shit [. . .] you don't give up, you stick by people." The importance of family in these narratives does not necessarily imply 'religious' commonality across the family, but simply that 'religion' and 'family' are closely linked for the *familial* type. Niamh stated that when she was a child, "at some point my parents had to explain to me why it was that my grandma hated me [. . .] and from then, in my head, I had it that Protestants were bad and Catholics were good," and it was Séverine's experience of religion that if "you say yes to everything then you're accepted in the [. . .] community, or if you ask [. . .] too many questions you're [not]." In the context of these exemplary quotations, it is understandable that this emphasis on the family takes precedence over (non)religious identification, and is associated with an image of 'religion'—positive or negative—which is closely linked to intimate relationships.

An ideal-typical *familial* narrative might well emphasize personal intellectual reasons for being non-religious, yet these will be subordinate to a commitment to their "main 'source of significance' [which] is more likely to be close family and friends than a [non]religious community and its [lack of] gods" (Woodhead 2010, 240). Far from being "profoundly individualistic" and living in a "morally insignificant universe," these students are "firmly grounded in the significance of the social and the emotional" as opposed to a "grander," yet no more legitimate, narrative (Day 2009b, 276; contra Smith and Denton 2005).

11.4.5   The Philosophical Type

It has become a common theme within contemporary theological critiques to castigate contemporary atheism for its non-philosophical nature. According to Alvin Plantinga, "many of [Dawkins'] arguments would receive a failing grade in a sophomore philosophy class" (2007), and it seems that certain critics almost lament that this "New Atheism" is not up to the standards set by "Feuerbach or Marx, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche" (Aslan 2010, xiii–xiv; cf. Fergusson 2009, 3). Presumably, these critics would prefer to engage with arguments couched in *philosophical* terms. This nomenclature should not be misconstrued as suggesting philosophical rigor, but this type of narrative is associated with a high degree of introspection and self-criticism, lengthy definitions, unsuppressed doubt, "freethinking," and self-reflexive articulacy about the internal processes through which stances are appropriated. For example, one questionnaire respondent stated: "who [I] am lies somewhere in the middle of what [I] was, what [I] will be, how others see me and how [I] see myself. [J]e suis moi."

Philosophical discussion maintains a neutral stance towards 'religion', yet displays a relatively high degree of knowledge relating to the specifics of many 'religious' worldviews, apparently resulting from personal—and frequently 'enjoyable'—engagement with relevant literature and practices. Relevant examples of the considered and diplomatic style of the ideal type would be Gordon's belief in "some sort of concept of God, but I wouldn't want to take it any further because I can't prove it [. . .] I'm fairly agnostic," or another student's thoughts about what happens after death: "I don't know [what happens] and I don't think I can ever reasonably say for certain until I die. Most likely I won't ever know, as my mind will go with my body." It would be disingenuous to label this self-critical introspection as 'uncertainty'; *philosophical* statements will generally come from individuals who know where they stand, even if that place is "on the fence." The associated openness to 'spiritual' and 'religious' ideas, in a much more critical and 'rational' manner than in *spiritual* narratives, further blurs the boundary between 'religion' and 'non-religion'.

11.4.6 Implications

This typology represents an attempt to articulate an alternative way of understanding 'non-religious' individuals whilst avoiding the emphasis on particular 'dimensions' of (non)religiosity which is prevalent in current understandings. Rather than beginning with categories which reify a religion/non-religion dichotomy and which privilege normative 'religiosity', this typology was constructed through individual narratives, and calibrated to their strategies of self-representation. It is immutably rooted in the context of a small sample at a single Scottish university, and requires detailed and systematic follow-up studies to flesh-out and theorize each type within this and other contexts. However, through a grounded theoretical focus on students' articulation of themes which are of 'importance' or 'significance' for them, this typology identifies five ideal typical ways in which students speak about (non)religion, which allows us to speak of the ways in which non-religion manifests itself in individual lives, without reducing it to an absence or negation of certain aspects of 'religion'.

We know that these student 'atheists' did not believe in God. But paying more attention to the ways in which they invoke the concept, and the way in which this 'non-belief' manifests itself, without becoming distracted by the terms employed, allows a much deeper—and usefully reoriented—understanding of the place of (non)religion in these students' lives. Each of these types is associated with particular ways of engaging with (non)religion which could, upon further research, be developed into a model of some predictive power and value. Although there was a great deal of variation in levels of emphasis and salience amongst the participants in this study, the majority of the narratives that emerged did not place much importance on (non)religiosity at all. Even amongst those statements which were classified as *naturalistic* or *philosophical*—which were those most associated with a high degree of thought and introspection concerning (non)religion—this emphasis was

largely due to the importance placed upon science and freethinking respectively, and not because of anything that marked (non)religion out as particularly significant in comparison to other phenomena. On the other hand, it is also very difficult to consider any of these students to be "utterly indifferent"(Strenski 2004, 147)—they are keenly aware of where they stand when (non)religion interacts with what matters to them—when, I would suggest, *their sacred values are challenged*.

For the sake of brevity,[18] I will work with Gordon Lynch's neo-Durkheimian definition of the 'sacred' as "what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meanings and conduct of social life" (2012, 29).[19] This definition makes no "claim that there is an actual ontological referent for sacred forms" (2012, 15) and is suggestive of my position (following Knott, 2013) that the sacred is not an exclusively religious category. As Kim Knott writes, "The 'sacred' [. . .] can be attributed by people in non-theological as well as theological contexts, irrespective of the nature of their belief systems: 'It is not a uniquely religious category . . . ' (Anttonen 2000, 274)" (2013, 210). For these students, and given my account above, I contend that the interaction of religion with personal sacreds precipitates the recognition and reaffirmation of subjective non-religiosity. Knott continues:

> Various things, places and people are set apart according to time and context. The boundaries that become the focus of sacred-making discourse and activities have the potential to erupt as sites of struggle but for much of the time lie dormant and, as such, invisible. (2013, 214)

Whether these students are "setting apart" concrete relationships with close family or friends, or the more abstract "unhindered pursuit of knowledge," against this backdrop it is unsurprising that they should place little emphasis on their non-religiosity, yet are articulate about this same non-religiosity in relation to personal 'sacred' themes.

11.5   Conclusion

Understandably, any conclusions which can be made from this study are highly influenced by its exploratory nature and the limitations of the method employed. The university context severely limits generalization, and practicalities foreclosed the possibility of comparing with 'religious' narratives. By prioritizing narratives, I excluded the possibility of encountering those who were 'truly' indifferent,[20]

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[18]The following aside is elaborated more fully in Cotter (2012).

[19]See also Catto and Eccles (2013, 54–55).

[20]Such as, apparently, the writer Ben Goldacre, who states: 'I just don't have any interest either way, but I wouldn't want to understate how uninterested I am. There still hasn't been a word invented for people like me, whose main experience when presented with this issue is an overwhelming, mind-blowing, intergalactic sense of having more interesting things to think about' (in Williams 2011). See Beyer in this volume on 'apatheists'.

and had to build my understandings upon the contextual and fluid utterances of individuals who desired to volunteer information. Although some attention was given to practice, my typology clearly suffers from a focus on the intellectual at the expense of ritual, embodiment, and other aspects of lived 'non-religion'. The typology is also quite noticeably 'positive' but could be developed to become more all-encompassing and focus on more 'negative' aspects as well. Further, as Lori G. Beaman suggested at the workshop where this chapter was initially presented, it is indeed *too early* to be settling on new terms. However, I have illustrated the merits of such an approach, which I am currently developing further, and have made a number of important points along the way.

Grounding this study in student narratives, and subordinating a priori understandings of 'religion' and 'non-religion' to these, provided an understanding which is potentially acceptable to 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and should be applicable beyond the study of the 'non-religious'. By inviting students to self-identify through any number of self-defined (non)religious terms, I have demonstrated enormous variation in understandings of the terms they utilized. Prevalent 'non-religious' terminology—particularly 'atheist'—was shown to be of limited use, and rooted in single dimensions of a Western-biased 'religion'. Each of my proposed types has its own characteristics, rooted in the specificities of what individuals considered as important and significant in their lives. However, in every case the student's personal (non)religious self-description was subordinated to the ideals implicit throughout their narratives. 'Religion'—and, by definition, 'non-religion'—was not something which these students invested with any significant amount of 'meaning' in-and-of itself. However, when 'religion' is perceived to interact with their sacred values, it becomes the 'other' against which their 'non-religious' stance is defined.

Finally, students were shown to self-identify through multiple (non)religious terms and to self-consciously fluctuate between these, intentionally or unintentionally, in a cognitively-effortful manner consistent with their narratives. This subject group is infused with all manner of combinations of (non)religious self-descriptions, practices, attitudes, beliefs, affiliations and levels of interest, which defy simple dichotomization and encourage a continued movement away from attempts to explain non-religiosity from a perspective of normative religiosity. Acknowledging and engaging with the non-religious can help us understand people in all their diversity in their own terms, and not simply because they are perceived to have or lack something which scholars define as 'religion'. These students may indeed be without god(s), but they are most definitely not without nuance.

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Chapter 12
Who Are the "New Atheists"?

Ryan T. Cragun

As with any social movement, the definitive origins of the latest wave of atheist activism are difficult to discern. Scholars (Cimino and Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012) have suggested that this latest rise to prominence for atheists was formally launched with the publication of Sam Harris' book, *The End of Faith*, in 2004. That book was closely followed by several additional books, including Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2007). As is typically the case with social movements, the books were not the beginning of the movement, but were an autocatalytic manifestation of a burgeoning movement both in the US and internationally.

While there is a long history of atheist and freethought activism in the US (Jacoby 2005), some of the most prominent activist groups are fairly recent in origin. American Atheists, for instance, was organized in 1963 as an advocacy group for atheist civil liberties. It was created as a result of the *Abington School District* v. *Schempp* (a.k.a. *Murray* v. *Curlett*, 1963) Supreme Court case in which public school Bible reading was found to be unconstitutional. The group has, since then, provided a point of contact for the American public with atheists in the US. While one of the oldest freethought activist groups in the US, American Atheists is not currently the largest. The largest freethought group in the US today is the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), which was started in 1978 in Wisconsin by a mother and daughter, Anne Nicol Gaylor and Annie Laurie Gaylor. The organization began as a relatively small effort, but now counts close to 20,000 members among its ranks. The Foundation began publication of a newsletter early in its history, and launched a weekly radio show and podcast in 2006, just as the latest wave of atheist activism was taking off.

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There are, of course, many other freethought publications and organizations in the US and internationally. But of primary interest in this chapter is a subgroup that developed out of the most recent wave of open atheist activism: New Atheists. The label appears to have been coined by Gary Wolf in "The Church of the Non-Believers" which appeared in *Wired* magazine (2006). While there has been a fair amount of debate as to whether or not the label "New Atheists" is appropriate for this movement (Flynn 2010), the label appears to have stuck and a growing number of people are self-identifying as members of the movement (Stenger 2009).

One of the few books written by a New Atheist that appears to be somewhat self-reflexive about the movement, *The New Atheism*, by Victor J. Stenger (2009), offers some suggestions as to what New Atheists believe. He describes New Atheists as rejecting all elements of supernatural belief (e.g., god, heaven, hell, reincarnation, etc.). He also argues that New Atheists put their trust in science. Finally, he suggests that New Atheists are critical of religion, though whether this staunch criticism extends to all manifestations of religion is not entirely clear; some would say yes (Hitchens 2009; Stenger 2009) while others are less universal in their critique (Harris 2004; Dennett 2007).

If Stenger's book is at least a somewhat accurate manifesto of New Atheism then it can be used to provide a basic outline for New Atheist characteristics. Drawing upon those characteristics—rejection of the supernatural, reliance on science, criticism of religion—should make it possible, given sufficient numbers of atheists, to discern what percentage of atheists in the US exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. This question may seem a little odd to some readers as they may wonder why I do not just assume that all individuals in the US who assert that they are atheists also exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. Prior research suggests that a certain percentage of people who either self-identify as atheist or report not believing in a god exhibit some religious or spiritual characteristics (Cragun et al. 2012; Kosmin et al. 2009; Sherkat 2008; Baker and Smith 2009a, b; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012). For instance, Cragun et al. (2012) found that 9 % of people who report their religion as "atheist" later identify as believing in a personal god, and another 5 % believe in a higher power or force. Likewise, Cragun et al. (2013) found that atheists in North America are somewhat diverse, with a variety of attitudes toward political and social issues. In other words, not all atheists exhibit the distinctly irreligious characteristics of New Atheists. Those atheists who do not exhibit the characteristics of the New Atheists, whom I will refer to in this chapter as "other atheists," report not believing in god, but may not reject all notions of the supernatural (e.g., belief in an afterlife) and may not be as strident in their criticism of religion as are the New Atheists. They may also be less confident in the ability of science to provide meaningful answers to existential questions. While the primary aim of this chapter is to examine the characteristics of New Atheists, I will also provide data on these other atheists by way of comparison. Both groups are understudied and warrant further investigation.

If sufficient numbers of individuals exhibiting the characteristics of New Atheists can be isolated from other atheists and non-religious individuals, it may be of interest to examine some of their other characteristics as well. How do New Atheists

compare to other non-religious people when it comes to things like age, sex, race, geographic distribution, marital status, income, education, and political views? Disentangling New Atheists from other atheists and other non-religious individuals so that I can describe their basic characteristics is the primary focus of this chapter. I conclude with some thoughts on how these characteristics may influence the future of the New Atheist movement.

12.1   Finding the New Atheists

As noted above, characteristics of New Atheists have been proposed by members of the movement (Stenger 2009; Myers 2009). These authors suggest three primary characteristics for New Atheists. First, New Atheists are obviously atheists in the sense that they do not believe in a god. Whether or not they are positive or negative atheists (Smith 1980; Bullivant 2008; Lee 2012b; Cliteur 2009)—i.e., they deny the existence of a god or simply lack a belief in a god, respectively—appears to be less important than simply not believing. Beyond just not believing in a god, New Atheists are described as not believing in any other supernatural phenomena, like ghosts, angels, spirits, demons, karma, heaven, hell, or anything else that lies outside the domain of the natural world.

   The second characteristic that is claimed of New Atheists is that they have, as a result of rejecting religion and the supernatural, turned to science for answers. Where science and some religions may conflict, New Atheists will side with science. One obvious area where New Atheists will side with science will be evolution. New Atheists should be unequivocal in their acceptance of evolution.

   Third, New Atheists are characterized by a critical attitude toward religion. The extent of this critical attitude is not entirely clear, as members of the New Atheist movement seem to be at least semi-tolerant of some more liberal forms of religion (Myers 2009) or may not criticize all aspects of religion (Harris 2004), while others are disparaging of all religion, spirituality, and supernatural belief (Stenger 2009; Hitchens 2009). Regardless of the degree, New Atheists will generally exhibit a critical attitude toward religion.

   Assuming these three characteristics are accurate descriptions of New Atheists, the next question is: Is there a nationally representative dataset that contains questions tapping into each of these three dimensions of New Atheism that also contains sufficient numbers of atheists to allow for distinctions among atheists? There is really just one such dataset that is publicly available: the Pew US Religious Landscape Survey.

   The US Religious Landscape Survey (USRLS) has a large sample of atheists, 1,643, most of whom (1,374) answered questions in each of these domains (described below). Additionally, the data were collected in 2007, just as the recent wave of atheist activism was growing in popularity. Of note, the dataset includes weights in order for it to represent the US population.

The questions that captured the three dimensions of the New Atheists were fairly straightforward. The USRLS asked about belief in an afterlife, "Do you believe in life after death," with "yes" and "no" as response options. The USRLS asked about evolution by requesting that participants report their level of agreement with the following statement, "Evolution is the best explanation for the origins of human life on earth." Participants could choose between "completely agree," "mostly agree," "mostly disagree," or "completely disagree." Finally, participants were asked about their views toward scripture, "Which comes closest to your view of your religion's scripture (if no religion, they were asked about the Bible)?" The USRLS provides just two options: (1) it is the word of god, and (2) it is a book written by men and is not the word of god. Participants could choose "other," though very few did.

With these variables, it is possible, using a two-step cluster analysis, to isolate those with the characteristics of New Atheists from other atheists. A two-step cluster analysis is appropriate in this situation given that the variables employed are nominal (indicate categories that cannot be ranked) or ordinal (ranked categories). Additionally, the number of clusters can be specified in a two-step cluster analysis. The cluster analysis was only performed on individuals who reported not believing in god on the belief in god question. I did not run the algorithm on all those who reported their religion as being atheist (see Cragun et al. (2012) for more information on this distinction). Also, since I was only interested in separating out New Atheists from other atheists, I specified two clusters. The resulting clusters are depicted in Fig. 12.1.

The cluster analysis classified close to 80 % of atheists in the US as exhibiting the characteristics of New Atheists. Since the latest Pew data (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012) suggest that the percentage of atheist Americans is close to 7 % of the population, that would mean roughly 5.2 % of the US population exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. That is close to 16 million people.
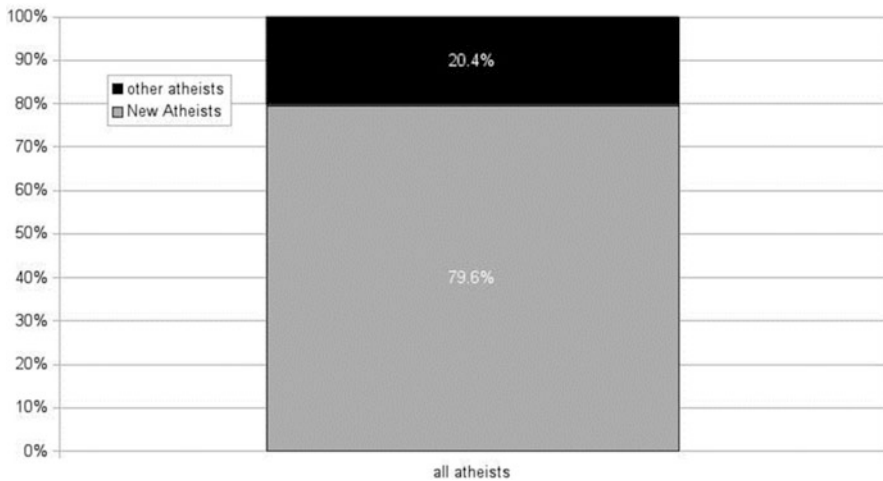
Fig. 12.1 Division of all those reporting no belief in god into New Atheists and other atheists
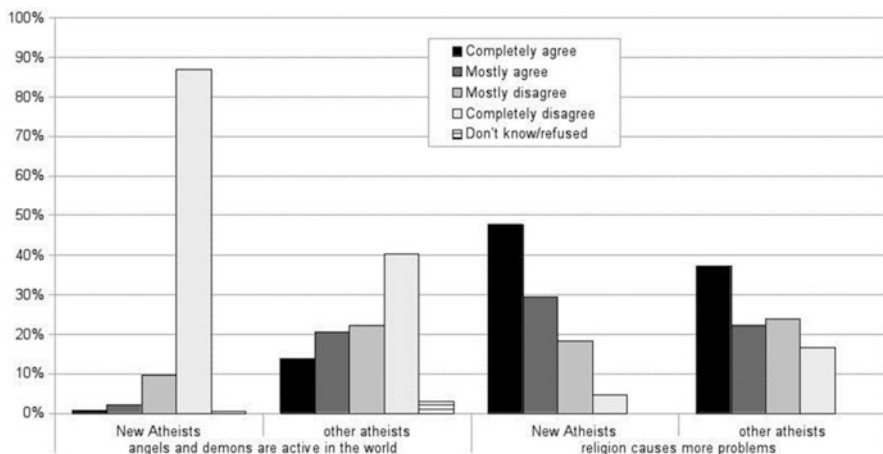
Fig. 12.2 Views of New Atheist cluster and other atheist cluster on additional items

To be clear, it is unlikely that all those who exhibit these characteristics consider themselves to be or identify as "New Atheists"; in this chapter I am simply asserting that close to 80 % of atheists in the US exhibit the characteristics that members of the New Atheist movement argue are the values and beliefs held by their movement. Self-identification as "New Atheist" is likely a sizable percentage lower than these numbers indicate.

In the interest of verifying the accuracy of the cluster analysis, I ran a few additional analyses to see how well the clusters reflect distinctions among atheists and whether the three clustering variables are sufficient to accurately isolate those who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. Figure 12.2 presents the results of two of the analyses, examining the views of the two clusters from the USRLS on whether or not they believe angels and demons are active in the world today and whether or not religion causes more problems than it solves.

The clusters are not quite as clean as I would have hoped. On the first question, about the activity of angels and demons in the world, the clustering pretty accurately reflects the distinction. Almost 90 % of those in the New Atheist cluster report completely disagreeing; another 10 % report mostly disagreeing. However, on the second question, just under 50 % of those in the New Atheist cluster strongly agree that religion causes more problems than it solves, with another 30 % just agreeing. These numbers are higher than those in the other atheist cluster, but not as high as I would have thought. I ran two additional analyses (not shown) that also supported the clustering. When asked whether or not they believe in hell, 100 % of the individuals in the New Atheist cluster reported that they do not. However, about 3–4 % of individuals in the New Atheist cluster report fairly frequent religious service attendance (once or twice a month or more); almost 90 % report seldom or never attending religious services. Just 63 % of individuals in the other atheist cluster report seldom or never attending religious services; 21 % report attending relatively frequently. While not perfect, the cluster analysis seems to have fairly

accurately isolated individuals who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists from other atheists. I may be over-estimating the percentage of individuals who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists in the US, possibly by as much as 10 %. This would suggest that New Atheists account for 70 % to 80 % of atheists in the US and somewhere between 4.9 % and 5.2 % of the US population (or roughly 13–16 million people).

Finally, before I begin describing the demographics of those who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists, I think it will be prudent if I change my wording slightly. While problematic because not all of these people will identify as "New Atheists," throughout the rest of this chapter I will refer to the people in the New Atheist cluster as "New Atheists," only so I do not have to continue describing them as "those who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists."

12.2 Demographics of the New Atheists

12.2.1 Age

It has long been known that atheists in the US are younger than theists (Vetter and Green 1932; Sherkat 2008; Kosmin et al. 2009; Baker and Smith 2009b). However, prior research has not isolated New Atheists from other atheists. In other words, the age distribution of New Atheists is unknown. With the New Atheists isolated from other atheists in the USRLS, I can now turn to an examination of their age distribution. Figure 12.3 contrasts New Atheists just with other atheists and examines the percentages of these groups in roughly 10-year age brackets (i.e., 18–29, 30–39 ... 80+).
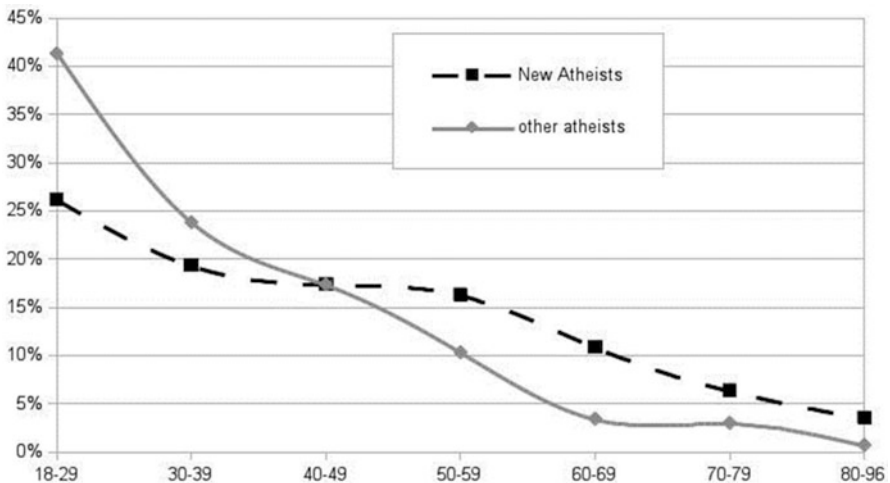
Fig. 12.3 New Atheists' and other atheists' age distribution
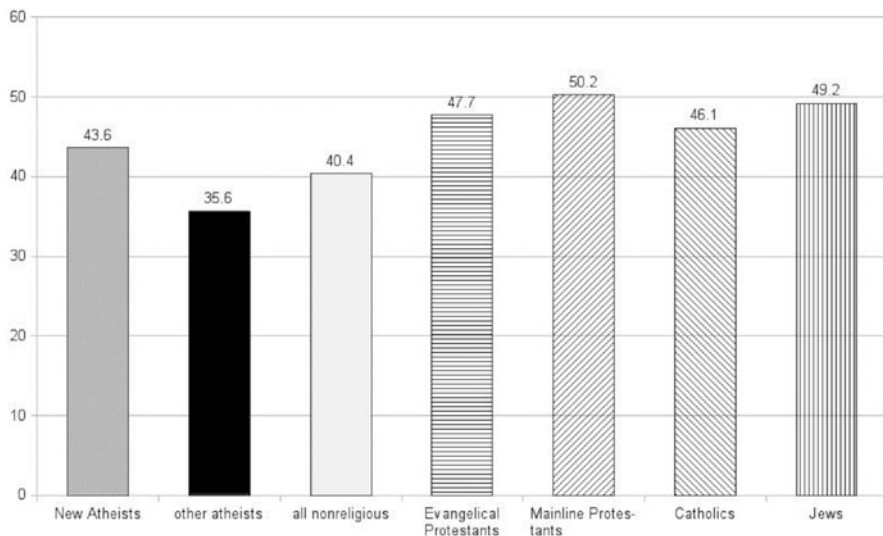
Fig. 12.4   Average ages of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

The differences are notable. New Atheists exhibit a slightly older age distribution. Just over 25 % of New Atheists are in the 18–29 year age group while almost 40 % of other atheists are. While there is no way of determining, based on the USRLS, whether other atheists eventually begin to exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists, that does seem to be a possibility based on Fig. 12.3, though clearly not all other atheists do so. However, by age 60, there are very few other atheists; most elderly atheists in the US exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists.

How do these two atheist groups compare with other religious groups and the broad category of the non-religious in age (i.e., those who report no religious affiliation)? Figure 12.4 illustrates this.

Other atheists are the youngest group, on average, by almost 5 years. The non-religious are the second youngest, followed by New Atheists. If what the scientific literature suggests about the importance of age distributions for the growth of religions (Miller et al. 2001; McKinney and Hoge 1983; Roozen 2009) holds for the non-religious and atheists, it is likely that these groups will continue to grow in the future.

12.2.2   Sex

Like age, there has long been a clear and discernible relationship between religiosity and sex. Women in the US are significantly and substantially more religious than are men (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012; Sherkat 2008; Baker and Smith 2009b). This disparity is even more pronounced among New Atheists, as is shown in Fig. 12.5.
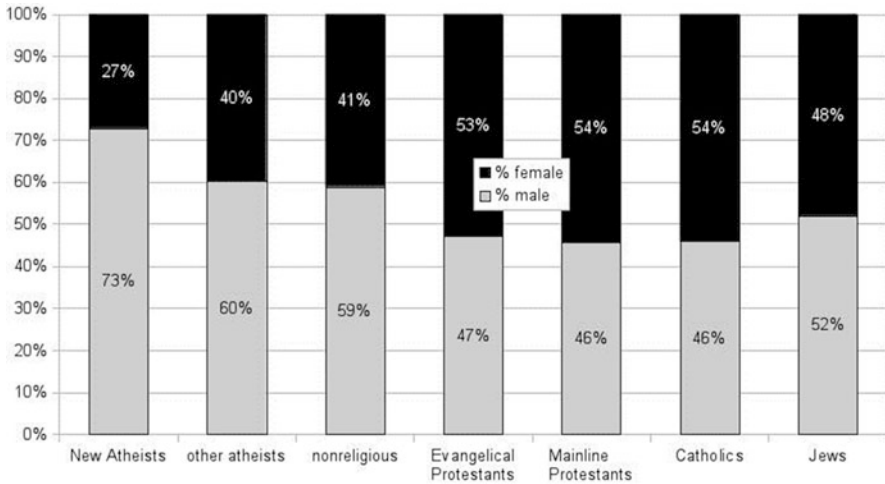
Fig. 12.5 Sex distribution of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

New Atheists are the most gender imbalanced of any of the comparison groups; 73 % of New Atheists are male. Other atheists and the non-religious are closer to a 60 %/40 % distribution between men and women. Other religious groups in the US have a higher percentage of women than men, though Jews appear to be a slight exception to that general finding. It may be the case that the nearly three to one gender imbalance among New Atheists is responsible for what appears to be a culture of misogyny in atheist groups, in some atheist writings, and at some atheist meetings. This has recently resulted in a fracturing among New Atheists (the first atheist "sect"), with a splinter called "Atheist+" (the second atheist "sect") that is advocating for greater attention to issues of misogyny and tolerance in the atheist movement (Christina 2012; Lee 2012a).

12.2.3   Race

The racial makeup of the non-religious has been changing over the last 20 years, as more racial and ethnic minorities (i.e., Blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics) have begun to leave religion (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012). However, the same does not hold for New Atheists. Figure 12.6 provides a breakdown of the racial makeup of New Atheists along with several other comparison groups.

Ninety percent of New Atheists are white. They do not appear to be a particularly diverse group. Other atheists, on the other hand, do appear to be more diverse, with just 77 % of them being white, a percentage very similar to that of the non-religious.
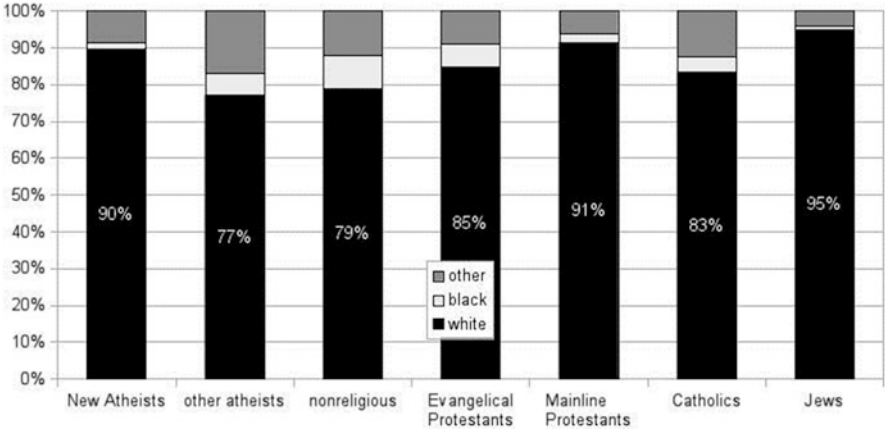
Fig. 12.6 Racial distribution of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups
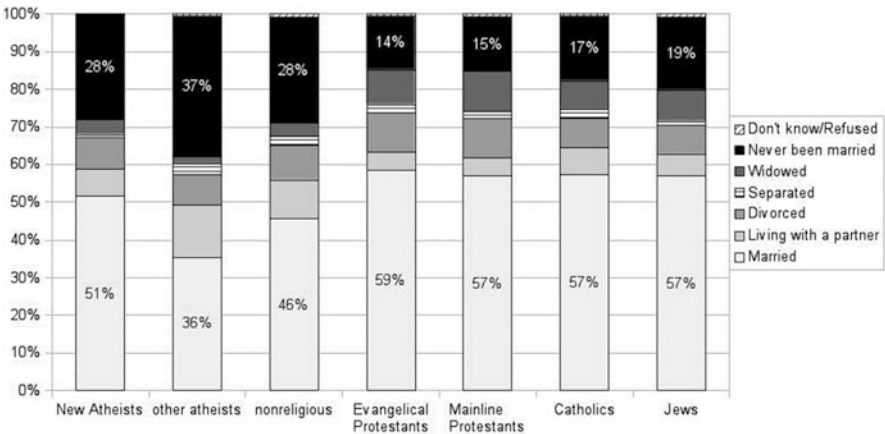
Fig. 12.7 Marital status of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

12.2.4   Marital Status

Atheists and the non-religious have long been known to be less likely to be married and more likely to be cohabiting or never married (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012; Baker and Smith 2009b). One study did note that some of these differences disappear when age is controlled (Kosmin et al. 2009), given the lower average age for the non-religious and atheists. Figure 12.7 shows the marital status distribution for New Atheists and several comparison groups.

The three non-religious groups are the least likely to be married and the most likely to be single. They are also the most likely to be living with a partner. A tell-tale sign of the influence of the lower ages of the other atheists and the non-religious is the lower percentages of widowed individuals, percentages that are much higher for the four religious groups included in Fig. 12.7. New Atheists are more similar to Jews than the other two non-religious groups, but they still exhibit a substantial difference in marital relations. At the end of this chapter, I examine marital status and age simultaneously to discern their effect on being both an atheist and a New Atheist.

12.2.5 Political Views

Prior research has also illustrated that the non-religious are particularly liberal and progressive in their political views (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012; Baker and Smith 2009a). Figures 12.8 and 12.9 illustrate this by examining two political elements: political party identification (Fig. 12.8) and ideological orientation (Fig. 12.9).

All three non-religious groups are particularly likely to be independents and Democrats, and are very unlikely to identify as Republican. They are, in fact, less likely to identify as Republican than every other group included, even Jews, who are widely known for their liberal proclivities in the US (Kosmin and Keysar 2006). New Atheists are the least likely to identify as Republican and 45 % identify as Independents. Political ideology is similar, as shown in Fig. 12.9.

New Atheists are the most liberal of any group included in the figure, followed by other atheists, the non-religious, and Jews. 19 % of New Atheists identify as very liberal, compared to just 8 % of Jews.
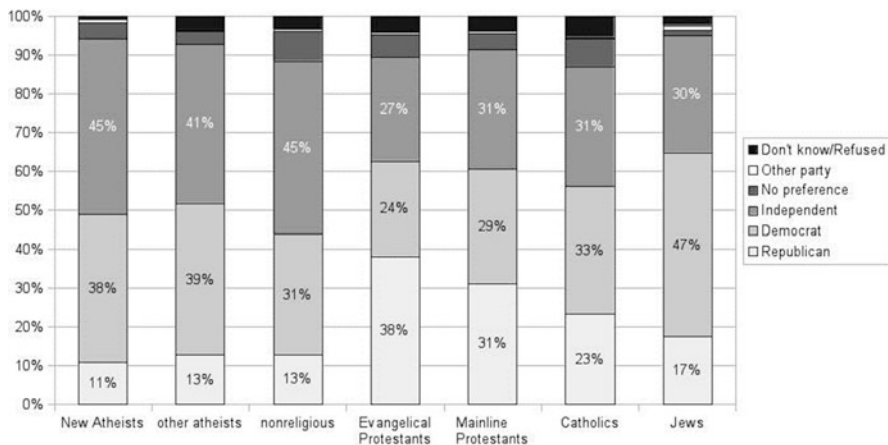
Fig. 12.8 Political party preferences of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups
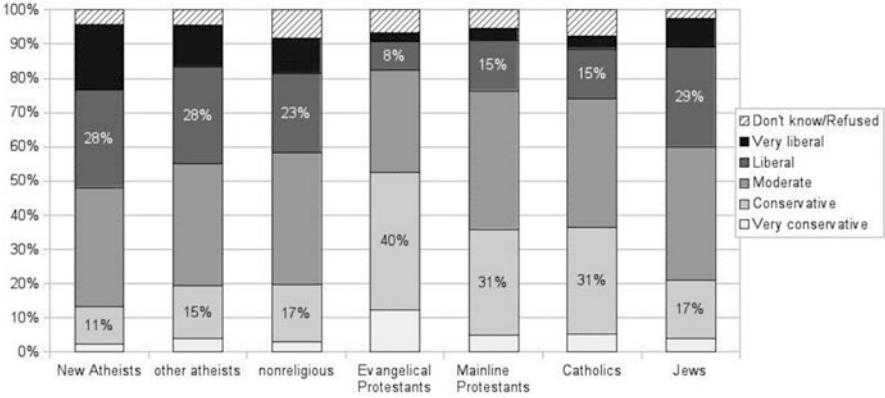
Fig. 12.9 Political ideology of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups
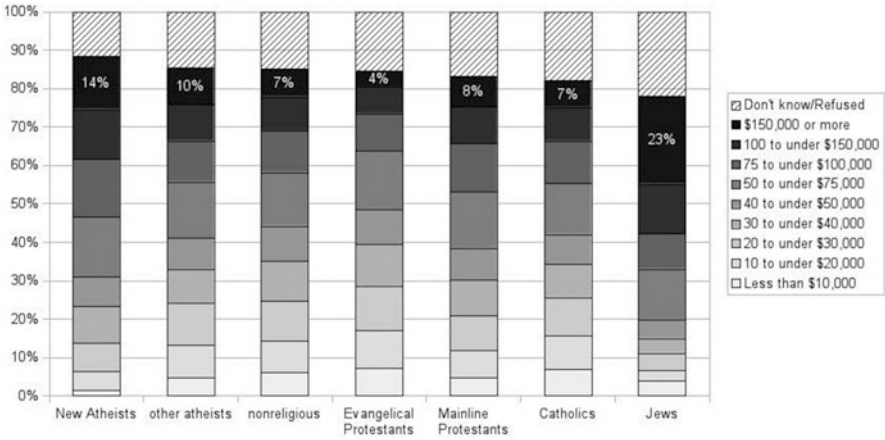
Fig. 12.10 Income of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

12.2.6   Income

As is commonly the case with surveys, a large percentage of each (non)religious group refused to answer the question about income. However, with the data that are available, it appears that New Atheists are second only to Jews in their income, as shown in Fig. 12.10.

New Atheists do, in fact, stand out from other atheists and the non-religious in their level of affluence. They have the smallest percentage of respondents in the lowest income group—just 1 % report incomes under $10,000. New Atheists have the same percentage in the second highest income category as Jews—13 %, but are outpaced by Jews in the highest income category, where 23 % of Jews make more

than $150,000 per year; 14 % of New Atheists do. Other atheists also have rather high incomes. The non-religious are about as affluent as are Catholics, on average. Evangelical Protestants, in line with prior research, have among the lowest incomes (Keister 2008).

12.2.7 Education

Helping to explain the disparities in income are statistics on educational attainment. Recent research has found that the disparities in educational attainment between the non-religious and the rest of the population have been declining (Kosmin and Keysar 2006; Kosmin et al. 2009), but isolating out New Atheists tells a very different story. Figure 12.11 illustrates that New Atheists have higher educational attainment than all but Jews.

The most highly educated religious group is Jews with 34 % having post-graduate degrees, followed by New Atheists with 27 %. That is more than double the educational attainment of other atheists and the non-religious, and almost twice that of Mainline Protestants. Other atheists have lower educational attainment than do New Atheists, but this is, in part, due to their lower average ages. Even so, New Atheists are highly educated.

12.2.8 Predictors of New Atheism

Having outlined the basic demographics of New Atheists in the previous sections, in this section I use that information to determine which of these demographic factors
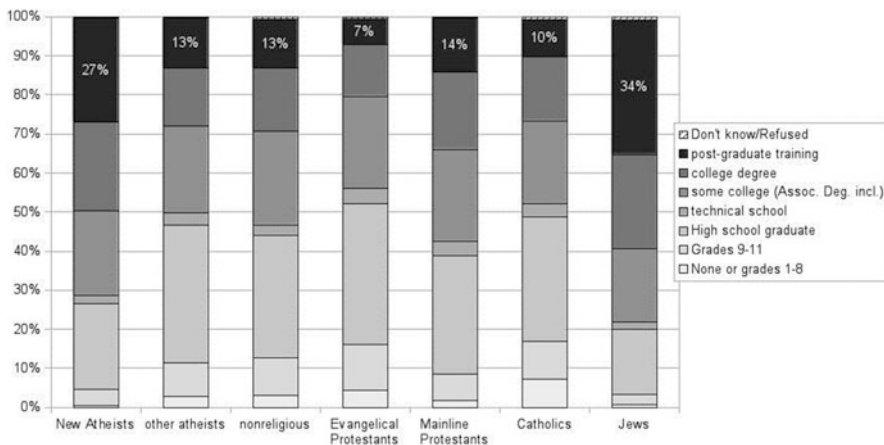
Fig. 12.11 Educational attainment of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

Table 12.1 Binary logistic regression results predicting atheists vs. theists

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	−0.006	0.001	19.921	.000	0.994
Sex	0.967	0.041	556.565	.000	2.629
Race (comparison group is other/mixed)			274.669	.000	
White	0.637	0.100	40.656	.000	1.890
Black	−1.049	0.146	51.553	.000	0.350
Asian	0.860	0.130	44.012	.000	2.364
Marital (comparison group is never married)			140.839	.000	
Married	−0.570	0.050	128.519	.000	0.565
Cohabiting	−0.172	0.071	5.933	.015	0.842
Divorced	−0.278	0.078	12.853	.000	0.757
Separated	−0.554	0.150	13.613	.000	0.575
Widowed	−0.323	0.119	7.296	.007	0.724
Party (comparison group is other party)			149.610	.000	
Republican	−0.926	0.220	17.707	.000	0.396
Democrat	−0.347	0.216	2.589	.108	0.707
Independent	−0.201	0.215	0.875	.350	0.818
No preference	−0.377	0.234	2.598	.107	0.686
Political ideology	0.642	0.021	922.526	.000	1.899
Education	0.189	0.013	216.182	.000	1.208
Income	0.093	0.010	95.589	.000	1.098
Constant	−6.367	0.256	616.149	.000	0.002
−2 Log likelihood					22,485.217
Cox and Snell R Square					0.055
Nagelkerke R Square					0.166

is the best predictor of both atheists versus theists and of those atheists who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. To do this, I employ logistic regression, which is an analytic technique that allows for the determination of the influence of multiple independent variables on a dichotomous dependent variable simultaneously. I ran two analyses, the first examining which demographic variables predict atheism, generally (Table 12.1) and the second examining which demographic variables predict New Atheism (Table 12.2).

The independent variables are the various demographic variables outlined above. Age, political ideology, income, and education are treated as interval variables, even though political ideology, income, and education are technically interval-like ordinal variables. Sex, race, marital status, and political party are all entered into the equation as nominal variables. For sex, the comparison group is female. For race, the comparison group is "other/mixed race." For marital status, the comparison group is "never married." And for political party, the comparison group is "other party."

For those unfamiliar with logistic regression, there are two primary coefficients in the table of interest. The first are the numbers in the column headed by Exp(B). These are referred to as "odds ratios" and they indicate the relative influence of

Table 12.2 Binary logistic regression results predicting New Atheists vs. other atheists

	B	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Age	0.023	0.004	34.645	.000	1.023
Sex	0.747	0.110	45.864	.000	2.110
Race (comparison group is other/mixed)			49.660	.000	
White	0.711	0.243	8.585	.003	2.036
Black	−0.046	0.374	0.015	.901	0.955
Asian	−0.487	0.304	2.567	.109	0.614
Marital (comparison group is never married)			18.704	.002	
Married	0.180	0.134	1.824	.177	1.198
Cohabiting	−0.342	0.168	4.172	.041	0.710
Divorced	0.169	0.216	0.613	.434	1.184
Separated	−1.038	0.374	7.717	.005	0.354
Widowed	0.332	0.385	0.744	.388	1.394
Political ideology	0.242	0.051	22.800	.000	1.274
Education	0.259	0.035	55.542	.000	1.296
Income	0.026	0.025	1.123	.289	1.027
Constant	−2.855	0.355	64.685	.000	0.058
−2 Log likelihood					2,550.027
Cox and Snell R Square					0.106
Nagelkerke R Square					0.167

each of the independent variables—while controlling for all the other variables in the analysis—on changing the odds of someone identifying as an atheist relative to a theist (Table 12.1) or a New Atheist relative to other atheists (Table 12.2). If the number is 1.0, that means that variable does not increase or decrease the odds. Numbers below 1.0 indicate that variable reduces the odds and numbers over 1.0 indicate that variable increases the odds. This is a relatively straightforward interpretation with interval-like variables. For instance, in Table 12.1, the odds of identifying as an atheist go down with age (Exp(B) = .994, $p < .001$), with every additional year reducing the odds a little bit more, whereas the odds of identifying as an atheist go up with education (Exp(B) = 1.208, $p < .001$). However, three of the variables included in the equation—race, marital status, and party identification—are nominal variables. Due to the equations used to calculate logistic regression, one of the groups from each of those variables has to be left out of the equation. The interpretation then becomes more complex. The category that is left out of the equation becomes the reference category or comparison group, and the categories that are included in the equation are relative to the comparison group. Thus, the influence of race on the odds of someone not believing in a god versus believing in a god or higher power in Table 12.1 are relative to the racial group "other/mixed," which is not included. In other words, whites are significantly more likely to not believe in a god or higher power relative to those of other/mixed racial identities (Exp(B) = 1.890, $p < .001$). The second column of primary interest is the column headed with "Sig.", which indicates whether the relationship between that specific

independent variable and the dependent variable is statistically significant, or unlikely to be due to chance. Values below .05 are typically considered significant.

Table 12.1 indicates that age is a significant predictor of being an atheist versus a theist. Older Americans are significantly more likely to believe in a god. The strongest predictor of atheism is gender—males are 2.63 times as likely to not believe in a god as are females. Whites and Asians are significantly more likely to not believe in a god relative to those of other/mixed races; blacks are significantly less likely. Relative to those who have never married, all of the other marital status groups are significantly more likely to believe in a god. Relative to those who belong to another party, only Republicans are significantly less likely to be atheists. The more liberal your political ideology, the less likely you are to believe in a god or higher power. And both higher income and higher education significantly reduce the odds of believing in a god or higher power. Despite the many significant independent variables, the amount of variation explained is quite low (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .166$).

Table 12.2 examines the variables that influence the odds of exhibiting the characteristics of a New Atheist as compared with those atheists who do not exhibit such characteristics—i.e., other atheists. Age significantly increases the odds of being a New Atheist, as does being male, which is, once again, the strongest predictor of New Atheism (increasing the odds 2.11 times). Relative to those of other/mixed races, only whites are significantly more likely to identify as New Atheists. Only separated individuals have significantly lower odds of being New Atheists relative to those who have never married. Political party identification was not included in this regression due to issues of multi-collinearity, but political ideology exhibits the pattern one might expect—as political ideology grows more liberal the odds of being a New Atheist increase. Higher educational attainment is also a significant predictor of New Atheism, but income is not.

12.3   Conclusion

The recent wave of atheist activism starting around 2004 has resulted in a new subgroup within the broader atheist community. Some atheists now identify as "New Atheists." According to members of this group, New Atheists are described as having three core characteristics: a rejection of the supernatural, reliance on science instead of faith, and a critical attitude toward religion. To date, a limited amount of research, all of which has been qualitative in orientation, has examined some aspects of the New Atheist movement (Cimino and Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012). But no research has attempted to quantify the New Atheists, either by trying to capture their percentage of the American population or describe their demographics. In this chapter, I attempted to do just that, drawing upon the one dataset, the US Religious Landscape Survey, which contains sufficient numbers of atheists and the questions necessary to distinguish between atheists.

The majority of atheists in the US, as determined by reporting not believing in a god or higher power, exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists—somewhere

between 70 % and 80 %. This suggests somewhere on the order of 13 to 16 million Americans exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists outlined above. Not all of those individuals will identify as New Atheists, but they share the beliefs and values of New Atheists.

These individuals, whom I refer to as New Atheists for parsimony in describing them, are younger than the average members of most other religious groups, but are older than other atheists and the non-religious in general. New Atheists are very likely to be male; in fact, gender is the strongest predictor of identifying as both an atheist and a New Atheist. New Atheists are particularly likely to be white and never married. Politically, New Atheists are likely to identify as independents, but they are more liberal than any other (non)religious group in the US, including Jews. New Atheists are quite wealthy and very well-educated.

There is a substantial body of research on religious vitality that discusses the ideal characteristics of congregations that portend future growth. Congregations with many young, affluent, highly educated, male members are particularly likely to grow (Miller et al. 2001; McKinney and Hoge 1983; Roozen 2009). It remains to be seen whether these characteristics will lead to growth for the non-religious and atheists, but it seems likely given that the fastest growing "religious" group in the US today is the non-religious. New Atheists already outnumber Jews and Mormons, combined. How large they will grow remains to be seen, but the future for New Atheism looks bright.

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