

“AN ALIEN IN A CHRISTIAN WORLD”: INTOLERANCE, COPING, AND
NEGOTIATING IDENTITY AMONG ATHEISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

By

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be an atheist? Most scholarly works that focus on atheism in the contemporary United States answer this question by studying how people come to not believe in a god. This study however is not concerned with that type of question, but rather examines atheism in a different sense by asking other questions. How does someone make the decision to claim this identity? How does that identity influence someone's life? How do atheists negotiate their minority status? While the label "atheist" can be imposed from the outside on anyone who does not profess belief in a god, and philosophically speaking this would be correct, not everyone who lacks belief in a god chooses to claim and construct an atheist identity for themselves. Choosing to label oneself as an atheist in interaction with others entails more than a simple description of beliefs. Choosing to self-describe as an atheist in the contemporary United States means not believing in a god *and* actively creating an identity which entails labeling oneself as a minority, negotiating minority status, dealing with discrimination and intolerance, and situating yourself in the American religious landscape that stereotypes atheists so negatively that you are aligned with the "most hated minority in America."¹

Religious Intolerance in America

To begin to understand intolerance toward atheists, we must first examine the American religious context. Beyond the glorified image of the American "melting pot" lies the grim reality of intolerance. Religious intolerance in particular has plagued the history of the United States. While Americans technically have freedom of religion, this

¹ News coverage and various other responses to "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society" (Egdell, Penny, Douglass Hartman, and Joseph Gerteis, *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006)) used variations on the label "most hated minority in America."

does not obligate people to accept others' religious choices. Religious intolerance is prejudice against individuals or groups based on religious affiliation, and manifests in overt and covert hostility as well as in the many disadvantages minority members face on the societal and institutional levels and in one-on-one encounters.² Examples of religious intolerance in American history abound, from exclusion and isolation to stereotyping and scapegoating to violence and murder, and everything in between. This study of atheists in America provides one more example of religious intolerance in the United States. However, the major difference is that this group experiences persecution not for aligning with a particular set of religious creeds and practices but because they construct their identity in opposition to those who do align with religious creeds and practices.

America has often been described as particularly religious. The fact that the vast majority of people in the United States (approximately 83 percent)³ claim a religious affiliation definitely contributes to the feeling of exclusion atheists report. America has also been described not simply as quantitatively more religious but also qualitatively more religious. Some have attempted to describe the American religious climate through negotiating the term "civil religion," which is hard to define and even harder to assess. The term originally belongs to Jean-Jacques Rousseau but was first popularized in the American religious context in Robert Bellah's 1967 essay "Civil Religion in America." He writes, "Civil religion is at its best a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in...the experiences of the American people." He goes on to declare that God has been the clear central symbol, but myriad other symbols,

² "What is Intolerance?" Portraits of Hate, Lessons of Hope website, <http://www.fightingreligiousintolerance.org/user-guide/what-is-intolerance>.

³ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U. S. Religious Landscape Survey," 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations>.

rituals, and biblical archetypes also play a role.⁴ Bellah demonstrates that most people in the United States share common religious characteristics, which are not exclusively Christian but emerge mainly from that tradition. Since Bellah, “civil religion” has been variously defined to include many thoughts about America’s special relationship with God from the founding of the country to present day, including ideas such as divine providence, a “city on a hill,” a new Israel, “a righteous empire,” a moral leader in the world, and God’s chosen people.⁵ “Civil religion,” it seems, is made up of biblical themes, narratives, and symbols blended with American nationalist themes, narratives, and symbols, and the resulting amalgamation is interpreted through mainstream Christian values.⁶ These values have been institutionalized since they are expressed in America’s founding documents, in the religious rhetoric of American political figures, and in what many people believe it means to be an American.

Because of these trends, belief in God has become a social norm.⁷ The symbol of God exerts such power because it can be interpreted in so many ways. There is only tacit agreement on an approximate meaning, so the task of specific interpretation falls on the individual who can hear “God” as something meaningful and positive to them. Since people can interpret this sign in any way they want, it is easy for most Americans to feel comfortable with its use in public discourse. This makes God a potent and effective

⁴ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 12, 15.

⁵ Bryan F. LeBeau, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O’Hair* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 10-11.

⁶ John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 19, 28.

⁷ Kevin J. Christiano, William H. Swatos, Jr., and Peter Kivisto, *Sociology of Religion: Contemporary Developments* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002), 69-70.

symbol.⁸ For example, references to God in political rhetoric often serve a unifying function, because they perpetuate a vague Judeo-Christian religiosity and help political leaders convey their esteem for religious belief, just like the “average American.”⁹ Thus, we can see how Americans who believe in God resonate with such social and political discourse. However, references to God exclude atheists since they do not relate to this symbol that connects most Americans, and they are left out of this ideological camaraderie.

Another way to see how minority religions in America are excluded is to consider the narratives of freedom many of us are taught as children. Textbook narratives of American history construct a powerful American identity. Because Protestants have been the numerical majority and because they have exerted the most power throughout the history of the United States, their story is often presented as the American story. The repetition of histories in which Protestants are the central and righteous figures is a powerful way of asserting cultural dominance.¹⁰ This Protestant bias means that many people who belong to minority religions are left out of histories or relegated to playing a supporting role, which only emphasizes Protestant glory and dominance. Exclusion from the narrative of American religious history means being left out in more immediate and concrete ways as well.¹¹ By excluding minority groups from historical narratives, their

⁸ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press), 183-184.

⁹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 244.

¹⁰ J. Hillis Miller, “Narrative,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 72.

¹¹ Thomas A. Tweed, “Introduction: Narrating U.S. Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1997), 2, 13.

existence and their struggles are not recognized. Minority groups and the intolerance they face do not fit into the grand celebrations of religious liberty that many American narratives present. This can give the misleading impression that instances of religious intolerance in the United States are aberrant phenomena. When problems are obscured and people do not comprehend the pervasive reality of religious intolerance in the United States, people are more likely to show apathy toward protecting religious freedom.¹²

Religious intolerance is and has been a major problem in American history. Majority groups, particularly Protestants throughout the history of religion in the United States, have often acted intolerantly to protect their dominant position and to reinforce the boundary between “us” and “them,” between insider and outsider. This helps the majority construct their identity as well as keeping the minority in a disadvantaged position. This kind of boundary construction is a crucial part of the process of defining individual and group identities. Dominant religious groups understandably fear losing their power and privilege in society.¹³ By defining who fits in the dominant group and who does not, members of the majority construct their identity and seek to control those around them. One of the most common ways in which this “dialectic of inclusion and exclusion”¹⁴ has been employed in the United States is by defining who is and who is not an American – a frequent component of religious intolerance.

¹² John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal. Introduction to *Religious Intolerance in the United States: A Documentary History*. (Unpublished Manuscript).

¹³ John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal. Conclusion to *Religious Intolerance in the United States: A Documentary History*. (Unpublished Manuscript).

¹⁴ Robert. N. Bellah, “Conclusion: Competing Visions of the Role of Religion in American Society” in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, ed. Robert N. Bellah and Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 219.

“Un-American-ness” has been a device used against almost every religious minority in United States history to create an “us” versus “them” mentality, even pertaining to religions that started in America, such as Mormonism. Anti-Semites claim that Jews are foreigners who are plotting to take over the United States. People fear that Catholics are not truly American because they answer to a foreign Pope. In addition, Catholicism’s celibate priesthood is perceived as sexually deviant and challenges the idea of the traditional American family. Asian religions are considered too strange and exotic to ever fit into mainstream American society, and they are often criticized for idolatry. Most recently, Islam has faced persecution because of some foreign Islamic groups’ violent actions and rhetoric against America. All of these groups claim a god or gods, but it has certainly not freed them from persecution in the United States, demonstrating that “One Nation Under God” often refers to a Protestant conception of God, religion, and America. Minority religious groups are persecuted for their deviant beliefs and their rejection of mainstream mores.¹⁵ Mainline Protestantism has come to connote “normal” while other religious alternatives are deemed strange and un-American.¹⁶

Claims of “un-American-ness” against atheists manifested particularly vehemently during the Cold War. The rhetoric of public figures presented the war as not only a battle between two nations, but a battle between atheism and Christianity.¹⁷ As President for most of the 1950s, Dwight D. Eisenhower both reflected and perpetuated

¹⁵ Khyati Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America’s Sacred Ground* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 121.

¹⁶ R. Lawrence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ Stephen Bates, “‘Godless Communism’ and Its Legacies,” *Society* 41, no. 3 (March-April 2004): 30.

the climate of heightened religiosity during the beginning of the Cold War.¹⁸ President Eisenhower's views of the Christian faith supported his ideas about America's role in the world. He declared that God was on America's side in the fight against the USSR, and he proclaimed that democracy is "a political expression of deep and abiding religion." He made frequent statements about the link between America and Christianity in the fight against "godless Communism."¹⁹ Americans were labeled "humble servants of a proud ideal" in the midst of a "crusade."²⁰ He echoed similar sentiments in a 1955 address to the American Legion:

Without God, there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first – the most basic – expression of Americanism.²¹

While Eisenhower spoke the most of any president about the dangers of atheistic Communism, President Ronald Reagan brought back some of the same rhetoric when he was in office. In March of 1981, President Reagan addressed the Conservative Political Action Conference with the following words:

The Marxist vision of man without God must eventually be seen as an empty and a false faith – the second oldest in the world – first proclaimed in the Garden of Eden with whispered words of temptation: "Ye shall be as gods."²²

¹⁸ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 70.

¹⁹ J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1986), 153, 320.

²⁰ LeBeau, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair*, 236-237.

²¹ Dwight D. Eisenhower, Remarks Recorded for the "Back-to-God Program" of the American Legion – February 20, 1955. Dwight D. Eisenhower Memorial Commission website, <http://www.eisenhowermemorial.org/quotations/quotesbydate.htm>.

²² Betty Jean Craige, *American Patriotism in a Global Society* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 101.

The biblical reference directly depicts Communism as not just godless, but satanic. By equating Communism with Satan and equating America with God, it is no surprise that many Americans hold extremely negative opinions of atheism and that atheists are discriminated against in the United States today. This Cold War legacy of distrusting atheists lingers still.

Current websites show this intolerant legacy. For example, one website titled “Atheist Communism is Evil” reports statistics on all the deaths for which Communist countries have been responsible. The site concludes that genocide comes naturally to atheists, because “atheists are evil.”²³ Another website also reports instances of mass murder under atheistic Communism to counter atheists who point out that Christianity has been responsible for many deaths throughout history, such as those caused by inquisitions and crusades. The “Militant Atheism Exposed” website claims that atheists “conveniently fail to mention the tens of millions killed by atheist-communists throughout the past century.”²⁴ While rhetoric associating Communism with atheism is still present, most anti-atheism intolerance on the internet today focuses on condemning atheists to hell and showing Christians that atheists are dangerous because of their lack of morality. One such website claims that Satan was the first atheist, and that atheists today are the “closed-minded subjects of Satan.”²⁵ Other sections of the “Militant Atheism Exposed” website claim that atheists have “flexible sexual morals,” “that relationships between atheists are a vortex of instability with much accompanying turmoil and mental

²³ Atheist Communism is Evil website. <http://www.geocities.com/Heartland/Hills/5742/atheistkillers.html>.

²⁴ “Militant Atheism’s Mistakes,” Militant Atheism Exposed website, http://atheismexposed.tripod.com/atheism_mistakes.htm.

²⁵ “Exposing the Atheist,” Society for the Practical Establishment and Perpetuation of the Ten Commandments website, <http://www.tencommandments.org/heathens5.shtml>.

anguish,” “they are driven by a hatred for the unborn,” and that “higher-level morality is not achievable by atheists.”²⁶ Based on this kind of incendiary writing, we see how many Americans get their negative impressions of atheists. Hit counters on some of these websites number in the millions.

About This Project

There are not many studies focused on atheists in the contemporary United States. The few that exist usually focus more on what makes someone become an atheist or what atheism means philosophically. This study attempts to add to these previous works in a different way – by studying *atheists*, not *atheism*. Because of this, my study resembles the study of minority religions in America more than it resembles some of the current work on atheism. Atheists in the United States face discrimination based on their beliefs much like Hindus, Muslims, or Mormons might. Like minority religions, atheism poses a perceived threat to the dominant Christian culture. Also like minority religions, atheism is often accused of promoting immoral behavior because their ideas do not match up with dominant Christian values. Atheists, like other minorities, take refuge in their communities because they are a safe place away from the dominant culture that persecutes them. For most religious minorities, boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are drawn by the religious majority as well as by the minority group, and this emphasis on difference serves the important function of identification, showing people who they are by showing them who they are not.

Perhaps the biggest difference between atheist communities and minority religious groups is that atheists often receive harsher treatment in today’s society, and this discrimination often goes unnoticed. It seems that tolerance toward different religions has

²⁶ Militant Atheism Exposed website, <http://atheismexposed.tripod.com/>.

gradually become more expected, and as a result has brought more religious “outsiders” into the fold of acceptability and American-ness. A general movement from Protestant, to Christian, to Judeo-Christian, to Abrahamic faiths, to all people of faith as “One Nation Under God,” has let everyone else in, at least ideologically. However, the increased acceptance of religious diversity does not extend to the non-religious.²⁷ As we will see, atheists face shocking levels of intolerance despite the supposed acceptance of pluralism in America.

Literature to date that does discuss atheists in the contemporary United States usually gives a one-sided look at these individuals and groups. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith’s article “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism,” for example, concludes that people join non-theist groups because they need to unite in activism.²⁸ As we will see in this project, however, there are many reasons people join atheist groups, and the majority join for social and personal reasons that have little to do with activism. Bridget Fitzgerald’s “Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity” is on the other side of the spectrum and deals with atheists only as individuals, not in groups.²⁹ My motivation for this project was to synthesize these approaches, since group activity and personal negotiation of identity are both crucial for getting an in-depth look at what it means to be an atheist in the United States. Both of these works are valuable resources, but in my project I wish to take both of their viewpoints together to consider how atheists deal with

²⁷ Penny Egdell, Douglass Hartman, and Joseph Gerteis, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006): 211, 214.

²⁸ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism,” *Sociology of Religion* 68, vol. 4 (2007).

²⁹ Bridget Fitzgerald, “Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 2003).

their minority identities as individuals and how atheist groups try to engage with society at large.

By taking this two-sided approach, we see how atheist communities serve crucial functions for their members. By aligning with a group, atheists create a social space in which to narrate their identities as atheists by drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Atheists, cognizant of these symbolic boundaries, then choose where and when to avoid emphasizing these demarcations in their personal lives. Since this minority status is not visible, like it would be for an ethnic minority, atheists have the power as individuals to choose when to disclose this stigmatized minority status. Negotiation of their identities in this way influences micro-level concerns, such as whether or not to disclose their atheism in a one-on-one situation, and macro-level concerns, such as whether or not to present oneself as an atheist to society by engaging in activities as a member of the atheist community.

The goal of this project is to situate atheists in the context of religious intolerance in America through their own voices, and to provide a rich picture of what it means to be part of this minority. We will examine how they see their place in American society, how they negotiate their identities and seek refuge in atheist communities to deal with their minority status, and how they address macro-level concerns about intolerance by choosing how they want to portray atheism to society at large. While this study started by looking for people who claimed any type of non-theist identifier, all of my respondents claimed the term atheist and/or were part of a group that used the term atheist, so “atheist” serves as the general term I use to refer to them and their communities.

Methods

The data for this project was collected through twenty-six interviews and six participant observation experiences. Three different data collection methods were used for redundancy, or “triangulation,” meaning that multiple sources confirm or dispute each other giving a more complete picture of the group studied.³⁰ This project uses participant observation, informal interviewing, and formal interviewing. By asking my respondents in one-on-one interviews about their group and what they get out of it, I checked that information by actually observing the group, and by asking the members about what the typical meet-up looks like, I checked whether or not what I attended was ordinary.

Following the advice that ethnographers “gather most of their data through participant observation and many casual, friendly conversations,” I interacted with members at group meet-ups to get most of my information.³¹ While trying to keep these conversations informal, I also tried to balance ethical concerns like explaining my project goals to my respondents.³² Most of my data has come from participant observation, and I have found that interviews back up that data.

The participant observation approach allowed me to witness atheist meet-ups. Most group gatherings I attended were referred to as “meet-ups,” not meetings. One respondent speculated that the name “meet-up” conveyed the informal environment, and using the term “meeting” would have made their gathering sound too planned and formal. Also, many of these groups are organized through meetup.com, so the term is probably

³⁰ Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 1999), 131.

³¹ James P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1979), 58.

³² *Ibid.*, 59.

borrowed from this website. Having no prior experience with these groups, I found out how a meet-up is organized, what is discussed, how members participate, and what kinds of emotional reactions meet-ups can evoke. This approach allowed me to view group members interacting normally. Since one of my main goals was to find out what people get out of being in these groups, observing community behavior showed me what such interaction is like. Interviewing about this topic then allowed my respondents to elaborate on what these interactions mean to them, and it helped to know what they were talking about having seen it first hand. I was also able to observe speech in which the members defined themselves. I collected data about what terms are most used among a set of terms that can all be used to describe non-theists (atheist, agnostic, freethinker, bright, secular humanist). Since some of these terms are used negatively by outsiders, I was able to observe the active reappropriation and reinterpretation of these terms. I also observed how speech defined their group in opposition to society as a whole or to a specific outside group. The limitations to this method were mostly logistical: by not having the time to undertake a longer study and attend several meet-ups, I may have missed out on noticing some recurring themes.

The informal interview approach allowed me to interact with group members casually to get their reactions to the meet-ups. The informal approach also allowed people to tell me what they think without being prompted. This way I saw how they reacted to meet-ups, what they thought was important about the meet-up to discuss, and how members felt about the meet-up as a whole or about particular parts. Though this approach seeks a more natural conversation with members, the biggest limitation to this

method is that a truly natural conversation was impossible given my status as a researcher, and thus an outsider.

The formal interview approach allowed me to obtain data on specific topics. I inquired about more personal feelings and stories without worrying about the influence of a respondent's peers. By asking specific questions, I was able to compare different members' responses and notice patterns in the data. This also provided in-depth, qualitative information. By asking the subjects to respond to open-ended questions about themselves, they told me about what they find relevant. This is the only method where I could collect personal stories verbatim. It is also the only method where I could inquire comprehensively about feelings and beliefs in relation to the meet-ups and the community, their status as atheists, reasons they use different terms for self-identification, and whether or not they agree with group identifiers. I used this information in comparison with data from meet-ups to find out how they speak similarly and differently in these two contexts. While there were topics and questions I knew I wanted to cover, I also wanted to find out what was important to members, so I asked my respondents at the end of formal interviews what parts of their lives as atheists they thought were important to discuss that we did not already cover and what facts or topics they thought were important for understanding them.³³ Since I also collected a lot of my data through participant observation at meet-ups, I listened to the topics they brought up for discussion and then asked follow-up questions to the individuals based on these topics. The limitations of this method were primarily that subjects could present me with whatever they wanted. Luckily, I had good respondents who, for the most part, did answer the

³³ Ibid., 136.

questions I presented while also presenting me with new topics and ideas. While I chose three different methods for data collection, during the actual process, the three techniques blended together so I obtained quality individual data from all methods.³⁴

Ethical Considerations

All of my respondents' names have been replaced with pseudonyms for this study. This way, I am ensuring their safety and anonymity. Participants were aware of my status as a researcher and gave verbal informed consent before I collected any information. This study was approved by and was conducted in full compliance with the guidelines presented by the Institutional Review Board of Wake Forest University.

³⁴ LeCompte and Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research*, 128-129.

CHAPTER I

“BEING AN ATHEIST IN AMERICA ISN’T EASY”:

INTOLERANCE TOWARD ATHEISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Introduction

“Being an atheist in America isn’t easy.” “I’m an alien in a Christian world...There’s so few places in a Christian nation where you can go and feel ok.” “I’d say we’re kind of the outcasts.” “It’s always the atheist that’s the bad guy.” These are the words of atheists describing their experiences and their views of being a minority in the United States. Throughout my interviews with them, every one of my respondents expressed how they feel separated from the rest of society in some way, and that being an atheist in the United States means being a stigmatized minority. This chapter explores America from an atheist’s perspective. It perhaps sounds strange to phrase it this way, because why would an atheist view America differently from most other people? In many ways they do not. Many of my respondents expressed how atheists are normal, nice, law-abiding citizens, and they should not be viewed differently from other Americans. However, at the same time, dominant society does not view them in these ways, leading many of my respondents to express feelings of exclusion, discomfort, and alienation, and to share stories of intolerance.

Impressions of Exclusion

Atheism, it seems, has become a very divisive term. Merely invoking the word has caused many people pain, which ranges from exclusion or discomfort to life-changing ramifications. While it is inadvisable to generalize about what the “typical

atheist” in the United States experiences, one generalization is easy to make: all of my respondents expressed feelings of exclusion from American society at large. Some of my respondents shared their sense of not belonging and related this feeling to the American landscape in general. Many shared that since American culture is so full of references to God, they are reminded everyday that they do not fit into this norm. Many of my respondents are aware not only of ways in which they feel like they are a minority, but they also noted the statistics concerning religious belief in America and how atheists stacked up. For example, Steven shared, “There have been recent studies that show we are the least trusted group in America.” He was most likely referring to a 2006 study published in the *American Sociological Review* which showed that people viewed atheists as the group “least likely to share their vision of American society” among other minority groups, as well as eliciting the highest numbers when people were asked if they would disapprove of their child marrying someone in this minority.³⁵ Studies like this resonate with the words of my respondents who described that they feel unaccepted.

Knowledgeable of the facts, like Steven, Monica referenced a different study regarding the number of non-believers in America. The results gave her hope. She found a larger number of people who claimed to be unaffiliated with a particular religion than she expected and stated:

I think we’re getting closer to having a part...up until pretty recently we were pretty much an invisible minority, until the Pew came out in ’06. Now we know that there are 16.1 percent of people who are not religious...now that people are realizing that ...people can realize that they’re not the only one who doesn’t believe.

³⁵ Penny Egdell, Douglass Hartman, and Joseph Gerteis, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006): 212.

Monica was referencing the 2007 Pew Forum's "United States Religious Landscape Survey," which reported that 16.1 percent of Americans do not affiliate with a religion. However, what she failed to note was that only 1.6 percent of unaffiliated people identified as atheist. In fact, out of the 12.1 percent who claimed to be "nothing in particular," only 6.3 percent declared themselves as "secular unaffiliated," while 5.8 percent reported "religious unaffiliated."³⁶

Despite Monica's optimism, she also voiced many problems facing atheists. She continued:

We're like the last minority it's ok to discriminate against. You can still get away with saying bad things about an atheist...There's this fable about atheists that we're terrible...we're people just like everyone else, most of the time we're good people!

Others shared Monica's combination of optimism and discouragement. David explained, "I think it's improving. You don't change these things overnight. People have been taught that we're horrible for centuries." Other respondents similarly expressed that Americans usually grew up with negative impressions of atheists. Teresa, who had been raised religious and had later worked at a church, said that for her, part of being raised religious was having a horrific impression of atheists: "You know, growing up, atheists were evil!...uncompassionate, bad people."

However, more than stereotypes and a vague sense of unease reinforced my respondents' sense of being outsiders in American society. For example, James told me about a feature on the local news that profiled an atheist family. The story conveyed shock and amazement at their normalcy. James may have been referring to a story run on CBS2 Chicago News in which the Low family spoke about raising their two children in

³⁶ The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U. S. Religious Landscape Survey," 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>.

an atheist home. Anchor Jim Williams reported, “The numbers [of atheists] might surprise you in a country with such a strong religious tradition.”³⁷ There is nothing spectacular about this family except that they are atheists, so making their family into a news story conveys the abnormality of atheism. Also referencing the news, Katie shared how the election coverage on Fox News had given her the impression that “they don’t consider our [atheists’] worldview legitimate enough to be talked about publicly...they want us to stay in the closet.” When atheists are either presented as an anomaly or as a problem, news coverage can add to atheists’ feelings of not fitting into mainstream American society.

Similarly addressing feelings of exclusion, some of my respondents expounded dishearteningly on how some Americans believe atheism to be in contradiction with patriotism. James told me, “I did take offense when George H. W. Bush said that atheists should not be considered patriots.” He was referring to a 1987 statement: when asked “Surely you recognize the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists?” President Bush responded, “No, I don’t know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.”³⁸ Steven summed up his view of this problem: “We are the outsiders who are told to shut up and get out of the country all the time.” As we saw in the introduction, many Americans view the United States as a Christian country. Atheists have drastically smaller numbers than Christians in the United States, but the rhetoric connecting American-ness and belief in God amplifies Christians’ views of atheism as a threat and

³⁷ Jim Williams, “Atheists An Increasingly Outspoken Minority,” CBS2 Chicago News, February 17, 2008. <http://cbs2chicago.com/specialreports/atheist.next.door.2.656500.html>.

³⁸ Quoted in Bridget Fitzgerald, “Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 2003), 28.

intensifies atheists' feelings of abnormality more so than just statistically being a minority group.

My respondents also expressed how surprised people could be when their negative expectations of atheists were not met. Benjamin told me how a friend of his was baffled at knowing an atheist who was moral. After having a conversation about how Benjamin chose to be vegetarian for ethical reasons, his friend asked him how he could be so moral if he was an atheist. Teresa had experienced something similar: "I think it surprises them that such a good person would be an atheist." She went on to describe how some people would be so shocked just to have met an atheist: "If I say the word 'atheist' to some people, their eyes get wide and they gasp... 'you don't believe in God?'" Teresa also explained how there is a "discriminatory attitude toward atheists in general in this country." My other respondents concurred.

Accounts of Intolerance

The above connections my respondents made between their minority status and the American atmosphere are mild compared to the ways other atheists have been treated. Their vague sense of not belonging that comes from sources such as the media and public officials is confirmed by the personal experiences many atheists have. Discrimination stories from my respondents varied from subtle disapproval and alienation to outright intolerance. One example of the latter was shared by Harold. He started a local atheist meet-up group which met at a restaurant for dinner once a month. When the restaurant owner found out what type of group they were, "he ended up calling the place where I was working as well as my home and said that we couldn't meet there anymore." When group members arrived, the restaurant owner did not let them in and said that he would

sue them because “he couldn’t have his restaurant associated with that word [atheism].” Because the restaurant owner called Harold’s place of employment, his boss found out he was an atheist with disastrous results: “I got fired that day.”

This was not the only example of a conflict at work. Patrick, a business owner, said, “I have lost some [clients]...because they found out I was an atheist.” Similarly, Stephanie explained a conflict that arose from her job teaching psychology that ended up affecting her family:

I taught evolution in the early chapters of psychology, which was in the text, it wasn’t me. Students would attack me because...they were fundamentalist and they didn’t want me to teach it...people would attack my daughters...One boy in the sixth grade came up and said to my daughter, “Your mother’s an atheist! She doesn’t believe in God!”

Stephanie ended up moving her family out of that community to find one that was more accepting of her atheism and teaching evolution.

Discriminatory responses came from other types of interactions as well. Katie told me about Camp Quest, which is a summer camp for atheist and humanist children. The organization rented a campground owned by Baptists. When the owners found out who the camp was for, they started leaving proselytizing pamphlets in the children’s cabins. The situation escalated until Camp Quest was actually denied the right to hold their camp there. Since it was illegal to deny campground rental access based on religion, it seemed at first that there was nothing the religious owners could do, but the Baptists who owned the camp lobbied the local government to draw up a legal document, which stated that they did not have to rent to “homosexuals, Satanists, or atheists,” and Camp Quest was forced to relocate.

Another painful story came from Eric. The last thing the mother of his son told him was that she would not allow him to talk to their son about religion and turn him away from it. Eric is convinced that his atheism constitutes the main reason she cut off contact, and he now does not know where his son is. While not every atheist with whom I spoke had experienced this degree of intolerance, it seems that they always knew of someone who had, such as Collin who said he had not experienced discrimination personally but that many people in his atheist group had shared their “horror stories.”

Above are perhaps the worst of the accounts I heard from my respondents, but there are many other forms of discrimination atheists have experienced. Steven shared that his atheist meet-up website gets hate mail and that he knows “dozens of stories of atheists being discriminated against and harassed, even losing their jobs and homes. An atheist woman I know even got a death threat.” Chris described how he has faced numerous instances of discrimination, mainly people telling him that he is going to hell, which he explained is sometimes a joke but more often is meant sincerely. Children also paid the price for their parents’ lack of belief. Stephanie’s daughter, for example, faced discrimination: “One little girl when she was in kindergarten said, ‘My mother said I can’t play with you because you don’t go to church.’” Monica, who had experienced discrimination one-on-one, such as a stranger yelling at her on a public bus, also experienced discrimination while doing activities with her atheist group: “We used to do street fairs, and a lot of people would, like strangers, would sneer and spout off Bible quotes. When we had our secular winter display, it was vandalized four times last year.” Anthony also experienced discrimination while working with his atheist group. They decided to collect canned goods for a food drive, but they had a hard time finding an

organization that was willing to accept donations from atheists. Another group discrimination account came from Patrick, who said that when he went to a national Atheist Alliance convention, there was a high level of security “all because religious people had threatened to blow us up.”

A lot of the discrimination my respondents have faced does not take the form of a direct attack, but as Steven summed up, “I tell someone I’m an atheist and...they look at me like I pissed on their mom’s grave.” He also reported that he gets awkward comments from strangers, for example, “I’ll buy an atheist book or skeptical magazine and the checkout person gives me a ‘What’s this? Atheist? Good luck with that buddy!’ and I get a mean look.” Doug received some of the same negative attention, especially people constantly telling him that they would pray for him because he is an atheist, but at the same time ignoring him – “an ostracism kind of thing I guess.” Or like Katie, who when off-handedly asked “Do you believe in God?” she replied “No, I’m an atheist.” to which she was told “Oh, that’s sad.” From my respondents’ experiences, we can see how many people are quick to offer a negative comment, but aside from this initial and powerful negative assessment, people tend to ignore and dismiss someone who they know is an atheist and thereby perpetuate a climate that is inhospitable to atheists.

From many of these discrimination accounts, we see how people who disapprove of atheism can be very quick to draw an exclusionary boundary between themselves and atheists. Due to the stigmatization of atheism in the past and in the present, people who show intolerance toward atheists reveal how they have been conditioned to exclude the atheist minority. By asserting their opposition to atheists, they claim a majority identity for themselves as “religious,” which is considered a positive identifier by many

Americans. In this case, when someone makes negative comments toward an atheist but goes no further, which is the case for the majority of intolerant acts reported by my respondents, it seems that the intolerant person's main concern is defining themselves by announcing their distance from atheism. This need to distance oneself from atheism obviously contributes to my respondents' feelings of exclusion and isolation in American society.

Location and Discrimination

Everyone with whom I spoke was not surprised when I inquired about discrimination. They had either been through it themselves or knew someone who had, except for the members at the Center for Inquiry meet-up I attended in Chicago, Illinois. When I asked a group of four at this Chicago meet-up if they had ever experienced discrimination, they looked puzzled and replied that they had not. This was my first clue that the treatment of atheists depends a lot on where one lives. Further fieldwork confirmed the importance of geography. Many of my respondents reported that geography was a significant factor in how one would be treated as an atheist. The most common type of response indicated that being an atheist was hardest in the South. This distinction was brought out in a few different ways. For example, some made simple overt statements characterizing the South as more religious and therefore more discriminatory, such as Katie talking about Camp Quest, where she said that the atheist and humanist children from the South felt particularly "marginalized." David, who has always lived in the Northeast, talked about how he viewed different regions in the United States: "I generally think the West coast is more accepting and the Northeast...generally the South is less accepting." Collin, who has always lived in the South, thought that

atheists faced discrimination “everywhere but especially in the South.” Teresa also characterized the South as less accepting. She qualified her claim by stating, “it depends on where in the South I am,” but added that “there’s a lot of Christians” everywhere in the South signaling that the more Christian-dominant an area is, the less accepting of atheism.

Though it seems like many people held similar conceptions no matter where they had or had not lived, others were able to draw out these contrasts because they had felt more or less accepted living in different places. Steven, for example, explained how he noticed a change when he moved:

It’s easier in the Northeast. Being from the South, I can say there is a lot less religion up here. My wife says the same thing when we visit North Carolina: she’s amazed at all of the religious billboards and people praying every five minutes.

The contrast seemed more abrupt, though, for people who moved from the North to the South. Anthony moved from the Midwest to the “Bible Belt” and was not prepared for the “flowery, outward” nature of its religiosity. Similarly, Elise was raised in New Jersey, where she says religion was never “an issue.” When she moved to North Carolina, she was surprised to find people talking about religion “all the time” and asking her where she went to church. People’s conceptions of regional differences also emerged from how they qualified others’ actions. Mark, for example, talked about how his fiancée’s family did not approve of his atheism, but he noted that perhaps that was to be expected since her family lived in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Similarly, Jeffery referenced “Southernness” as the cause of why some of his extended family did not accept him.

Perhaps the biggest indicator of all, however, was not the ways in which people verbalized acceptance and rejection by region, but how individuals from different regions

responded to questions about discrimination and fitting in. Every person affiliated with an atheist group in the South was quick to say that they or someone they knew had faced specific instances of discrimination and that they did not feel like they were accepted in most environments. Respondents affiliated with groups from the Northeast or northern Midwest, however, were usually not as quick to think of how they or people they knew had faced discrimination. There were certainly stories from these respondents concerning discrimination or intolerance, but they, on average, had fewer discrimination stories to share, were more likely to be out about their atheism, and had more positive comments about fitting in with people outside of their atheist groups. Patrick, for instance, said, “There’s a lot of nonbelievers in Rhode Island...The Northeast is definitely a liberal community...I bump into people all the time who are atheists...I think people are more accepting about it up here.” Unlike Alice and Amber (Southerners), mentioned above, who hide their atheism from religious co-workers, Ethan, a Northerner, does not feel uncomfortable being out as an atheist at work because there are other non-believers there.

My respondents are not unique in attributing a specifically religious character to the South. The Bible Belt is more religiously homogeneous than the rest of the United States.³⁹ Southerners attend more religious services, are more likely to rank religion as important in their lives, to believe in God, and to endorse creationism. Even the “unchurched” in the South are more likely to confess supernatural beliefs.⁴⁰ The percentage of Southerners who claim no religious affiliation is the lowest of any region,

³⁹ Thomas A. Tweed, “Our Lady of Guadeloupe Visits the Confederate Memorial: Latino and Asian Religions in the South,” in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities, and Contexts*, ed. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 139.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

and it is an area dominated by forms of Protestant Christianity.⁴¹ The South, of course, does contain many minorities like the rest of the United States, but my respondents and scholars have both pointed to the more religious, specifically Protestant, nature of the southern states.

However, it is difficult to pin down exactly how the South is more religious and differently religious. The Pew Forum's "United States Religious Landscape Survey" shows that the South boasts the highest percentages of all types of Protestants.⁴² This study tells us that statistically the South is more Protestant, but that does not help explain the qualitative differences between the South and other regions of the United States. Other ethnographies can help here, because many have shown how other religions respond to the Protestant-dominant Southern culture. Statistics reveal, for example, that more Jews in the South are affiliated with congregations than in other regions, and some have borrowed from the Protestant culture to fit in with normative Christianity by having services on Sunday instead of Saturday.⁴³ Similarly, a Vietnamese Buddhist congregation in Raleigh, North Carolina gathers for services every Sunday morning, whereas in Vietnam they would only get together twice a month and at festivals.⁴⁴ Hindus in the South are said to generally focus on a Supreme Being rather than multiple divine figures to better fit in with monotheistic Christianity, and they also often plan around the

⁴¹ Charles H. Lippy, "From Angels to Zen: Religion and Culture in the Contemporary South," in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities, and Contexts*, ed. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 124.

⁴² The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U. S. Religious Landscape Survey," 2007, <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#>.

⁴³ Mark K. Bauman, "The Flowering Interest in Southern Jewish History and Its Integration into Mainstream Society," in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities, and Contexts*, ed. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 170.

⁴⁴ Lippy, "From Angels to Zen: Religion and Culture in the Contemporary South," 130.

Christian calendar and build social halls adjoining their temples to emulate a typical Christian church.⁴⁵ Even Catholic Christians feel a need to conform and are more likely to go to mass every Sunday. Also, homilies are likely to be longer in southern Catholic churches, which makes their services more like their Protestant counterparts.⁴⁶ Another ethnography showed that Catholic respondents reported a Protestant bias that made the South “feel” Protestant both socially and religiously, because Protestants were so likely to talk about their church and their religious convictions publicly.⁴⁷ Thus, this ethnography about atheists attesting to a particularly religious South is only one example of how non-Protestant groups narrate a minority status in regard to region. My respondents, like members of other minority religious affiliations, feel excluded because of the large number of Protestants and because of the quality of Protestantism in the South – what one of my respondents referred to its “outward, flowery nature.” While minority religious groups can try to blend in by adapting their styles of worship to more closely resemble Protestant worship, this is not an option for atheists who have no such worship tradition to adapt. Instead, they face exclusion with seemingly no recourse. Also, since it seems that people in the South are more likely to make religion a topic of social conversation, being an atheist becomes more of an issue than it would in a place where people are less likely to inquire about religious beliefs in a public setting.

⁴⁵ Steven W. Ramey, “Temples and Beyond: Varieties of Hindu Experiences in the South,” in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities, and Contexts*, ed. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 209.

⁴⁶ Susan Ridgely Bales, “Sweet Tea and Rosary Beads: An Analysis of Southern Catholicism at the Millennium,” in *Religion in the Contemporary South: Changes, Continuities, and Contexts*, ed. Corrie E. Norman and Don S. Armentrout (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 196.

⁴⁷ Jon W. Anderson, “Catholic Imagination and Inflections of ‘Church’ in the Contemporary South,” in *The Culture of Bible Belt Catholics*, ed. Jon W. Anderson and William B. Friend (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 81, 96.

Region was not the only geographic factor cited as making a difference in how one would be treated; some respondents speculated that the difference had more to do with the disparity between urban and rural areas. This could also explain why the group in Chicago was a bit baffled when I asked if they had faced discrimination. Doug drew out the rural-urban distinction based on his experience. He grew up in a rural town of about 200, where his father is a farmer. He estimated that 80 to 90 percent of his high school classmates were evangelical Christians. He described his high school experiences: “I was an outcast of sorts...I could tell that it [atheism] wasn’t exactly a smiled-upon view point.” However, he has had a much more positive experience since moving to Boston: “It’s about as liberal as Kansas is conservative...Nobody really seems to have a problem with it [atheism]. People are just a lot more accepting here.”

Monica also moved from a rural area to an urban/suburban area. She rated her experiences on a scale from one to ten, one being the least discriminating toward atheism and ten being the most: “I would say around here [suburban Philadelphia] it’s a three or a four. In Philly it’s a two...In my hometown [rural Pennsylvania], like a six or a seven.” Katie echoed this idea: she moved from a relatively rural area in Ohio to Philadelphia, where she says atheists are “having a good ol’ time here.” Even Harold who has faced blatant discrimination because of his atheism does not characterize where he lives as totally unaccepting. He cited that living in the Northeast and in an urban/suburban area are both indicators that there are a lot of atheists who are open about their status as non-believers.

Three of my respondents from the Raleigh-Durham Atheists Meet-up signaled that while it is difficult to be an atheist in the South, it helps that they are located in the

Research Triangle, a relatively urban area in North Carolina named because of the three prominent research universities there (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, and Duke University). Stephanie said that perhaps atheism is more accepted there because of the universities' presence: "as it's a center for learning, it's a center for questioning as well." She moved there with her two daughters to come to a place where "there are so many educated people," as opposed to where they used to live in rural Florida, where she says the public schools taught creationism instead of evolution and the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments were displayed in her daughters' school. Collin also thought that he fared better as an atheist in the Triangle because it is a "progressive place," and he speculated that if he lived in a small southern town, his atheism would be much more of an issue. Teresa agreed with Collin that the Triangle is one of the safer places in the South to be an atheist because "people in an urban place expect that there's going to be more diversity" and that the Research Triangle is more diverse than many places in the South because of the universities.

Other respondents indicated that, to them, anywhere they had been in America was less accepting of atheism than the other countries where they had grown up. Peter said that religion in Serbia was "not so in your face so there's no need for groups like this [atheist groups]," because even though there are religious people there, they are not like religious people in America, signaling that the character of American religiosity is more public. Bethany voiced that growing up as an atheist in Ireland was "not a big deal at all." James, who grew up in England, felt similarly: "Being an atheist in England is not a big deal." He theorized that people in Western Europe are more accepting of atheism because Communism and Socialism are more common. His conjecture is interesting since

America's public revulsion toward atheism has been so linked with combating Communism since the end of World War II.⁴⁸ In England, James did not know any religious children growing up; there was "really no religious force around." He also noted that he felt "quite embarrassed" hearing Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan speaking so publicly about religion. "In England," he said, "politicians did not talk about God or religion."

Accepting and Unaccepting Groups

Just as my respondents indicated regions which are and are not accepting of atheists, they also spoke of certain groups of people who are and are not accepting. One of the communities my respondents signaled as accepting was the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgendered (LGBT) community. Anthony and Collin represented their atheist group at a gay pride festival, and they both reported that everyone seemed totally accepting of them. Monica, who has been active in the LGBT community sums up what many of my respondents expressed:

The LGBT community is very accepting of it [atheism]. I know that there are a good number in the LGBT community... I think they're very accepting because they know what it's like to be discriminated against...they don't usually discriminate against you.

The atheist group in Raleigh-Durham had even recently tried to reciprocate by attending a rally at the North Carolina Capitol to protest California's Proposition Eight, which overturned marital right for gays and lesbians. Some speculated that because LGBT community members have also experienced discrimination from religious groups, they are likely to relate to the atheist community through this common ground. Since the LGBT community has often served as a refuge for many people who sometimes feel

⁴⁸ J. Ronald Oakley, *God's Country: America in the Fifties* (New York: Dembner Books, 1986).
Bryan F. Le Beau, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

excluded from society and have faced condemnation from religious groups and people, many of my respondents characterized the LGBT community as inherently accepting of many different types of people.

The other community which many of my respondents signaled as accepting was the Unitarian Universalist (UU) Church. A few of my respondents are even members. Sam explained that he enjoys going to UU services because sermons deal with the same big issues that religions deal with, but with “no creed or dogma.” Monica said that her atheist group held an event at a UU church and there was no conflict at all. Stephanie joked that the UU church is where atheists go when they have kids. Whether my respondents belonged to a UU congregation or not, all of them who mentioned it had positive opinions about it and thought that a Unitarian Universalist was not likely to discriminate against an atheist, since one could be both, and since the Unitarian Church was the religious organization most likely to accept differing view points on religious and social issues.

While some groups were designated as accepting, conversations were more likely to address those that were not. For example, two of my respondents who are African-American shared that they felt more animosity about being an atheist from other black people than they did from white people. Eric told me that he is very open about his atheism and when he has tried to tell his black friends about his views, they have been extremely opposed. One even told him that he was a “traitor to the black race.” Ron felt similarly, remarking that African-Americans are “one of the most hyper-religious demographics in America” and thus view atheism in a particularly poor light. He stated, “In general black people are assumed to be Christians...there’s a possibility of being

Muslim or of a traditional African religion, but some religion is always assumed.” He shared that he thinks that the black community is overall less accepting of atheism, and notes the difficulty and awkwardness of some social situations: “I will be asked questions...people will say ‘But you do believe in God don’t you?’...as if to say ‘no’ is almost outside of their comprehension.” Ron founded the Boston Black Humanists because he “felt like there were many black people who were in the closet...wondering if it’s ok not to have religious belief” and was “hoping to make some sort of social connection” with other people in the African-American community who would accept his views. Black church communities have often been responsible for instigating secular civil activism, such as the Civil Rights Movement. Churches have also historically functioned to unite the black community culturally,⁴⁹ and this could help explain why African-Americans would equate a rejection of the church with a rejection of the black community.

While I encountered differing views about accepting and unaccepting groups, overall most of my respondents claimed that Christians were the ones most likely to discriminate against them. “Christians” is obviously a very broad and heterogeneous group. It is interesting, however, that my respondents usually pitted atheists against Christians specifically and not against “theists” or “religious people” more broadly. Anthony explained that there was not something specific about Christians that made him or other atheists assume that Christians were the opposition, but rather it was just that Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States, so chances are if a religious person has a problem with someone’s atheism, he or she is most likely a Christian. I

⁴⁹ Mary Pattillo-McCoy, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 6 (Dec. 1998): 767-768, 781.

noticed that most of my respondents perceived Christians to be the opposition, not just from overt explanations, but more frequently from other things they said to me or to each other, such as Sam, who explained that one of his alternatives to telling someone that he is an atheist is saying “I’m not a Christian,” signaling that the important boundary to draw was between atheists and Christians. At one meet-up, I heard a group talking about whether or not they engaged in online debates with Christians. It was also apparent that whenever they spoke of having to hide their atheism or who was proselytizing to them or harassing them, it was always a Christian.

There were some qualifications to narrow down what type of Christian they perceived as exhibiting intolerance toward them. Above, we saw how many people have noted the Protestant character of life in the South, and some of my respondents specified that it was a Protestant Christian who had proselytized to him or her or had said something intolerant. I often heard “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” from my respondents in the South, showing that this was the type of Christian who was in the opposition. I never heard the term “evangelical” to describe Christians in the North; these respondents were likely to say Catholic, or in one instance Greek Orthodox. For example, Harold, mentioned above, specified that it was an Orthodox Christian who barred him from his restaurant, and Steven specified that his wife removed the word “atheist” from her MySpace page because she was teaching in a Catholic area. Patrick similarly expressed that the Catholic community was not accepting of atheists. Even though it is clear that my respondents rarely thought that all Christians were rivals of atheists, it is also clear that “atheist” in the United States connotes a specifically “non-Christian” sentiment.

Conclusions

From all of my respondents' views on what it means to be an atheist in America, we can start to build an idea of how atheists view their persecutors and what they think their persecutors think of them. I have tried to let my respondents speak for themselves, to get their words and their impressions, so they are heard on their own terms. While this group is anything but homogeneous, we can, however, see how being an atheist in America means being aware that many others have negative opinions of you, which reinforces your minority status. It was also interesting to see that this minority status and the accompanying difficulties continue to baffle some of my respondents. Many did not feel like there should be such a stigma attached to their group. As one person claimed, "We're just plain old folks with one tiny degree of difference from all the other plain old folks." But it seems that though they may not understand why other people can be so intolerant toward them, they do know that this "one tiny degree of difference" can be a vitally important one that leaves them cut off in many ways from achieving normalcy in the American landscape. By claiming an atheist identity, they have chosen to accept the boundaries that this term entails. Discrimination actively shows atheists that they are different and reinforces their minority status.

CHAPTER II

“PEOPLE YOU CAN TALK TO WITHOUT GETTING THAT WEIRD LOOK”:

COMING OUT, COMMUNITY, AND NARRATING IDENTITY

Introduction

Unlike some minority groups, it is impossible to tell who is and who is not an atheist just by looking at them. We saw in the last chapter how atheists face discrimination for their lack of religious belief. Since atheism is not visible, the safe choice would be not to identify oneself to others as an atheist and thus avoid the negative ramifications of intolerance. Surely many people in the United States today who lack belief in a god do not publicize that information. For those who do decide to identify in some way as an atheist, there are also choices about when to disclose that information and when to keep silent. The power of disclosure rests in each individual. This chapter will examine the decision to come out and how atheists manage and narrate their stigmatized identity through interaction with other atheists.

Coming Out

Most people use the phrase “coming out” to denote someone disclosing their homosexuality. The phrase is used frequently in the atheist community as well, and there are a lot of similarities between the ways in which these two communities employ it. Being gay and being an atheist are both stigmatized minority identities that are not visible when looking at a person. Therefore, to be known as a homosexual or as an atheist, one must disclose that information. In this way, the individual is creating that facet of their identity by making it public information. By labeling themselves as members of a

minority, they produce an identity. Since it is a choice whether or not to claim this identity in interaction with other people, coming out is a decision influenced by the individual actively evaluating their immediate social context.⁵⁰

Obviously, all of my respondents are out as atheists to some degree, even if only to the members of their atheist group and to me. Others are out selectively; perhaps only a spouse or partner knows, or a group of close friends. Some members reported being completely out to everyone they know, though this level of full disclosure seems the least popular since many know that their stigmatized minority status comes with repercussions. Most of my respondents are out as atheists selectively. Some expressed that they needed to come out to the people they are around most often, because they felt that they should be honest with those people and with themselves. Usually, my respondents came out as atheists to their romantic partners and close friends. Many shared that even though it was not worth it to be out as an atheist all the time, they needed to feel like they could be themselves around these close relations. Coming out as an atheist for many people was part of being honest about who they are. Also, while my respondents often described how their atheism is just one facet of their total identity, it was very important for the people closest to them to know.

The majority of my respondents who are out selectively choose to hide their atheism from people when they think conflict might arise from their disclosure. A common situation in which my respondents reported not coming out to avoid conflict was at work. At a meet-up I attended in Raleigh, North Carolina, many of the members talked about how they are afraid of unnecessary drama being caused by co-workers finding out

⁵⁰ Peter Davies, "The Role of Disclosure in Coming Out among Gay Men," in *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience*, ed. Ken Plummer (New York: Routledge, 1992), 76, 83.

that they are atheists, whether they fear concrete ramifications or not. Alice, who works for Mormons, said that she backs her car into her parking space everyday at work so her co-workers cannot see her atheist bumper stickers. Similarly, Amber said that because many people in her office are Christians and sometimes all pray together before a meal, she often feels uncomfortable and decided not to tell anyone that she is an atheist. People at a meet-up in Charlotte, North Carolina echoed these ideas – that they were not aware of any concrete threats but wanted to avoid conflict especially at work.

Other situations in which people actively avoided conflict involved family. Teresa had not planned to share her atheism with her family:

I didn't talk to them about it...I didn't want to hurt them...all of them that I know of are fundamentalist Christians...I didn't want [my mother] to be constantly praying for me and think I was going to hell.

However, her family did find out, and her mother stopped calling and emailing, confirming her fears. Because others also feared similar alienation from their families, they too hoped to leave their families in the dark. Even if my respondents did not fear ostracism, they did fear tension and uncomfortable situations with their families, and they thought that it was perhaps “not worth it,” as Sam expressed: “why rock the boat...like with family...why bring it up?”

Further, sometimes people adapted their patterns of disclosure based on meeting different groups of people. For example, some people who had an accepting family did not expect their in-laws to have a problem with their atheism. Monica said that after a newspaper article ran about her and talked about some of her work within the atheist community, “we get a call on Saturday morning, my boyfriend's mom who is very religious was freaking out.” Similarly, Jeffery said that some of his in-laws had never

been accepting of him at family gatherings. Usually, situations like this forced people to reevaluate “how out” they wanted to be, because they were confronted with a person or group of people who reacted more harshly to their atheism than other people in their lives had. On the other hand, a few respondents reported that they changed their pattern of disclosure to be out in a greater number of situations when they met more accepting friends or moved to a more accepting place.

There is no formula for most people regarding when to disclose their atheism. Bridget Fitzgerald’s “Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity” focuses on why people become atheists, but also deals in part with how people choose to disclose this status. She concludes that choosing not to disclose and instead lying about being an atheist or actively avoiding religious topics is a direct result of the perceived conflict that would arise if someone did disclose. She found that people feared various ramifications from social rejection to more concrete discrimination.⁵¹ I received these types of responses from my respondents as well, but interestingly, most respondents only provided general categories of outcomes, such as “conflict,” “discrimination,” or “rejection,” without being able to specify what exactly any of these would look like. People usually did not express concrete results from people finding out they were atheists, but rather feared making a relationship “uncomfortable” or evoking “conflict.” When my respondents explained to me why they would not disclose their atheism in a given situation, they did not know exactly what would happen if they did disclose, but it was not “worth it” to take that risk.

⁵¹ Bridget Fitzgerald, “Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 2003), 117, 122-124.

It seems that for many atheists who disclose selectively, it is deemed worth it to “come out” in their closest relationships and not in less intimate ones. People who did not disclose to their parents usually shared that their motive was to protect them since they knew a religious family member would be upset to learn that they did not believe in God. Even though parents can be intimate relations, they are usually not people seen everyday, so it is easier to keep them in the dark and maintain a good relationship. This element of protection was absent when describing why someone would not come out at work. Both situations do share, however, the possibility of conflict arising because someone does not approve. By not disclosing their atheism in these situations, my respondents avoid the possible conflict that could arise. Many conversations about disclosure that I heard at meet-ups concluded with “it’s just not worth it.” We see in some of these situations that, for many people, it is important to be out to some people and equally important to keep it hidden from others.

A few of my respondents reported that they are completely out as atheists. Overall, these respondents were more likely to work from home so avoiding conflict with co-workers was not an issue. People who are completely out were also more likely to live in a Northern state and/or an urban area, which are both locations that respondents identified as being more accepting of atheism. Because they have probably faced less discrimination based on their location, coming out does not appear to be as big of a risk as it would for someone who identifies their location and personal situation to be more hostile toward atheism.

Choosing to come out as an atheist in different situations is based on how the individual weighs the possible gains and losses from disclosure. Most people

acknowledged the personal nature of these decisions. One respondent, however, did not approve of people choosing not to come out. Collin expressed that people need to come out for the good of the entire atheist community:

Atheists need to come out of the closet. If you want things to change, you have to come out of the closet, because if you keep it to yourself, you're part of the problem and not part of the solution. And as a gay man, I've also learned that coming out of the closet got things to change for the gay community, and if atheists want the same thing, they have to come out of the closet.

Collin believes that being public about one's atheism will show America at large that atheists exist and are not a group to be feared. He shared that when people started disclosing that they were gay, Americans realized that they already knew gay people, people they liked, and it took away some of the fear and hostility directed toward that community. Collin believes that all atheists should come out of the closet in a similar movement, so that they can be recognized in America as normal people, not an obscure and stigmatized minority. Collin's comment is similar to "visibility politics" rhetoric in the gay community, which cites people who stay in the closet as the main cause of continued oppression.⁵² While Collin views coming out as a macro-level movement, for most people, these larger concerns are secondary to the experiences they have with other people in their daily lives. Most respondents when confronted with Collin's comment or one like it did not agree. Disclosing one's atheism is instead a personal decision that each individual has to make in accordance with the situations they encounter.

Atheist Groups

The only situation in which all of my respondents feel comfortable being out as atheists is with their atheist group. We saw from the last chapter that atheists in the

⁵² Davin Allen Grindstaff, *Rhetorical Secrets: Mapping Gay Identity and Queer Resistance in Contemporary America* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 126.

United States feel like outsiders. This seems to be the underlying motivation to form or join atheist groups. Because their deviant beliefs often incite discrimination, they understand that they need strategies to manage their minority status.⁵³ Uniting with other atheists to share their stories and form a community with like-minded people serves as one such strategy. There are myriad atheist groups in existence today, everything from Humane Nonbelievers for people who are interested in animal welfare, Atheist Bikers, Signing Atheists for the deaf, Atheist Singles, Atheist Celiacs for those with celiac disease and following a gluten-free diet, Atheist Photography Club, Pro-Life Nonbelievers, Vegetarian/Vegan Atheists, Foxhole Atheists for those who have served in the military, Atheist Musicians, and Godless Grief for those coping with the death of a loved one, in addition to groups based on nationality or previous religion. Atheists often feel uncomfortable in every day social situations, so these groups give them an opportunity to link with others who share their atheism and other areas of interest. However, the non-theist groups with the most members are the ones based on current geographical location which are open to any type of non-believer; these are the groups where I located my respondents.

A typical meet-up is a casual affair. When I entered a meet-up in Charlotte, North Carolina, I descended into the basement of a crowded restaurant to find about ten people occupying a large table in the corner. The number grew to around thirty in the next few minutes. I was easily welcomed into the group and sat down with a few people who were all introducing themselves to each other for the first time. Throughout dinner, we talked a lot about politics – the election season had just ended, and people were rejoicing in the

⁵³ Fitzgerald, “Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity,” 119.

Democratic victory. Social issues were discussed, and it was assumed that everyone was politically liberal. The conversation flowed easily back and forth between discussing social issues and talking about people's experiences as atheists. People shared their stories of discrimination, their feelings of isolation in social situations, and their fears of disclosing their atheism. They also empathized with others and shared their thoughts about others' hardships. They managed a balance between making light of their disadvantaged position and sharing deep emotions about it. As people left and the group got smaller, everyone re-mixed their seating arrangement to meet new people and to make sure that everyone was included in a conversation group. Four hours later, the final members departed, shaking hands, showing big smiles, and saying, "See you next month."

Other meet-ups I attended were very similar. It was clear from observing these gatherings that people came to enjoy being with other atheists, and my interviews confirmed that the majority of my respondents joined groups for social reasons. They enjoy being in atheist groups because they have positive interactions with other members and make friends. Since people often feel uncomfortable with family, co-workers, and other social contacts, many of my respondents joined an atheist group to meet people while not hiding their atheism. When they are with other atheists, most report feeling safe from discrimination, enjoying the sense of community and the friendships, and greatly appreciating the freedom of being able to say anything while not worrying about what people would think. Joining these groups gives atheists a sense of inclusion which fills the desire to be accepted by other people who will provide positive relationships. This

can be particularly important for people who feel disadvantaged in some way, since group affiliation provides personal validation and communal solidarity.⁵⁴

People expressed their feelings of belonging in various ways. Amber said that she enjoys forming a “community” and feels “safe” within the group. Adam also used the word “safe” and told me that the people in the group are “non-judgmental.” Similarly, Anthony said that in the meet-up group, people are “instantly ok” with each other, and they can skip the awkwardness of not knowing how the other people feel about religion. Brandon said that he always feels like he is “suppressing [his] militant atheism,” and in the meet-up group, he does not have to. Ron shared that being in a community of like-minded people is “comforting.” People also reported that talking to group members was a positive experience. Mark said that he enjoyed the “positive reinforcement” regarding being an atheist. Katie characterized her gain as “emotional fulfillment.” In these responses, we see how members feel like group meet-ups constitute one place where it is alright to be an atheist as opposed to how they feel in other places or with other groups of people. Since the symbolic boundaries drawn between atheists and the religious majority of America usually imparts a strong sense of their minority identity, atheists strongly identify with other people in the meet-up group as fellow minority members even if they are meeting for the first time. The feeling that everyone is “instantly ok” with everyone else also takes away the sense of fear and unease that characterizes other social situations.

Some respondents were first time participants in the group meet-ups so their reasons for joining were fresh on their minds. Among the first-timers, there were a lot of responses about forming a sense of community with other like-minded people. Mark

⁵⁴ Donelson R. Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 2nd ed. (Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1990), 50, 54-55.

simply replied that he wanted to talk and make friends. Amber said that she and her family were searching for “fellowship” with others. She expressed that she often feels awkward among other peer groups, such as her co-workers. She told a story about an instance at work when others decided to pray and she felt uncomfortable. Though she did not explain that meeting with this group was a clear contrast with awkward situations at work, by her telling this story we see that she feels unaccepted to some degree in other social situations, and that in this group, she feels a sense of belonging. Adam, another first-timer, expressed himself similarly by saying that he came to the meet-up to join a “safe” community. He also noted similar feelings of discomfort because he feels that atheism is not widely accepted. He shared that he does not feel comfortable talking about it with most people, and that he is not “out” as an atheist. He thought that by joining this community he could talk without feeling restricted.

James also joined to find a community, but he recalled a specific impetus to find a group:

I remember seeing the bumper sticker [a Darwin fish] on the car, and it meaning a lot to me somehow, even though I didn't feel like I was missing anything before. When I saw the bumper sticker... It's hard to describe what the feeling was, but it was sort of like, yeah, finally there's someone else. Maybe it's not a hopeless case that people will understand the way things are.

He then found meetup.com and realized that there were atheist groups and joined a few. He said he did not have much of a social life before, and that he really enjoys meeting people in this way. By realizing that there were other atheists around with whom he could connect socially, he stated that he does not feel as isolated.

Some of my respondents specifically voiced that they wanted to find friends who were non-believers to avoid being around religious people “all the time.” Anthony

wanted to find an atheist community because he moved from the Midwest, and he said he was not prepared for the “outwardness” of religion that he encountered in the South. He wanted to find people who had something in common with him and to find “a sense of kinship,” since he believes that all people “desire to belong to a peer group.” Sam also referenced region saying that he felt that atheists in the South especially want to find people with the same beliefs so that they can speak openly. Teresa, another Southerner, voiced something similar about her desire to join for social reasons because she knew that she would have atheism in common with these people, unlike most other people she met. She said, “I want to hang out with people who aren’t blessing me all the time, talking to me about Jesus all the time.” She added that being in an atheist group helps her feel “more solid that I’m ok...I don’t feel like I’m an alien in a Christian world. I felt that a lot before I joined this group.” Sam expressed something similar:

When your talking to a Christian, I mean, it’s like even if your not talking about religion, there’s still lots of topics besides religion itself that are awkward to talk about.

These comments reflect the sense of ostracism discussed in the previous chapter, and show that joining an atheist group provides a way to combat those feelings and the intolerance that atheists face. The important thing for most people is not talking specifically about what they believe and do not believe, but knowing that they can belong to a community of people with whom they are more likely to have a positive social experience. Since they are aware of the social boundaries involved in being an atheist, creating a sense of inclusion through these groups helps balance the sense of exclusion they often feel.

One way in which people relate to each other at meet-ups and create a sense of solidarity is through sharing negative experiences resulting from their atheism. As we saw in the previous chapter, these accounts figure prominently in how atheists understand their relationship to the broader American society, but these stories also serve an important group function. At an Atlanta Atheists meet-up I attended, a few people talked about how they can “trust” other people in the group, and that having this social network helped them when they wanted to vent, required support, or needed someone to talk to about their experiences. Ethan explained that his atheist community gives him “some people I can rant at, let off some steam and have them nod their heads up and down instead of side to side.” Group meet-ups serve as a chance to speak openly about negative experiences, and many respondents shared that meet-ups are the only place where they can find people who understand their situation and sympathize with their discrimination experiences and feelings of exclusion.

The most common responses, however, regarding why someone joined an atheist group or what they received from it centered on the fact that people did not usually come to an atheist meet-up to talk specifically about atheism, but rather simply knowing that everyone has atheism in common allows people to feel safe. Being around other atheists releases the burden of constantly being concerned about how to negotiate their minority identities. They know there is common ground between them, and this imparts a sense of comfort and freedom. Stephanie’s reasons for joining show an example of this theme:

I was new in town, and I needed a quick way to make friends. Meetup.com is a quick way, but I wanted to meet people who were deep thinkers and that I would have an understanding that none of us believe in God. So of the meet-up groups available, I knew this one would have thinkers, people who were questioning and people who I agreed with.

Doug also thought that an atheist group would be more welcoming than some other social groups he had experienced and said, “I thought I could find more support and like minded people.” David’s response was similar, emphasizing that it is a positive experience to be around people who are like-minded:

It’s a joy finding people who at least at some level agree with you...I think it’s a natural human thing – you like people who are like you. You don’t have to explain yourself all the time or having them think you’re incorrect...If you’re a Christian, you tend to look for Christians; if you’re a Hindu, you tend to look for Hindus.

In Collin’s response, we see similar ideas about the comfort of being around likeminded people and avoiding awkward situations. He shared the following:

This is like my favorite thing to do. I especially look forward to the atheist meet-up... I really look forward to it because you do get to be around other people who you don’t have to explain yourself to, people who understand your frustrations, people who understand the way you think, people you can talk to without getting that weird look and wondering what they’re thinking in the back of their mind.

Ron also expressed the difference between fitting in and getting along with people in an atheist group compared with society in general. He said that his atheist group

provides social connections where at the very least you don’t have to worry about getting into conversations about religious ideas where you really have no interest...In mainstream culture, you find yourself faced with religious ideas even if you don’t want to talk about them.

We see in these responses the emphasis on being around people with whom they have atheism in common, since they see other people as potential, and likely, judges of their lack of religious belief. My respondents enjoy the company of others who they deem similar to themselves, and since atheists see themselves as a disadvantaged group, my respondents seem to thrive on the social support they get from others with matching

views.⁵⁵ Having atheism in common with other people can be very important to my respondents, whether they need to vent about their experiences or not, because regardless of particular motivations to find a group, everyone expressed the contrast between feeling like an outsider in society and feeling safe and included in their atheist group.

Some respondents compared their desire to join an atheist group to other people's desire to join a church, since in both situations, people are looking for inclusion. Monica, for example, said, "I decided to join because I wanted like a social group that fit my interests. Another person might join a church, but that's not for me." She added later, "We're like a church, just without all the God stuff." Teresa noted that she joined an atheist community to fill the social void that was once occupied by a religious community:

The only thing I missed from being religious was the social aspect. When I left the church, I left everything. I left my family; I left my friends...I missed that experience of being with people who are like minded...I wanted to go to a group with similar opinions so I wouldn't feel uncomfortable talking about what I believe.

While a church community is dissimilar from an atheist community in many ways, for people like Teresa, they can serve similar social functions in members' lives. Katie had similar comments about what she got out of being in her atheist group:

I think I get...a lot of things that your average organized religious person gets out of their religious community, because organized religion has so many secular qualities, and I think a lot of people join for secular reasons as well as religious reasons, belief reasons...We all want to feel connected to other people...sharing a meal, watching something, talking, service projects. You just feel really connected to the people because you're doing it with people you have this really certain thing in common.

Collin also made this comparison, and drew out the assumptions indicated by many of my respondents that a church is a community of people who have the same beliefs, and

⁵⁵ Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 57-58.

because of that commonality, people feel comfortable socializing without hiding their convictions. Atheists also seek that commonality and sense of comfort that comes with being around people who share an atheist identity. Since Collin is one of the group's leaders, I asked him what people have expressed to him in the past about what they get out of coming to group meet-ups:

I think it's very important that atheists and agnostics have a place where they can socialize with other people, likeminded people, where you can talk about things without people kinda looking at you, strange looks, or them being like 'what?' It's just a safe place where people can talk, and you can vent your frustrations. This group is mostly a social group... and I think it fills the same sort of niche that a church maybe does for a lot of people...I think this sort of serves the same purpose. It's a place for likeminded people to get together and not have to keep their mouth quiet about their convictions.

Since many respondents indicated that most people they know go to church, being in a group based on lack of religious belief allowed my respondents to find a community despite not fitting into the church-going norm in most of the United States. These responses address the same theme of feeling comfortable socializing with like-minded people, while also highlighting how they view their atheist group as being very similar to religious groups in social function. By making this comparison, my respondents signaled that belonging to a community based on shared beliefs, even if that affiliation is lack of religious belief, is a natural phenomenon, since it is easier to make friends and feel comfortable interacting with people when common ideas are shared between members.

Another comparison to a church community dealt with networking and the trading of professional services. Groups in Atlanta, Georgia and Charlotte, North Carolina discussed learning what services group members could provide so they could help each other out and have people they know do work for them. Both groups compared this to a

church community which would similarly rely on each other. Brandon quipped, “I’d like my house remodeled godlessly, please,” signaling that he would rather hire members of the atheist community if possible, since he had been bothered by a painter he had once hired who then preached to him. Just as my respondents feel more comfortable around other atheists at meet-ups, they would feel comfortable in a similar way more often if they could find ways to interact with other atheists in their daily lives.

Another recurring reason to join a group was to learn about atheism. Some respondents expressed that they desired to learn more about what they believed or did not believe through interacting with other members. David explained how September 11th, 2001 was a “wake-up call” about religion for him. When he realized that he did not know how to articulate his beliefs, he started to explore:

I guess I always thought of religion as being somewhat harmless ... like I didn’t believe it but I didn’t see the need to think about it very much. But that was one event that happened that made me realize ... if religious belief can cause you to do something that catastrophic maybe it could do something even worse. Maybe I should understand it some more.

He went on to discuss how he now had a greater awareness of exactly what he thinks regarding belief and non-belief. Two other respondents also referenced September 11th, sharing that afterward they started to reevaluate what they thought about religion and about atheism. A different example came from Ryan, who said that when his daughter was born, he realized that when she grew up and started having questions about religion and belief, he did not know what he would say. He wanted to learn more about himself and what he believed. These respondents thought they could learn more about themselves through interacting with people who held similar beliefs and who claim an atheist identity.

Respondents sometimes wanted to join for both social and intellectual reasons, such as Ethan: “I was looking for mostly social interaction, but also a little bit of intellectual stimulation.” Stephanie noted that she had joined for social reasons, but now enjoyed the intellectual aspect as well, because “these people are actively seeking and arguing and questioning.” James responded similarly and went into more detail about how an atheist meet-up differs from other social situations:

I didn't really have much of a social life before hand, so there's the social aspect of it, just meeting people and getting to talk about things. I think that the main thing at least when I started was intellectual stimulation. Living out in the suburbs I really wasn't getting much of that. You know, sometimes I'd go to a party or something like that and then start talking with someone about religion or philosophy, and either they're not terribly interested or it seems like it's the wrong place. Even if they're interested, they seem reluctant to get into it just because maybe it's the wrong context... I started going to these meetings...and after a while I started making friends there. Some of the people you start to see outside of the meet-up group...

Ethan's and James's responses mirror other respondents' comments which show that intellectual stimulation is part of social fulfillment, and atheist meet-ups offer a unique opportunity to socialize, discuss, and feel comfortable while doing so.

We see in all these responses that everyone has something different to say, but that the common themes are finding community, talking with like-minded people, having a safe atmosphere where one can say things without awkwardness or fear of not being accepted, and socializing with friends. However, participating in meet-ups with my respondents revealed other things they gained from being in the group which they did not self-report. For example, I observed how people built community and were comforted through humor. Humor can be a key method of bonding. Making jokes with people

signals that everyone in the group shares the same experiences and ideas,⁵⁶ and this allows people to not feel atypical or isolated.⁵⁷ Humor also serves as a coping mechanism, and in a social context, it moderates stressful life experiences.⁵⁸ The discrimination stories in the first chapter demonstrate how atheists can have stressful life experiences of the type that many other people do not have, and within the group context, humor provides them with a coping mechanism.

I heard a lot of joking at meet-ups. Most of the jokes made light of the members' situation in some way. For example, in meet-ups in Charlotte, Raleigh, and Atlanta, members made jokes about what people must think an atheist meet-up is like. They joked that people thought they were "burning down churches," "eating babies," "spitting in holy water," "plotting to bring down religion," and one person simply made devil horns on top of her head with her fingers. Similarly, someone at a different meet-up said that people expected atheists to have "horns and a tail." Other jokes focused on the incompatibility of their group with some religious practices, such as saying "he's healing us" in response to someone reaching their hand out across the table, "now let's all join hands" as if to pray after everyone introduced themselves, and calling the group a "congregation." Mark joked saying, "I had faith that people would come," which elicited a wave of laughter. One group had recently acquired an abandoned church in which to hold their meet-ups; the irony was certainly not lost, and they referred to the man who

⁵⁶ Marvin R. Koller, *Humor and Society: Explorations in the Sociology of Humor* (Houston: Cap and Gown Press, Inc., 1988), 19.

⁵⁷ Herbert M. Lefcourt, *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2001), 139.

⁵⁸ Herbert M. Lefcourt and Rod A. Martin, *Humor and Life Stress: Antidote to Adversity* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1986), 191.
Lefcourt, *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly*, 131.

had been looking after the building and making repairs as the “sexton.” By thinking about humor as a way of bonding and coping, we can see how these jokes alleviate some of the stress of being an atheist by making light of their situation and create a consensus among people that they can all identify with these issues since they have similar experiences as atheists.

Narrating Identity

Perhaps most importantly, belonging to an atheist group gives people the space in which they narrate their identity as atheists. Identity is an active and ongoing creation. It is not static, natural, or inherent. Instead, identity can be constructed through narration, for example, as someone tries to talk about their life with a sense of continuity.⁵⁹ I noticed the process of forming identity when someone talked about their experiences as an atheist, which could be to me as an interviewer, or more often to each other as fellow group members. When people tell stories about themselves and their experiences, it helps them relate to other people as well as helping them to make sense of their own lives. People I observed at meet-ups narrated their stories to explore and construct an atheist identity for themselves and for their community.⁶⁰ Religious organizations provide a place for many people to narrate their identities, because they situate the individual within a group of people who are using the same vocabulary set, often borrowed from their religious tradition, to identify themselves. Although an atheist group does not have a body of religious texts and traditions from which they can borrow vocabulary for identity narration, I noticed people using common vocabulary to talk about atheism at meet-ups.

⁵⁹ Christine Coupland, “Identities and Interviews,” in *Exploring Identity: Concepts and Methods*, ed. Alison Pullen, Nic Beech, and David Sims (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 275-276.

⁶⁰ Kath Woodward, *Understanding Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 28.

We can see how atheist groups provide the same space for identity narration that has been attributed to religious groups.⁶¹

Christian Smith's *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* shows how evangelical Christians in America flourish precisely because they perceive themselves to be under attack from the rest of society and thrive on this conflict and difference. Evangelicals form their minority identity through their group affiliation, not as individuals. Interaction with other group members helps individuals narrate their identities as part of a specific sub-culture. People are able to mark inclusive and exclusive boundaries, and such categories are always evaluative. By surrounding themselves with others who positively evaluate their specific minority status, individuals can maintain self-esteem which may be diminished when they are not with their group and face being a minority in society.⁶² Smith's theory of sub-cultural identity very closely matches what I discovered from my respondents. Atheists, like evangelical Christians, perceive themselves as separate from society at large and define themselves mainly by this difference. In group meet-ups, people narrate their identities through sharing their stories and learning vocabulary from other group members. Also, when members narrate their identities as atheists, other group members affirm their experiences and beliefs, so together the group members are constructing a positive evaluation of their group's sub-cultural status.

Since narrating a sub-cultural identity relies on negotiating difference, telling discrimination stories can be a part of how an atheist chooses to narrate his or her identity.

⁶¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, "Religious Identities and Religious Institutions," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 217.

⁶² Christian Smith with Michael Emerson, Sally Gallagher, Paul Kennedy, and David Sikkink, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 89-95.

Sharing and dramatizing stories of discrimination and intolerance, such as the stories from the last chapter, can serve an affirming function as members narrate themselves as the minority defending themselves from others.⁶³ Members were always very supportive when someone shared a discrimination experience and offered their sympathy or explained that they knew how the other person felt. In this way, members bonded with other atheists by sharing these stories. They also constructed their identity as atheists through their stories, because they defined themselves as similar to other members and dissimilar from those who discriminated against them.

The most common theme of identity narration among people at meet-ups was the “de-conversion story,” a term some used to describe how they came to atheism. While some people had been atheists their whole lives, many were raised religious and came to atheism later as adults. At most meet-ups I attended, I heard people sharing their de-conversion stories with each other. People were eager to share their own experiences and to hear others’ stories, and many expressed to me that they love learning about others’ atheist journeys. These stories would often come up as a response to someone specifically asking them how they came to atheism, as additional commentary on religion and what they do and do not believe, or with seemingly no impetus at all. In interviews, my respondents would often tell me about how they came to atheism without me asking, and it was clear that they viewed their de-conversion story as a crucial component to understanding them and what they had to say about atheism.

⁶³ Erich Goode, *Deviant Behavior*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 269-270.

While it is perhaps unfair to call any one of their stories “typical,” the following is an example which contains some common elements of many of the de-conversion stories

I heard:

I was raised a Roman Catholic and made my First Communion. Soon after my mother passed away, when I was ten, I began to examine my faith spurred on by the statement that “all prayer was selfish.” I don’t know where I heard the phrase but it led me to an investigation of my belief system. I made a decision at that time not to pray anymore and became an agnostic, while still attending services and working towards my Confirmation. My break with the Church came over a crisis precipitated by catechism teaching the concept of transubstantiation, a teaching I simply could not countenance. This break at fourteen occasioned a search of other religious systems including Judaism, Buddhism, and the Hare Krishna sect. I came to the realization that all religion eventually required a suspension of reason and an ultimate reliance on faith. This revelation coupled with a study of history led to me rejecting revealed truth as fundamentally flawed at age eighteen. From this time I have considered myself an atheist.

We see in Richard’s de-conversion story how he was religious, experienced a crisis which shook his faith, found his childhood religion incompatible with other ideas he held to be true, explored other religious options, and concluded that he did not want to align himself with any religion because he considered them to be false. These are all common themes in others’ de-conversion stories.

While not all of these parts occur in every story, most begin with a religious upbringing and end with finding atheism as a logical choice. Many, like Richard, found religion to be incompatible with other views they held, such as Ethan, who was raised Roman Catholic, but said, “It struck me as very wrongheaded to be discriminatory toward women and gays,” which launched his journey away from religion. Whenever a group member voiced his or her opinion that religion was incompatible with their values, other people were quick to affirm this decision.

Though not all went through a crisis on their path to atheism like Richard, there were many who did, such as Harold who became an atheist when he realized that miracles and his prayers would not help his wife with her debilitating medical condition. Teresa also provided an example of crisis in her de-conversion story. “I always questioned everything, but when you’re raised in that religious parameter, everything is learned with the base that God exists,” she explained. She was actively involved in a church community when “I found out my husband was gay. I grabbed back on to my faith for a while...out of fear, because that’s all I had.” She and her husband went through an ex-gay ministry for a while, but did not complete it. They later divorced. She looks back on this time in her life saying that this is when her religious views began to “unravel.” Narrating atheism as a positive end result to a life-crisis affirms this result both for the person telling their story and for the listeners.

Another common theme revolved around the conclusion that atheism represents the most logical choice. “Logical” is the word many used to describe their position. When members share their de-conversion stories, no matter what else is contained in them, when they reach the decision-making point, “logic” or “reason” serves as the explanatory mechanism for all the people in the conversation, because these are often vocabulary choices that others use in their narrations as well. Even those who were never religious chime in at this point in the narrative. People are usually quick to throw in their comments agreeing with this conclusion, which is not surprising since the meet-up brings together like-minded people and since they judge their lack of religious belief positively. They show great support for their fellow members after they tell their personal journey to the conclusion that all the members share. Getting reassuring feedback can help the

members feel connected to each other, as opposed to often feeling disconnected from others because of their atheism, and can help mediate the stress they often feel because of their minority identity. Joining a group not only provides emotional and social support through friendships and networks, but also validates members when they can compare their views and experiences to others' and find similarities.⁶⁴ In this way, the de-conversion story serves not only to help members actively shape their own identities by forming coherent narratives which conclude with becoming an atheist, but they also serve to unite the members as they lend support and encouragement after hearing someone's story and reinforce the boundaries between their community and the rest of society.

Conclusions

Every one of my respondents indicated that building community with other atheists serves crucial and manifold functions in their lives. Social, emotional, and intellectual fulfillment as well as validation of experiences and beliefs can be gained through membership in a group of like-minded individuals. By joining atheist groups, my respondents build friendships and learn about others' lives which may be similar to their own, but on another level they also learn about and validate themselves as they interact, discuss, narrate, and negotiate their own identities as atheists. The great sense of enjoyment from being around other atheists that most of my respondents reported shows a stark contrast from the discrimination experiences they face as part of their lives as atheists. The sense of contrast they feel between the positive experiences they have within the atheist community and the negative experiences they have when confronted about their atheism by members outside of the atheist sub-culture further entrenches the boundary between atheists and the rest of society. Group membership helps atheists'

⁶⁴ Forsyth, *Group Dynamics*, 56, 59.

morale, because groups help cultivate a positive evaluation of being different. Through experience of this difference, atheists come to more fully understand their minority identity.

CHAPTER III

“WE WANT TO SHOW AMERICA THAT WE ARE GOOD CITIZENS”:

PRESENTING ATHEISM TO AMERICAN SOCIETY

Introduction

We saw in the first chapter that many atheists agree that they hold a disadvantaged position in American society, and we saw in the second chapter that many feel that forming atheist communities helps to mediate the tensions they face in everyday life because of their atheism. However, when it comes to engaging in issues about religion and atheism publicly and representing themselves and their group to society at large, disagreement abounds. Since many atheists choose to disclose their atheism selectively, this bars some from pursuing any kind of public engagement. There are, however, many other concerns that my respondents shared when it comes to presenting oneself as an atheist and presenting the atheist community as a whole to American society. The ramifications of being an atheist impact how comfortable one would be coming out and doing things *as an atheist* in his or her community. Groups can be integral in the process of negotiating identity and teasing out ideas concerning public engagement, but decisions about whether or not to present oneself as an atheist in society and what one should or should not do *as an atheist* rests on the individual. This chapter will show how varied atheists' ideas are when it comes to presenting atheism to the public.

Atheism on the Public Stage

The majority of atheists have had no determining force in how atheism is presented to society, since the most obvious public face of atheism centers on only a few people. Many people in the United States associate atheism with some of the popular books on the topic that have come out in recent years. Authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Carl Sagan, and Daniel Dennett have become the public face of atheism, and my respondents react to such authors with everything from admiration to disgust. Most of my respondents disapprove of these authors. Monica, for example, tried to read Hitchens but was quickly bored, and concluded that she did not know why she would read this type of literature since, “it’s like preaching to the choir.” Katie replied similarly saying, “I already know all this stuff.” Katie’s comments did not end there, however, and she provides an example of people who gave atheist literature a try and did not like what they read:

Dawkins...I wished he’d stayed a biologist instead of an atheist activist...he’s says things that are really inappropriate...I don’t think he realizes...Harris is a caustic hypocrite...full of hate and bile...and I don’t like how he doesn’t recognize the moderate religious people as our allies in the fight for church and state separation.

Katie’s statements echo many other respondents’ who disapprove of popular atheist authors because they think they are responsible for keeping “atheist” a dirty word. In addition, some of my respondents talked about how unfortunate it is that these authors provide the public face of atheism, when they are not really representative of what many atheists think. The majority of my respondents reacted negatively when I asked them about atheist literature, because they felt that these authors’ vehemence increases the

negative public opinion of atheists and exacerbates the boundary excluding atheists from the rest of society.

A few of my respondents, however, did find value in atheist writing in some way. Doug, for example, stated that he was “converted” by atheist literature. He shared, “I was doubting before I read it...my interests have always been in science. I had problems reconciling my religious beliefs with scientific facts...reading Dawkins kind of cleared up any doubts I may have had.” Patrick’s response was similar, citing Sagan as “definitely responsible for me becoming an atheist, no question about it.” James qualified this type of response, explaining that people must have been slipping away from religion already before reading one of these books:

I don’t think they’re converting people who believe...but there are a lot of people who are apathetic about religion, or haven’t thought about it very much, or think that maybe it’s kind of silly but you should do it, who read those books and think “I recognize that’s what I believe, and maybe, you know, I’m not alone in thinking this is ridiculous.”

A few of my respondents really appreciate these writings, such as Patrick: “It gives me an enlightened view...those guys are great minds...speaks so much reason into the question of religion...refreshing.” Similarly, Stephanie confided that Harris’s book was

one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever read – it was like one thought from beginning to end...I love Dawkins and Harris because I grew up extremely religious so breaking away from that, it’s good to read good strong writing, entertaining writing, about a subject I enjoy.

But she went on to express some more complicated views about these books:

I think it’s very trendy. It’s pop culture right now which I think is good as far as popularizing...they’re also kind of silly, some of them, because they want to take away religious beliefs and that ends up making them just as offensive as the people who offended them...I don’t like that so much.

Here Stephanie provides a good example of the conflicting views some people hold about atheist literature. While some may appreciate these books on one level, most also recognize the caustic impression they give regarding the atheist community. In Stephanie's comments, we see how enjoying atheist literature is something personal, but when it comes to the public effects of associating with authors whom many deem insulting, her opinions are more guarded. She signals the importance of these authors putting atheism into a public conversation, but simultaneously worries that perhaps it is not worth it when these authors offend religious people, which in turn perpetuates atheist stereotypes and makes it harder for atheists to be accepted.

Like Stephanie, the majority of my respondents who did read atheist literature recognized the problems these authors had caused for the image of atheism, but some still found value in their writings because they provided personal fulfillment. Sam, for example, found that reading these books helped him gain a vocabulary for talking about belief and non-belief that he did not have before. David characterized their effect as "motivation" to stay firm in his lack of belief, and Alexandra, after sharing that her religious co-workers stress her, described how atheist literature helps her: "When I'm at work and people are like [ugh], I read it and it reinforces me." Ethan responded similarly, sharing, "There is a common human trait – people enjoy being reinforced in what they believe." Steven and Collin mirrored Ethan's response using the phrases "reaffirm my lack of belief" and "backs up my very strong convictions" respectively. We see in these responses that people gain a sense of reinforcement from reading atheist literature. This resembles what respondents gain from talking with other atheists at meet-ups. Both function as vehicles of encouragement and affirmation. Though more concrete validation

seems to come from two-way conversations, reading atheist literature can also function as a reinforcement of beliefs.

While most of my respondents who did enjoy atheist literature read it for personal fulfillment in some way, a few of my respondents expressed that they gained arguments from atheist literature that they could then use in later conversations. Thus their reading not only offered personal gains, but also provided them with a way to engage in issues about atheism with people outside of the atheist community. While not the norm for my respondents, a few liked to engage in debates with religious people. For example, Ethan shared that atheist literature helps him “be conversant in how to confront and how to oppose this kind [religious] of thinking.” Steven noted that these books

give popular arguments for believing in God, then show how they don't work...books like these help me stay up to date. Also, I've had a few internet debates and what I read in atheist books gives me ammunition, so to speak.

We can see how debating successfully would have a validating function, confirming for an atheist that lack of religious belief is a more rational and correct view. However, it is qualitatively different from the kind of validation gained through conversation with someone who agrees. Lesser known writers and bloggers have also weighed in on this discussion, such as those featured on the American Atheists website. “To Bash or Not to Bash,” for example, concludes that religion bashing is necessary at some level to show people that atheists are correct.⁶⁵ Similar articles can be found on local affiliates' pages, such as the Atlanta Freethought Society website which offers an article titled “Why We

⁶⁵ Eddie Tabash, “To Bash or Not to Bash,” American Atheists website. http://www.atheists.org/To_Bash_or_Not_to_Bash.

Should Debate Christians.”⁶⁶ Similar to popular atheist books, articles featured on websites like these show a much higher degree of vehemence than most of my respondents exhibited, signaling that those who are outspoken are not actually representative of the atheist community as a whole.

What I found to be more representative were people who did not want to engage in inflammatory arguments. Whenever someone at a meet-up brought up the subject of engaging in religion debates, most people were often quick to reject this activity. Many members thought that debating with religious people only furthered the stigma attached to atheists and atheism and emphasized the boundary between atheists and religious people so much so that it made it seem like religious preference was a person’s only important identifier. Sam critiqued this type of engagement, saying he did not approve of atheists who “sit around and bark at Christians.” He continued: “I don’t like to get into the atheists versus Christians thing. I don’t go on the internet and make snide comments.” Activities like these only perpetuate what he calls “an us versus them mentality” that he thinks is inherent in the way some people talk about religion. Sam’s comments seem more representative of the majority of my respondents who were more concerned that religion debates only harm the public image of atheists. The public face of atheism seemed to be more important to people than the gratification they might receive from winning an argument.

Some respondents also expressed negative ideas about engaging in inflammatory debates, not only because it can give a poor impression of atheism, but also because this kind of behavior only perpetuates a hostile climate between believers and non-believers.

⁶⁶ Ed Buckner, “Why We Should Debate Christians,” Atlanta Freethought Society website, <http://www.atlantafreethought.org/afnews/199807-Buckner-Debate.htm>.

Mark expressed that he did not want other atheists to show anger toward religious people. Bethany expressed the same idea declaring, “Us hating religious people is just as bad as religious people hating us.” Similarly, Stephanie noted, referring to Christians, “I think we should just leave them alone.” It seems that many of my respondents are aware of how they or another atheist they know has been treated unfairly because of their atheism, and because of this, many of my respondents fear that engaging the public negatively will only keep atheists stigmatized, since negative engagement could further entrench dividing boundaries and add to the negative opinion of atheists. Forms of engagement deemed “negative” included anything that had the potential to anger religious people, such as provocative arguments and incendiary literature. Since in the first chapter we saw the hardship that might be at stake for atheists, it seems appropriate that many of my respondents would desperately want to avoid any comments or actions that might reinforce the negative public opinion of atheists.

Just as some of my respondents do not condone engaging in religion arguments, writers and bloggers on some atheist websites also encourage tempering this fighting mentality. In an article published in *The Humanist*, a magazine published by the American Humanist Association, for example, we see an effort to enhance the public portrayal of atheists by encouraging readers to forget about religion bashing. In “Overcoming Antagonistic Atheism to Recast the Image of Humanism,” a leader of a freethought society is quoted:

Our biggest problem in the Humanist movement... is keeping atheists who just want to complain about people of faith out of our organization. They join and then get upset that we aren't focused on bashing religion.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Jeff Nall, “Overcoming Antagonistic Atheism to Recast the Image of Humanism,” *The Humanist* (July-August 2006): 31.

The author goes on to use “To Bash or Not to Bash” as an example of the type of literature and the type of people who provide the public with the stereotype of the misanthropic atheist. We see in this article that while many atheist authors are cast in a negative light for their tirades against religion, there are also atheist authors actively trying to combat this behavior in an attempt to improve the public portrayal of their organizations and relations between atheists and religious people.

Activism

Not all forms of public engagement are deemed negative, however. Some of my respondents feel that atheist activism is extremely important to spread either a positive image of atheists or simply to show the public that they exist. Activist activities I heard about included renting a billboard to display a message about atheism, creating a winter solstice display to put next to a nativity scene, volunteering as a group at a soup kitchen, and collecting canned food for a community food drive. While the first two might seem very different from the latter two, all of these ideas were relayed to me as ways of making people aware that atheists exist. A public display, people explained, was not to convert people or to mock someone else’s beliefs, but simply to let people know that other views existed and should be respected. Community service fulfilled a similar function; it let the community know that there are atheists, with the added bonus of hopefully then associating them with good works.

Patrick decided to engage in activism because, in his view, there are a lot of violations of separation of church and state, and atheists need to let the country as a whole know that many find this unacceptable and that there are other people besides Christians in the United States. He noted, “I get a lot of satisfaction knowing that I’m

spreading awareness.” In fact, he said that the problems atheists face when church issues get entangled with the government is the main reason why atheists are outspoken about their beliefs. He continued, “If separation of church and state wasn’t a problem, no one would need to be outspoken about it. If these problems went away, outspoken atheists would go away.” Harold also expressed that spreading awareness is important. He did not name specific issues, like the separation of church and state, but wants to let people know that atheists are not a group to be feared. He shared, “We need to get out there. We need to let people know that atheists are a hell of a lot more moral,” noting that activism that brings awareness about atheists to other people would show them that people’s misconceptions about atheists, especially regarding lack of morality, are incorrect. Steven noted that national atheist groups are “very active in politics and the law, protecting our civil rights, and engaging the religious community in debates and on the news,” but his personal reasons for joining an atheist group and for pursuing activist ventures – “to spread the message that atheism is more mainstream than a lot of people believe” – are more geared toward recognition of the atheist community rather than fighting specific battles. For the most part, the members of atheist communities involved in activism want to undertake projects that spread awareness about the fact that atheists make up an increasing part of the American population, and that atheists are good people and should not be feared.

At an atheist meet-up I attended in Raleigh, North Carolina, a discussion took place concerning balancing the group’s social purposes with the activist goals of some members. Out of all the conversations I observed and participated in during meet-ups, this showed the most disagreement amongst members. Collin, one of the group’s leaders,

was very outspoken about taking on activist projects, for example making a winter solstice display to put next to a Christmas display in town. He viewed this type of project as presenting a “counter-voice over Christianity.” Many people in the group did not agree that this type of project was going to help the atheist community. Some withdrew from the conversation, saying that they came to meet-ups for social purposes. Others who were intrigued by the idea of activism pushed for less abrasive projects, such as collecting canned food for a community food drive or getting a group together to volunteer at a soup kitchen. Some of these members critiqued Collin’s ideas, since they feared a display would do nothing to promote a positive view of the community, and would instead give Christians more reasons to harbor negative feelings about atheists.

This conversation shows that although some people engage in activism and think it will benefit their community, most others believe that a public message showing that atheists exist will not be so neutrally received by the rest of society. Fearing that almost any message about atheism that is relayed to the public will be taken poorly, and therefore might adversely affect atheists, seems to be the predominant concern. While all atheists would probably say that making society aware that atheists exist and that they should not be feared is a worthy goal, the means used to get there seem to be the stumbling block. People who do not want to engage in activism might not necessarily express better ways to spread awareness, but coming from a disadvantaged minority position, they are quick to discourage activities that could make their situation worse. Just as disclosing an atheist identity must be negotiated by the individual, groups must also negotiate their role as an atheist community by weighing the positive and negative effects that their actions could have.

Non-Theist Terms

This discussion at the Raleigh-Durham Atheists Meet-up led to the broader topic of addressing the atheist community's "PR problem." Before embarking on any activist projects, some members thought it necessary to rename the group to give them a more palatable label. Some thought that using words other than "atheist" to describe their group would be beneficial when seeking acceptance from the greater community. Collin, however, outspoken again, was extremely critical of dropping the term atheist. He views other non-theist terms as a "cop out" saying that atheists need to represent themselves *as atheists* if there is ever going to be hope of changing public perception. He explained that "the more atheists become visible, the more things will change," and that "atheists need to come out of the closet. If you want things to change you have to come out of the closet, because if you keep it to yourself, you're part of the problem and not part of the solution." We see in Collin's comments that, for him, engaging in activist projects and being out as an atheist are very connected. To him, atheists need to be out doing things in the community *as atheists*, and should always be honest with others about their lack of religious belief in more personal and everyday situations as well. Most people did not make the same connections between activism and coming out, perhaps because most of my respondents joined atheist groups for social and personal reasons and were not interested in this kind of activism. We can see how Collin's enthusiasm for activism comes from his belief that atheists should come out of the closet, and he takes this idea to very public and socially engaged conclusions.

Most other people did not prescribe that every atheist should come out of the closet. Instead, they understood the difficult situations that might be caused by coming

out. Similar to Collin, however, most of my respondents did have a lot to say about how one should self-describe as a non-theist when they did choose to disclose that status. Choosing a non-theist term for self-description is a personal decision reflecting how an individual wants to convey their beliefs to other people. However, non-theist terms are also used to describe specific meet-up groups and the movement of non-believers as a whole. My respondents used a variety of terms to describe themselves as non-theists, including atheist, agnostic, bright, secularist, secular humanist, non-believer, and non-religious. These terms mean different things to different people, just like terms to describe a Christian or a Jew might have very different connotations depending on the context. As Sam noted, “It’s difficult to talk about religion without an agreed upon definition of what these terms mean.” Most of my respondents also problematized some of the terms people use to describe non-theists. As Steven put it: “There has been a big stink in the atheist community the past few years about what to call ourselves.”

Sam quipped, “There’s lots of flavors” to consider when deciding which non-theist term one wants to use in self-identification. “Atheist” seems to be the most wrestled-with term. “It’s a difficult word,” Sam noted, “it’s a dirty word; it’s an ugly word, and who wants to be associated with that?” He continued:

The term is so misunderstood that it’s really not effective communication a lot of times to say “I’m an atheist,” because the recipient of my words is going to jump to all kinds of conclusions like I sacrifice dogs or whatever.

Atheist, however, is the word he most often uses to describe himself; despite all the problems, qualifications, and concerns, “atheist” still fits for Sam, like it does for many other respondents. Patrick echoed similar sentiments sharing that when he uses the term atheist “people think we have two horns, a tail, and a pitchfork.” He noted that it “takes a

little time to get comfortable telling people” that he is an atheist, but this is the term he has come to use the most often. Ethan noted the same problems with using the term that Sam did, but Ethan views the adverse reaction as having a beneficial quality as well: “I like the shock value; some people see that as a negative, but sometimes it is necessary to be confrontational.” While most of my respondents choose to avoid conflict, Ethan pushes the boundaries of what is comfortable and safe when he chooses to use the term atheist despite the negative response he is likely to receive. Though he did not express why he thinks being confrontational is sometimes necessary, we can see how he exhibited a greater level of comfort with being out than many other respondents.

Others agreed. Collin, for example, said that it was “wishy-washy” to use non-theist terms other than atheist. He continued:

If you use those other words to describe yourself because you’re afraid to use the word atheist, I think it’s people who are fence sitters, people who are using it as a cop out, people who are using it to be more socially acceptable, and I don’t have any time of day for those kind of people...Deal with it...own that term, and the hell with anyone who has a problem with that.

Collin’s quote shows that not only does he use the term atheist for himself, but he feels very strongly that all people who lack religious belief should adopt “atheist” as well. Most people take a personal interest in deciding how to describe themselves as non-theists, but Collin wanted to encourage others to use the same term that he does. Likewise, Adam agreed that people can use other non-theists terms out of fear, and likes to use the word atheist because it “cuts to the point.” Frank also decided to use the term atheist, but came to realize the importance of using that term only after trying another for a while:

I would once have characterized myself as a secular humanist but realized that this was in fact a euphemism for atheist designed to hide the fact that I

was an atheist from others. Once I became comfortable with my opinions I dropped the pretense and adopted atheist as my self-description.

We can see a range of emotions from people who choose to use the term atheist. Collin provides the most vehement, and therefore less typical, type of response when he prescribes using only the term atheist for everyone. However, others who have adopted the term seem to view it more as a personal decision. Even respondents who are very sure that the term atheist is the most effective or the most accurate still understand why others might not feel comfortable using it or why they might be more selective when approaching some people outside of the atheist community.

Similar to some of the comments already discussed, Steven presented another dimension of the problem: “The word ‘atheist’ gets a bad rap, but that’s not our fault, and I don’t think we should call ourselves something different to appease intolerant people; they’d still hate us if we went by another name.” Steven’s grim perspective on the problematic term leads him to still use “atheist,” and he, like many others, reveal a move toward reappropriating the term. Whether for the sake of being blunt, of “owning the term,” or realizing that employing another term is futile, using the term atheist despite the negative implications represents a move to take back the term and take the negative force away from it.

“Take back the term,” was David’s prescription for combating the “social stigma with using the term [atheist].” Since “atheist” is often used as a derogatory label by people outside of the atheist community, wearing it as a badge of pride and renegotiating the meaning of the word can empower atheists. Instead of passively accepting a negative label for themselves and their community, some want to actively reappropriate “atheist”

and give it a positive meaning as they consciously use it to self-describe.⁶⁸ While reappropriating the term does not obligate people outside the movement to form positive ideas about the atheist community, it does help members inside the movement to feel like being a part of their minority group is a positive association. The move to reappropriate “atheist” is similar to previous movements, such members of the homosexual community reappropriating “queer” or some in the black community reappropriating “nigger.” By using a term that many see as demeaning, reappropriation takes the force out of the insult. My respondents who want to use the term atheist show an assertion of their agency in deciding to self-describe as atheists and giving the term positive connotations.⁶⁹

It seems that people who feel very strongly about using the term atheist are more comfortable with drawing stark boundaries between themselves and their group and the rest of society. Penny Egdell, Douglass Hartman, and Joseph Gerteis, in “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” show that the term atheist is used specifically for the purpose of drawing boundaries. Since the term does not denote what these people believe, but defines them in opposition to theists, it naturally divides atheists away from everyone else. However, they suggest that the term atheist is less meaningful for atheists themselves, and more meaningful for most other Americans who use the term to draw exclusionary symbolic boundaries.⁷⁰ While theists of various sorts certainly use the term atheist to exclude, we can see that “atheist” is a very meaningful designation for atheists as well. Some respondents who feel strongly

⁶⁸ Adam D. Galinsky, Kurt Hugenberg, Carla Groom, and Galen V. Bodenhausen, “The Reappropriation of Stigmatizing Labels: Implications for Social Identity,” in *Identity Issues in Groups*, ed. Jeffery T. Polzer (Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd., 2003), 222.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 231-232.

⁷⁰ Penny Egdell, Douglass Hartman, and Joseph Gerteis, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006): 214.

about the term, like Collin, also show a sense of pride in not being like the rest of society which they deem as not up to their standards.

Other respondents, however, do not want to reappropriate the term atheist and doubt the efficacy of attempts to do so. Some of my respondents expressed that there is an inherent problem in using the term, because “atheist” only defines someone in an oppositional relation to a “theist.” Ron, for example, noted that “atheist” is defining what someone *is not*, not what someone *is*. When asked about the term atheist, he responded, “Why would I want to identify myself from their perspective?” noting that “atheist” is a label a theist would use to classify an outsider. He continued:

We show up to the world with no beliefs so not having them doesn't make you anything...no where else in our lives we define ourselves by what we don't do...I wouldn't call myself a non-Republican, I call myself a Democrat.

Monica expressed very similar views about the problems inherent in the term, mirroring Ron's response: “If someone asks you ‘What do you believe?’ and you say you're an atheist, that's like them asking you ‘What's your favorite food?’ and you say ‘I don't like chicken.’” Katie agreed that the term atheist does not reveal any actual descriptors of the person: “Atheism is not a life stance; it is not a world view,” and it defines people “by something we're not.”

The term atheist has been characterized by many inside the non-theist movement as only a reaction to theism, and they prefer a term like “secular humanist” which conveys positive values and ethics.⁷¹ Respondents who criticized the term atheist for its vagueness and lack of substantive content might still choose to use that label, but others, like Katie, decided to employ self-descriptors such as “secular humanist,” which they

⁷¹ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism,” *Sociology of Religion* 68, vol. 4 (2007): 410.

agree is not predicated on difference or negative comparisons. While she says she will still use the term atheist, that usually only occurs when someone does not understand what secular humanism is and she has to explain further. When I asked Doug about the portrayal of non-theists communities to the broader public, he described his goals as a secular humanist: “being the best person I can be and dedicating some of my time to charitable works and causes just for the sake of making the world a better place and helping your fellow man.” Monica also saw the importance of calling herself a secular humanist, noting that this designates positive attributes such as “being a good person” or wanting to “solve people’s problems” while still emphasizing that they are secular not religious. This came up many times as a common way to self-describe according to values people possessed, not according to ideas they rejected.

Terms other than atheist, however, came under ridicule by some respondents. Patrick thought that self-describing as a “freethinker” was just an attempt at “trying to make yourself sound smart.” Evoking similar disdain, the most commonly dismissed and problematized term other than atheist was “bright.” Katie indicated how the term was “deliberately invented” to unite all types of non-theists under one word, but that the movement was a “big flop,” because “people in this movement are really resistant to someone telling them how to define themselves.” Her last point proved true across many of my interviews, as multiple respondents chose to avoid terms specifically because they felt like they were imposed from either outside the movement, like atheist, or from inside the movement, like bright. Others disapproved of the term bright because it is “obnoxious” or “arrogant,” or as Doug put it; “the term is condescending because it

implies that others are dim, and I don't think the best way of fixing a PR problem is something like that.”

Some did, however, accept the general idea behind inventing the term “bright.” Some referenced this term in relation to the word “gay,” explaining that some within the homosexual community decided to use “gay” to self-describe instead of reappropriating “queer.” By creating new terminology, the homosexual community could avoid the negative connotations implied in the imposed term “queer” and use a term, “gay,” which already had positive connotations. The term “bright” also already has positive connotations, and trying to unite different types of non-theists under an umbrella term is viewed by some of my respondents to be a positive step in fixing atheists’ “PR problem.”

Conclusions

We have seen in this chapter that when it comes to the public portrayal of atheism, my respondents expressed many conflicting views. As one of my respondents put it, getting atheists to agree on how to represent the body of non-believers or what the movement should be doing is like “herding cats.” Perhaps this is due to the fact that atheists are a minority group dealing with the reality of intolerance, and different individuals depending on their circumstances will negotiate their minority status in a variety of ways. The people who claimed that they have never faced personal discrimination are most likely to be out about their atheism and to engage in activism. Since these respondents have not faced immediate threat because of their atheism, they are less likely to shy away from confrontation and emphasis on exclusionary boundaries. Respondents who have faced discrimination are more likely to be selective in revealing that they are atheists and are less likely to engage in activism. We can see that fear of

predicted ramifications impact how comfortable one would be coming out and doing things *as an atheist* in his or her community. This reveals an interesting process of decision making for the individual, and although groups are often integral in the process of negotiating identity and teasing out ideas concerning public engagement, the decision of how to portray oneself as an atheist to society at large, if at all, often comes down to individual decisions. This is perhaps why meet-up discussions about how to engage in the community entail so much disagreement. Each person decides for themselves how public engagement might affect their life and chooses how to negotiate their minority identity accordingly. It is clear, however, that most of my respondents wish to take routes in expressing their atheism that do not exacerbate the boundary between believers and non-believers and the hostile attitudes that this boundary can encourage. Instead, people want the public face of atheism to convey a positive impression to American society.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

When I started this project, most people I told about it had no idea that discrimination against atheists was a problem. This furthered my resolve to lend my voice to this group. As we have seen, discrimination against atheists *is* a problem – they face intolerance ranging from social exclusion and feelings of isolation to hateful comments and life-changing events. Because of these intolerant actions, atheists choose to disclose their minority status selectively by actively evaluating the possible outcomes. They also find solace among fellow atheists, and their meet-up groups constitute the only place in many people’s lives where they feel completely safe *as an atheist*. This safe social space allows them to create and narrate their identities as atheists, which they cannot do in the context of other social interactions where they choose to stay in the closet. Atheist groups provide an outlet to vent frustrations, share stories, and receive positive reinforcement, as well as simply providing a place to make friends. Also, since atheists can be selective in disclosing their atheism, presenting atheism to the public raises difficult questions for individuals and groups. Overall, my respondents wish to present a public face of atheism that teaches Americans that atheists are good people, not to be feared, not to be hated.

While it is not likely that intolerance toward atheists in the United States will disappear any time soon, some of my respondents commented positively about the future. Many, for example, expressed hope in President Barack Obama and his potential to have a positive impact on the perception of atheists in America. “I’m glad President Obama mentioned us in his speech,” Steven shared. He was referring to President Obama’s inaugural address in which he added “non-believers” to the end of a list of religious affiliations. Monica said something similar and added, “Despite the like ten references to

God, at least we were there.” Also, Katie explained how President Obama provides good proof to the country that someone who was not raised in a religious household can still turn out to be a positive role model. Perhaps this signals little real change in the negative feelings many Americans harbor about atheists, but my respondents still felt hopeful, because being mentioned at all is a step toward public recognition of their existence.

While a typical meet-up includes plenty of pessimistic comments about the state of atheists in the United States, meet-ups were actually rather joyous occasions. Not only are atheist communities the only setting for my respondents to tell stories of intolerance to a sympathetic ear, they are also they only social group in which atheists can share their hopes that their situation will get better. I think Steven summed up the hopes of my respondents best:

We want to show America that we are good citizens, we pay our taxes and help the needy. We’re not angry communists who want to burn down churches and ban the Bible, that’s ridiculous. We...go to work, raise our kids and mow the lawn just like everybody else. We just happen to not believe in any god, that’s it. The atheists I know are a pretty fun and compassionate group of people.

Perhaps the most important thing an atheist community provides its members is a sense of hope that other Americans will realize that atheists are as normal, as good, and as respectable as any one else, and until that happens, they have a community that will help them through.

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