

THANK GOD I'M AN ATHEIST:  
DECONVERSION NARRATIVES ON THE INTERNET

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

To a large extent, the academic study of religion has yet to seriously consider the reality of atheism in the United States. The popular claim that atheism is “the fastest-growing minority in the country”<sup>1</sup> is difficult to verify, but a sufficient amount of demographic studies have made it undeniable that the number of atheists in the United States is growing rapidly. According to Kosmin & Keysar, et al. (2009), who evaluated three waves of the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), the number of people who identify as having no religious affiliation is increasing by roughly 660,000 each year. (20) If they are compared with other religious groups, “their numbers far exceed the combined total of all the non-Christian religious groups in the U.S.” (Kosmin & Keysar et al. 2009, i) Importantly, these numbers refer broadly to all individuals who choose not to identify with any of a list of organized religions and may include individuals with theist or deist beliefs of a more individualized kind. In other words, these numbers point toward an increasing disenchantment with organized religion in the United States, but these trends may also point only toward the individualization or personalization of religious beliefs predicted by advocates of the secularist hypothesis.<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, it is more difficult to gather numbers concerning Americans who identify as atheists – that is, as decidedly believing that God’s inexistence is, for all intents and purposes, impossible. According to the same studies, atheists only account for about seven percent of this larger demographic. (Kosmin & Keysar et al. 2009, 11) One Financial Times/Harris poll put the population of avowed atheists in the United States at

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Werleman, Flynn, Atkinson

<sup>2</sup> See for example Bruce 13-19

four percent in 2006, which means in theory that there are at least a million individuals in the U.S. who identify as atheist. (U.S. Census Bureau 2011)

Despite this handful of sociological inquiries, the vast majority of public-domain discourse concerning atheism is anything but academic. Searching for “Christianity” on Google’s database of scholarly articles will yield roughly 13 times as many works as searching for “atheism.” Of those scholarly works, the majority are works of theology and philosophy which forward arguments about either the superiority of atheism over religion or, more commonly, vice versa. The handful of bestsellers concerning atheism have been exclusively scathing attacks on religion by scientists and political commentators<sup>3</sup> or equally scathing attacks on atheism by religious apologists.<sup>4</sup> To the extent that atheism has been studied in academia, very few scholars have devoted their time or energy to the actual discourse and practices being employed in the atheist community. The number of books devoted to ethnographic analyses of what atheists say, think, or do would hardly fill a modest bookshelf, and there is a similar dearth of material in periodicals.

This thesis is an attempt to fill that gap. What follows is an analysis of a very particular body of discourse. The deconversion narrative – an atheist’s autobiographical account of their journey from religion to atheism – has become one of the most important discursive methods by which atheists on the internet form bonds of affiliation with a greater atheist community. In writing this thesis, I read hundreds of deconversion narratives published on Richard Dawkins’ *Convert’s Corner*<sup>5</sup> and [exchristian.net](http://new.exchristian.net/)<sup>6</sup> – the

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Dawkins 2006b, Harris 2004, and Hitchens 2007

<sup>4</sup> See for example McGrath 2006 and McGrath & McGrath 2010

<sup>5</sup> <http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts>

<sup>6</sup> <http://new.exchristian.net/>

two most extensive sources of internet discourse concerning what it means to call oneself an atheist. These accounts were published between April 2010 and April 2011 and read in roughly chronological order. While attention was paid to information volunteered by deconverts concerning their ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and gender, my primary focus in analyzing deconversion narratives was on the types of literary elements used to describe atheism as a subject position. In other words, while scholars of psychology like Heinz Streib et al. (2009) and Janet Jacobs (1987), have largely focused on the psychological effects and quantifiable demographic details of the actual process of deconversion, this thesis instead engages with the discourse of deconversion narratives *as* discourse. By “discourse,” I mean to situate this thesis in a Foucauldian methodology, in which discourse is understood as a network of relations of “resemblance, proximity, distance, transformation” by which historical objects are related to other objects and thereby constructed out of the language available to describe and evaluate them. (Foucault 1972, 49) The analysis of discourse employed in this thesis begins from the presumption that language can never objectively and impartially describe material reality, including the formation of the subject, but that it instead creates the very terms which allow those objects and subject-positions to have meaning. The use of the term “subject-position” throughout this thesis is also intended to ground the following analysis in a Foucauldian lens, referring to the claim that the way individuals understand their own identities – even concerning those facets of identity which appear purely material or natural such as sex and race – is deeply conditioned by language which compels individuals to understand those forms of identification in particular and ubiquitously normativized ways.

A discursive analysis of atheist writings on the internet has remained largely absent from academic discussions of atheism. Stephen Bullivant, lecturer in theology and ethics at St. Mary's University College at Twickenham, and John D. Barbour, professor of religion at St. Olaf College, have taken the crucial first step of highlighting the discursive themes which most frequently emerge in deconversion narratives, but have not attempted to explain those themes in terms of what they imply about atheist subjectivity. In other words, no one has looked in-depth at how the language which describes what it means to be an atheist affects broader questions of identity such as the extent to which identity is fluidly constructed rather than strictly determined. Thus, this thesis will isolate a few of the linguistic themes which emerge when hundreds of atheist individuals set out to share their accounts of how they became atheists. It is an endeavor to explain the discursive functions which those themes may play in the formation of individual atheist subjectivities and an internet atheist community. It is, ultimately, an attempt to begin uncovering the implications of one popular understanding of atheist identity in terms of what that discursively-constructed identity implies about the limits of self-creation and the appropriateness of attempts to influence the formation of the identities of others. I will demonstrate that this form of atheist discourse serves to transform the identities of those who participate in it while covering its own tracks, so to speak, and simultaneously disguising the degree to which identity is open to discursive transformation. It is in this regard that I think that my analysis of atheism on the internet is of importance for any scholar interested in the way that identity is constantly being destabilized and restabilized, for it demonstrates that such a process should not be understood as a result

of a particular kind of religious or anti-religious epistemology, but as a result of a particular form of discourse.

Thus, while this thesis begins with the question, “what is atheism?” it is ultimately geared toward the question, “what is an atheist?” The former question addresses atheism as it is commonly and simplistically understood – as a monolithic ideology to which all atheists ascribe. The latter question addresses the various discursive practices by which individuals who call themselves atheists connect their subjectivities to a collective atheist identity and simultaneously distance their subjectivities from both religious and atheist ideology. The latter question requires an analysis of the metaphors and literary themes used in deconversion narratives so as to draw out the hidden assumptions concerning subjectivity which lie at the intersection of atheist and religious language. However, it is important to understand how these two questions may yield unexpectedly different answers, and thus it is with the first question that we begin.

## CHAPTER 1: WHAT IS ATHEISM?

In surveying discussions concerning the growth of an atheist movement in the United States, one finds a sharp polarity between two opposing understandings of what atheism is. Atheism, like many of the 'isms' of identification (capitalism, socialism, Episcopalianism, patriotism, libertarianism, etc.) championed in today's society, is taken to stand for a philosophy with its own unified tradition, history, and authority. People from across the political and religious spectrum have chimed in to define atheism in such a way as to simultaneously unify the diversity of atheist individuals under a common philosophical banner and to illuminate the relationship between atheism and Judeo-Christian<sup>7</sup> religion.

### ATHEISM AS RELIGION

On the one side of this polarity, one finds a wealth of commentators who claim that atheism is nothing more than religion in disguise. A number of critics of atheism argue that, while atheism rejects the possibility of God's existence, it frequently appears to share many sociological similarities with religious fundamentalism, recognized by its commitment to the impropriety of applying human (subjective) interpretations to religious truths and a sense of responsibility for a morally bankrupt society which remains blind to its own failings:

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<sup>7</sup> While many atheists are quick to vilify Islam and other religions, atheism is most often defined in contrast to a particularly Christian form of theology.

the conviction that they are in sole possession of truth (scientific or otherwise), the troubling lack of tolerance for the views of their critics... and, perhaps most bizarrely, their overwhelming sense of siege: the belief that they have been oppressed and marginalized by Western societies and are just not going to take it anymore. (Aslan 2010, xiii)

This line of reasoning is perhaps the most common rebuttal to atheism as a social movement. Many religionists in America today are willing and in fact eager to admit that one cannot know with certainty whether God exists or not. Thus, one sees the appeal to faith – a belief in the existence of God which is regarded as all the more significant precisely because it does not rely on observed evidence – as that which is necessitated by God’s inherent ineffability. Hence, atheism is caricatured as a kind of fundamentalism<sup>8</sup> by comparison. In these portrayals, fundamentalism is understood less by its connotations of biblical literalism than as an unwillingness to take seriously evidence which belies one’s core convictions and thus creates a sense of metaphysical uncertainty:

What the new atheists do not do, and what makes them so much like the religious fundamentalists they abhor, is admit that all metaphysical claims – be they about the possibility of a transcendent presence in the universe or the birth of the incarnate God on earth – are ultimately unknowable and, perhaps, beyond the purview of science. (Aslan 2010, xv)

Scholars have sought to demonstrate that this claim within atheism to have sole access to metaphysical certainty – to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that God’s existence is an impossibility – amounts to an epistemology identical with that of religious fundamentalism. What atheism shares with religion, some argue, is that both see only “one dimension of reality.” (Stahl 2010, 100) The fact that atheism looks like religion in its claim to have an exclusive hold on truth is actually a result of a particular form of discourse. “The New Atheism and fundamentalism present us with two totalities: closed,

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Fundamentalism’ here is used to connote an unwillingness to take seriously evidence which perhaps belies one’s core convictions.

one-dimensional, and incommensurable systems of thought...with no common standard of evaluation.” (Stahl 2010, 105) It is argued that atheism’s nearly ubiquitous marriage with scientific materialism<sup>9</sup> constructs a religious epistemology. Both atheism and religion defend their authoritative claims by embracing the “unknowable” as supporting their worldview. In some religious discourse, the claim that theological language can never capture God’s true nature only demonstrates the radical difference between humanity and God, motivating the need for a kind of emotional or nonrational approach to the divine.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in some atheist discourse, the fact that scientific language can never observe the most fundamental processes underlying observed reality only demonstrates the absurdity of attempting to discover truth via non-scientific means. The impossibility of observing quantum mechanics, for example, follows from and lends weight to the discoveries of the scientific method rather than serving to demonstrate science’s limitations. In both cases, the blind spots constructed out of the discourse being used, scientific or theological, create a kind of try-or-die scenario; certain realms of reality may be unattainable, but only one discourse has a hope of eventually understanding or experiencing them because it is the only discourse which can account for them. If scientific discourse cannot immediately overcome the obstacles to the observation of quantum processes, in other words, it is still superior to religious discourse in that it can explain why those obstacles exist and begin to devise methods to either overcome or circumvent them. If religious discourse cannot adequately describe the

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<sup>9</sup> Typically, this is referred to as ‘naturalism’ by atheist scholars and amounts to an unwillingness to look beyond observable nature to explain the operations of the universe.

<sup>10</sup> Thus, liberal religionists who oppose atheism may appeal to thinkers like Paul Tillich, Friedrich Schliermacher, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer to demonstrate that religion is not so much about truth as it is about community or a basic sense of morality, allowing them to argue that atheists have more in common with religious fundamentalists than they do.

characteristics of God, it is still superior to scientific discourse in that it can engender the appropriate feelings of awe and humility which can transform God's alterity from an obstacle to a source of religious experience.

In modern religious discourse, then, that which is "unknowable" is necessarily so, following logically from the radical alterity of the divine, while in scientific discourse, that which is "unknowable" is generally accidentally so, following from current yet temporary inadequacies of observational technology. However, in both cases, the gap between human description and reality is used to argue that only one mode of understanding the world is appropriate. Only the scientific worldview can come up with the technologies and methods capable of overcoming current obstacles to observation, while only the religious worldview can sufficiently describe the ritual and emotional means by which the individual can overcome the radical divorce between humans and God. By this logic, discursive alternatives are not explicitly forbidden, but subjugated to a privileged form of knowledge which is "morally acceptable and technically useful." (Foucault 1978, 21)

Thus, despite the handful of writers who have attempted to demonstrate that the blind spots encountered in scientific and religious discourse are mutually-reinforcing,<sup>11</sup> the scientific epistemology which underpins most atheist discourse is imagined as diametrically opposed to the religious worldview. Atheistic science, it is argued, *discovers* obstacles only in attempts to observe material reality, while religious thought actively *creates* abstract and logically insurmountable obstacles precisely because it operates in a realm which is necessarily unobservable. The epistemological differences between these discursive blind spots create a sharp polarization between religion and

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<sup>11</sup> See for example Peacocke 2001, Polkinghorne 1998, Murphy & Ellis 2009

atheism, for one can only hope to circumvent them within the confines of the worldview in which they are encountered. If the reasons for the difficulty in observing quantum processes are exclusively material, then religion has as much hope of resolving this difficulty as science has of understanding a God who is defined by immateriality. Hence, atheism's reliance on a scientific or naturalist epistemology creates a situation in which atheism and religion are regarded as mutually exclusive, not simply by virtue of the atheist rejection of God's existence, but because of the divergent methods by which religionists and scientists are presumed to understand reality. Ultimately, this reasoning which regards atheism as the flip-side of the metaphysical coin is more frequently seen in the claim that atheism, like religion, involves a leap of faith. The liberal religionist may feel comfortable in arguing with agnostics that it is impossible to know for certain whether God does or does not exist, for they may still embrace faith or religious community to tip the balance in favor of belief, but atheism is seen as a short-sighted form of fundamentalism – a conviction that God certainly does not exist in the absence of compelling evidence coupled with a misguided faith in the ability of science to one day explain even those forces of nature which it is, by definition, unable to observe.

At the same time, the conviction that every facet of reality can, in theory, be understood through scientific discourse also serves to render atheism mutually exclusive with agnosticism, the claim that it is currently impossible to determine with certainty whether God exists. Agnosticism, in contrast to atheism, purportedly reflects a lack of confidence in the ability of naturalist science to answer metaphysical questions.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Notably, agnosticism is often attacked by both religionists who view an unwillingness to resolve the question of God's existence as the functional equivalent of denial, echoing Pascalian logic, and atheists who view this same unwillingness as enabling an unacceptably tolerant attitude toward religious fundamentalism.

However, while atheism relies on its exclusivist epistemology for its position in opposition to metaphysical thinking, giving scientific analysis veto power over religious claims, the function of this epistemology in monopolizing modes of analysis is precisely the same as the religious epistemology which gives religious dogma veto power over the discoveries of science. Thus, belying the claim that atheism is simply a cultic alternative to Christianity – mutually exclusive with religion precisely because it shares religion’s dogmatism – it is perhaps more accurate to say that the opposition between atheism and religion is less a matter of two radically incommensurable epistemologies than it is a matter of one discursive formation constructed out of a continuous negotiation concerning the prioritization of two overlapping epistemologies. The very fact that atheist discourse can only be defined in reference to religious language indicates that certain “rules of formation” govern which rhetoric can be properly defined as atheist and generate a sense of “regularity” (Foucault 1972, 38) by which the language of atheism and religion are inextricably connected.

#### ATHEISM AS ANTI-RELIGION

The claim that atheism amounts to a perverted form of religious fundamentalism has sent atheist writers to great lengths to distinguish atheism from religion. Emblematic of this move is the work of Richard Dawkins, an ethologist who has become perhaps the world’s most popular and outspoken atheist. In *The Selfish Gene* and *The Extended Phenotype*, Dawkins made waves in the scientific community in the 1970’s and 1980’s

by championing a gene-centered view of evolution. As he gained popularity, Dawkins increasingly tied his scientific claims to religious criticism, setting his sights on advocates of Intelligent Design, the claim that the existence of God can be verified by scientific analysis. (Dawkins 1996) By 2006, Dawkins was primarily associated with atheism, publishing *The God Delusion*, which has sold more than two million copies and has been translated into 31 languages. (Dawkins 2010) Dawkins appears well aware of the claim by his opponents that atheism is epistemologically religious. In much of his writings concerning religion, Dawkins distinguishes atheism from religion by insisting on the inherent openness of scientific materialism to contradictory evidence. To Dawkins, the belief in God is already a scientific hypothesis relying on observations of the underlying order of the universe. By regarding religion as a matter of empiricism – one which can largely be resolved by an appeal to that which can be observed – Dawkins avoids arguing that God’s nonexistence is a metaphysical certainty. Instead, he repeatedly claims that God “almost certainly” does not exist. To Dawkins, the universe simply makes more sense without God than with:

A universe with a god would be a completely different kind of universe from one without, and it would be a scientific difference. God could clinch the matter in his favour at any moment by staging a spectacular demonstration of his powers, one that would satisfy the exacting standards of science. (Dawkins 2006a)

Hence, Dawkins’ atheism does not rule out all metaphysical questioning. It is solely intended to dispute the existence of an active, personal God:

If, by 'God', you mean love, nature, goodness, the universe, the laws of physics, the spirit of humanity, or Planck's constant, none of the above applies. An American student asked her professor whether he had a view about me. 'Sure,' he replied. 'He's positive science is incompatible with religion, but he waxes ecstatic about nature and the universe. To me, that *is* religion!' Well, if that's what you choose to mean by religion, fine, that makes me a religious man. But if your God is a being who designs universes, listens to prayers, forgives sins, wreaks

miracles, reads your thoughts, cares about your welfare and raises you from the dead, you are unlikely to be satisfied. (Dawkins 2006a)

In this sense, then, Dawkins seeks to distinguish atheism from religion by focusing only on the forms of religion he finds most pernicious and politically relevant – so-called “extremists” who use religious faith to justify physical violence. He resorts to evolutionary theory not to claim that atheism has a monopoly on metaphysical truth, but instead to claim that atheism can reasonably ignore certain metaphysical possibilities until they are accompanied by empirical evidence. For Dawkins, this is not a leap of faith but a calculated prediction based on scientific data. Because he relies on scientific materialism, Dawkins cannot dispute the possible existence of that which is truly ineffable, but he does dispute the existence of any transcendental deity whose actions can be observed in this world. Consequently, he distinguishes atheism from religion by leaving open the possibility that the atheist view of the universe might require and embrace modification as new evidence is uncovered, while religion purportedly maintains a static view of the universe which is only permitted to react to and necessarily subordinate scientific discoveries. For Dawkins, then, the difference between atheism and religion boils down to a question of probability versus certainty. Atheism, the reasoning goes, is not a metaphysical conviction but a political stance based on a scientific probability; there is *almost* certainly no God, but the scientific method demands that the atheist live his or her life in accordance with the soundest theory and thus it is pragmatic to behave *as if* God’s existence is impossible. As Dawkins is wont to point out, this jump from probability to praxis is not a leap of faith, but an unavoidable matter of daily pragmatism representing the only alternative to epistemological chaos. After all, he claims, most Christians are “atheists” when it comes to purportedly obvious

absurdities like unicorns or Hindu gods – ‘true’ atheists merely take it one step further and rule out the possibility of the nonempirical:

Not only do we need no God to explain the universe and life. God stands out in the universe as the most glaring of all superfluous sore thumbs. We cannot, of course, disprove God, just as we can't disprove Thor, fairies, leprechauns and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. But, like those other fantasies that we can't disprove, we can say that God is very very improbable. (Dawkins 2006a)

### SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

It has just been argued that the majority of discourse concerning atheism is divided between a caricature of atheism as that which denies the existence of God with the same kind of epistemology of dogmatic faith as those who affirm the existence of god, on one side, and a self-representation of atheism as a totally unique epistemology of scientific probability having no similarities with religious worldviews, on the other.

Nonetheless, a few intellectuals have attempted to demonstrate the space for subjecthood between atheism and religion despite and indeed in reaction to this discursive polarization. Notably, Mark C. Taylor, professor of religion at Columbia University, has argued for the need to break down this dichotomy. On the one hand, Taylor falls somewhat into the camp of those who see atheism as a replication of the religious metaphysic, arguing that the very attempt to distance atheism from religion is what generates the affinity between the two. Referring to ‘humanistic atheism,’ by which he refers to those who see atheism as better serving the goals of religion by producing more ethical and compassionate subjects, Taylor (1987) claims that such a view merely enacts

a “reversal of divinity” by which “the humanistic atheist transfers the attributes of the divine subject to the human self.” (25) This inversion, to Taylor, makes humanistic atheism incapable of ever escaping the discursive confines of a religious worldview:

By transferring the predicates of divinity to the human subject, the humanistic atheist inverts, but fails to subvert, the logic of repression. With this inversion, the problem of mastery and slavery is relocated rather than resolved. The death of the sovereign God now appears to be the birth of the sovereign self. (Taylor 1987, 25)

On the other hand, Taylor does not regard this critique as grounds for the abandonment of an atheist sensibility. Instead, Taylor advocates what he calls “a/theology,” in which:

The struggle against the omnipotent father does not simply repeat the undialectical inversion of God and self enacted in humanistic atheism...Far from resisting the unsettling currents that circulate throughout postmodern worlds, the a/theologian welcomes the death of God and embraces the disappearance of the self. (Taylor 1987, 104)

To Taylor (1987), the problem with humanistic atheism is that the underlying logic of religion is left intact – the conviction “that beyond, behind, beneath, or within the play of appearances there is an enduring logos that constitutes the essence or reality of phenomena.” (175) In religion, this conviction stems from the existence of God, while in atheism, this conviction is maintained in the insistence on the sovereignty of the human subject. Thus, Taylor attempts to reconcile the useful aspects of atheism – namely its rejection of God as an ultimate source of meaning – with the need for further epistemological work in undermining all objective meaning. (Taylor 1987, 158)

In a similar vein, Michel Onfray, prolific French philosopher and founder of the tuition-free Université Populaire (People's University) at Caen, France, has criticized humanistic atheism for its similarities to religion. Onfray’s position is that of a more

radical atheism – one which is not content to simply reject the existence of God without simultaneously rejecting the notion of transcendent ethics: “Secular thought is not de-Christianized thought, but immanent Christian thought. Couched in rational language, it nevertheless preserves the quintessence of the Judeo-Christian ethic.” (Onfray 2007, 217) For Onfray, any form of atheism is insufficient so long as it maintains the possibility that there is an objective difference between morally right and wrong (45), views the body as a receptacle of purity (47), deploys strategies of social organization modeled on religious institutions (215), or subscribes to the notion that humans have free will (49). All of these assumptions are simple remnants of the Judeo-Christian legacy which survive in the western legal system and popular conceptions of every facet of society from sexuality and gender to bio-ethics.

As with Taylor, Onfray regards the affinity between atheism and religion as stemming from a similar epistemology, namely the conviction that an objective principle underlies lived experience:

Where then does the Catholic substratum survive? And where the Judeo-Christian epistemology? Simply in the notion that matter, the real, and the world are not all there is. That something remains outside all the explanatory apparatus: a force, a power, an energy, a determinism, a will, a desire...And the world – is it absurd, irrational, illogical, monstrous, senseless? Assuredly not ... Something must exist to justify, legitimize, make sense. Otherwise...(Onfray 2007, 45)

At the same time, while Taylor attempts to position himself in a critical space between the problematic binary of religion and atheism, Onfray criticizes Judeo-Christian ethics in order to push atheism beyond such a binary. Both thinkers claim that atheism merely replicates a religious worldview, but Onfray is perhaps more invested in rehabilitating atheism rather than merely abandoning the moniker as misleading. Onfray also deploys the term “atheology,” but unlike Taylor, Onfray celebrates rationality and

demands that the division between atheism and religion be more stringently enforced rather than deconstructed. While Taylor's a/theology amounts to a refusal to privilege either atheism or religion with epistemological independence, Onfray's atheology amounts to a "de-Christianization" (215) of ethics through immanentist philosophy – a rejection of all transcendent thought "with no exceptions." (46) In this sense, Onfray calls for a greater commitment to the project of nihilism as a stepping stone to what he calls "post-Christian" (57) atheism and for the creation of a hedonist ethical system which does not appeal to objective truths or metanarratives.

#### THE RELIGION-ATHEISM CONNECTION

The work of Taylor and Onfray demonstrate an attempt to build on the recognition that atheism exists in a co-constitutive relationship with religious thought while criticizing both religion and scientific materialism. Nonetheless, Taylor and Onfray may be considered outliers on the public landscape on which atheism is defined. Despite infrequent attempts to problematize the polarized view of atheism as either a fundamentalism akin to religion or as the radical opposite of the religious worldview, most popular discussions of atheism reinforce the dichotomy. As atheists like Richard Dawkins attempt to distinguish atheism from religion, a specific and normativized discursive formation has emerged around atheism. Dawkins repeatedly asserts that atheism comprises a very specific subject position. The proper atheist, he argues, engages with the world as if God certainly does not exist, even while he or she recognizes

that this certainty is, in actuality, a scientific hypothesis. Thus, the atheist, in contrast to the waffling agnostic, is functionally forbidden from employing discourse which accepts the possibility of God's existence. This shunning of discourse which accepts the undeniable yet overwhelmingly remote possibility that God exists constitutes a silence – “an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies...an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.” (Foucault 1978, 27) As Stuart Hall writes in reference to Foucault:

Just as a discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it ‘rules out’, limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it. (Hall 1997, 44)

This polarization between atheism and religion is ubiquitous. Writers like Dawkins point out that the very term ‘atheism’ is an unfortunate negation to the delusions of religion. There are no formal titles for those who refuse to believe in Unicorns or the possibility of alchemy – atheism exists only in opposition to religion as a temporary corrective to a metaphysical absurdity. Nonetheless, this opposition between atheism and religion necessarily dictates what must be appropriately conceded by the proper atheist. The atheist must not, it is implied, believe with absolute certainty that God does not exist, nor can the atheist admit to too much metaphysical uncertainty lest they fall into the agnostic camp, which would render them unacceptably similar to the liberal religionist.

Thus, when one examines the rhetoric used to define atheism as a philosophy, one is hard-pressed to find a thriving middle ground between those who claim that atheism is merely empiricist fundamentalism and those who claim that atheism is the only discourse immune to the absolutist rhetoric of religion. The heatedness of the debate between

atheism's proponents and opponents as well as the overwhelming focus on epistemology and the question of what constitutes "faith" as the locus for any potential similarity or mutual-exclusivity between religion and atheism has functioned to exclude this potential middle-ground from popular discourse. As the atheist movement becomes increasingly concerned with dispelling the claim that it is a disguised cult, a powerful discursive formation emerges, in which discursive events "refer to the same object, share the same style and ...support a strategy ...a common institutional, administrative or political drift and pattern." (Cousins & Hussain 1984, 84-85) This 'common institutional drift' at the heart of atheism is none other than the overwhelming insistence that something irredeemably separates atheism and religion. Attendant with this insistence is a subtle proscription on rhetoric which appears either overly agnostic or immanent – that is, the rhetoric of atheism is constantly deployed in a discursive formation whose boundaries are policed. To refuse to admit that God just *might* exist is to commit the sin of fundamentalism; to entertain too readily that very same possibility is to commit the sin of agnosticism.

Atheism is, then, a movement which can only be defined in its opposition to religion – an opposition which is continuously produced and reified through discourse. As a rejection of the religious belief in God's existence, atheism is only intelligible by means of the religious language which it opposes. The subject to which atheism refers is not God, but rather the religious discourse which imagines and constructs God. Atheist discourse must deploy this religious discourse in order to reject it, and thus must be considered part of the same discursive formation in the sense that, while it negates the religious response to the question of God's existence, it nonetheless accepts this question

as a discursive hypothesis worthy of consideration. The terms of the debate concerning God's existence – including the nature of both God and human subject – are largely granted by the atheist for the sake of argument. As Roderick Hart (1978) puts it, “irreligionists increasingly depend upon their more successful partner for *rhetorical* initiative as well; they allow the churches to determine what topics are worth discussing as well as how and when those topics should be discussed.” (36) The consequences of this move are crucial; if “religion...decides atheism's field of argument,” (Hart 1978, 37) then religion also decides atheism's field of subjectivity, as the participation in a discursive formation necessarily determines the conditions of the formation of the subject. (Foucault 1982, 208) To better understand the atheist subject, in other words, it is important to realize that atheism is not a freestanding signifier untouched by the presuppositions of the religious language that it rejects; it is produced out of the overlapping discourse between belief and nonbelief. As Stephen Bullivant has noted, deconversion stories are better understood as accounts of “irreligious experiences,” a term he borrows from Colin Campbell, (1971, 127) rather than “non-religious experiences.” “*Secular or non-religious* experiences...imply no reference or connection to religion whatsoever, whether positive or negative, *pro* or *contra*. This is not the case with irreligious experiences, which are perhaps best to be understood as a (*prima facie*) negative subset of religious experiences.” (Bullivant 2008, 8) This discursive formation, wherein one sees the simultaneous deployment and rejection of religious language and the construction of atheist subjecthood, is precisely where deconversion narratives emerge.

The policing of the boundaries around atheism does not occur exclusively or primarily in the discussion of atheism as a philosophy or movement. While Dawkins stresses that atheism is a matter of scientific probability rather than metaphysical certainty, this does not necessarily speak to the question of what it means to call oneself an atheist. To better understand atheism and all of its discursive limitations, one must attend to the question of the subject and attempt to understand what it means to be an atheist. This, in turn, requires an examination of those “technologies of the self” (Foucault 1988a, 18) which construct the atheist subject position. Precisely because atheism only gains definition by referring to religious language concerning God, the atheist subject-position is always already imbued with the discursive limitations on subjectivity inherent in religious discourse. “It is not enough to say that the subject is constituted in a symbolic system. It is not just in the play of symbols that the subject is constituted. It is constituted in real practices. There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them.” (Foucault 1984, 369) Thus, an examination of the praxical elements of deconversion narratives can bring to light the nuances of those discursive limitations and the processes by which they subtly traverse the supposedly stark boundary between atheism and religion. Before we can analyze the details of deconversion narratives, however, we must attend to the implications that arise when one regards atheism as belonging to the same discursive formation as religion. The preceding problematization of the false binary between religion and atheism is what enables us to appreciate the affinities between atheist and religious discourse as they function in constructing subjectivities. It will first be necessary to understand the ways in which subjectivities are commonly formulated in

discursive practice. Only then will it become apparent that the rhetorical similarities between deconversion narratives and religious writing, rather than merely demonstrating a kind of argumentative rejoinder, actually have profound implications concerning atheist subjecthood. Put differently, the details of deconversion narratives must be deferred until we have a proper understanding of the significance of autobiographical writing in the formation of collective and individual subjectivities.

## CHAPTER 2: INTERNET ATHEISM AND TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF

Not so long ago, atheism was largely absent from the national political landscape. Before the advent of the internet, which now constitutes one of the most substantive discursive arenas, ‘atheist’ was a term used almost exclusively in academia and religious apologetics as a synonym for ‘heretic.’ In ancient Greece, for example, philosophers like Protagoras, Socrates, and Epicurus have been retroactively regarded as atheists or agnostics by modern scholars. (Bremmer 2007, 11) However, these philosophers are perhaps better understood as philosophical or religious skeptics, as the emergence of the Greek term *atheos*, meaning “godless, without gods, godforsaken,” comes relatively late in the development of Greek philosophy and seems to have been used broadly to label all those who expressed skepticism toward the existence of anthropomorphic gods as heretics. (Bremmer 2007, 23) During the Hellenistic period, too, accusations of atheism were used pejoratively to slander anyone who disagreed in any way with dominant religious views, such that there appears to be no historical evidence of “practicing atheists” as there is today. (Bremmer 2007, 24) This can also be said of the ancient Christian period, when Christians who were formerly accused of atheism by pagan philosophers now accused the pagans of practicing “atheist polytheism.” (Origen, *Exhortatio* 5, 32 and *Contra* 1.1, 3.73.)

Up until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in other words, “atheist” was a term used polemically to insult those who disagreed with orthodoxy and was rarely if ever used as a form of self-identification. (Armstrong 1987, 288) Such atheisms in antiquity were rarely associated with a social or political movement; they were, rather, isolated to exceptional and often

persecuted individuals. (Bremmer 2007, 12) Only during the enlightenment and the modernist writings of Bertrand Russell, David Hume, Ludwig Feuerbach and the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud did atheism slowly achieve the status of a self-professed philosophy. To some, the transformation which turned atheism into a source of pride rather than shame was made possible by the Enlightenment's privileging of philosophy over theology. (Buckley 1990, 33) As theologians took a reactionary posture in relation to the discoveries of science and rational philosophy, atheism gained legitimacy as a philosophy which appeared to easily follow from Enlightenment thinking. Nonetheless, this shift from theology to philosophy and the attendant transformation of atheism from something considered heretical to something considered rational took place almost exclusively in an elite intellectual circle. Thus, atheism remained confined to the realm of abstract philosophy and science throughout the modern period.

Today, atheism appears to have achieved its greatest distance from the intellectual sphere in history. While atheism's primary proponents remain deeply mired in a scientific method which emerged out of the Enlightenment, the atheism of today must be understood first and foremost as a social or political movement with its own non-intellectual laity. As Jacqueline L. Salmon (2007) put it in the Washington Post, "A legion of the godless is rising up against the forces of religiosity in American society." It cannot be denied that the internet has played a crucial role in the recent emergence of atheism as a self-aware social movement. The vast majority of atheist activity either occurs or is organized online, and websites now exist which cater to diverse members of the atheist movement.<sup>13</sup> Several scholars have attempted to outline the implications of the

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<sup>13</sup> For example, <http://www.parentingbeyondbelief.com/> caters to parents who wish to raise atheist children, <http://www.atheists.meetup.com/> and <http://www.atheistnexus.org/> offer dating services for atheists looking

strong connection between atheism and the internet. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2011), for example, have noted that “the substantial transformations in our contemporary media-scape are creating a new space for atheists to come out, speak out, and ‘meet up’ in a still largely religious society.” (31) Based on online questionnaires administered to self-proclaimed atheists, Cimino and Smith claim that this reliance on the internet tends to simultaneously produce both a sense of acceptance and exclusion for the online atheist<sup>14</sup> community. On the one hand, the growth of atheism on the internet allows atheists to “imagine themselves as part of a community...even though they will likely never meet many, if any, of their fellow secularists.” (Cimino & Smith 2011, 34) Hence, a greater feeling of acceptance is engendered as atheists identify with the experiences of countless other atheists on the internet. While atheists constitute a relatively small and particularly reviled social demographic, hundreds of websites devoted exclusively to self-proclaimed atheists intimate to their members that they can maintain some sense of unity, despite the barrier of physical distance, in their sense of shared persecution. Atheists routinely express fears concerning discrimination in the workplace and a general feeling of social stigma from those around them.<sup>15</sup> To some extent, these fears may not be unfounded, as polls regularly show atheism as one of the most unpopular characteristics in public figures.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, then, the sense of community created by atheist websites and forums necessarily produces a simultaneous

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for other atheists, and <http://www.militaryatheists.org> caters to “atheists in foxholes,” members of the American Armed Forces which identify as atheist.

<sup>14</sup> For Cimino and Smith, ‘atheist’ and ‘secularist’ are used interchangeably.

<sup>15</sup> See for example Downey 2004

<sup>16</sup> For example, a Gallup Poll asked Americans how willing they would be to vote for a president who was: Catholic, black, Jewish, female, Hispanic, Mormon, homosexual, or an atheist. The Catholic candidate won the hypothetical race with 93 percent approval. The atheist took dead last, lagging well behind homosexual, with only 46 percent of respondents being willing to support a nonreligious candidate. (Gallup 2007)

feeling of exclusion as participants are constantly made cognizant of the fact that their community is a virtual one and that their bubble of commonality is hemmed on all sides by a society which scorns them.

The result of these conflicting feelings of acceptance and rejection, to Cimino and Smith, is an atheist community keenly interested in self-presentation. The relative ease with which one can actively participate in internet discourse compared with other forms of mainstream media means that today's atheists express a keen desire to "present themselves to the public." (Cimino & Smith 2011, 34) This desire is amplified by the common feeling that atheists are repeatedly vilified and caricatured on the mainstream media by their opponents. Thus, the internet seems to constitute a space in which atheists feel empowered to present themselves as they wish to be seen – unified with a strong and supportive community against the injustices of a highly-religious society.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the sense of atheist unification intimated by atheist websites also contains strains of diversity. For Cimino and Smith (2011), the high level of anonymity and decentralization on the internet have produced a "pluralistic, highly individualized public with multiple 'minor publics,' made up of individuals holding diverse, if not incompatible, philosophies and political stances" which "does not constitute a social movement as typically understood." (36) By drawing on Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," (B. Anderson 1983, 6) Cimino and Smith emphasize that one cannot formulate conclusions about internet atheism as a unified movement, but must attend to the conflicting discourses which loosely encompass a diverse group of individuals.

At this point, it is appropriate to ask whether internet atheism can be considered a community at all. Atheist discussions on the internet are laden with disagreements concerning how individuals should most acceptably demonstrate their atheism. For every atheist who shows a staunch unwillingness to accommodate any religious language whatsoever, there are others who embrace ironic religious language like that found in Pastafarianism or Last Thursdayism. For every atheist who appears unwilling to endure the religious views of others, there are atheists who maintain a kind of live-and-let-live attitude wherein they seem willing to tolerate the views of those who accept atheism. Despite this apparent intellectual diversity, however, it is perhaps this prevalence of diversity which creates a sense of atheism community. One is repeatedly confronted with the claim that atheism, unlike religion, is unique precisely in that it allows diversity. Atheism, it is argued, is compatible with nearly any philosophy so long as that philosophy does not take seriously the possibility of God's existence. As Grothe and Dacey put it, "atheists have no beliefs in common but their disbelief." (Grothe & Dacey 2004)

Thus, one might say that atheism is frequently understood as a negative form of identity, defined less by a commitment to doctrinal uniformity than by a lack thereof. Atheists are presumably free to believe whatever they want so long as they do not believe in God. This view appears consistent with Cimino and Smith's use of "imagined community." Atheists on the internet may not be ideologically identical to one another; yet, what is significant is that a great diversity of views concerning the meaning of life, the value of ethics, and the importance of science are generally all oriented toward the same goal – disbelief in the existence of God. Importantly, these different kinds of

atheism are not necessarily mutually exclusive or even fully formulated by atheists themselves. Rather, there are different strains of language employed in overlapping manners by various sorts of atheists. Atheists rarely set out to define every aspect of their atheism in contrast to other members of the atheist community. Instead, they tend to describe themselves in a more personal and autobiographical style such that any individual contribution to the discourse of internet atheism is likely to contain elements which may both alienate and/or unify readers.

In other words, if atheism on the internet is understood as an “imagined community” which emerges out of an entire body of atheist internet discourse rather than out of a more explicit attempt to demarcate the boundaries of an atheist community, one of the most significant means by which this community is imagined is perhaps through the deconversion narrative – an autobiographical account of one’s transition from religion to atheism. Hundreds of deconversion stories are published each year on websites like The Converts Corner and [positiveatheism.org](http://positiveatheism.org). (Bullivant 2008, 9) Nonetheless, as Stephen Bullivant (2008) notes, though there may easily be “hundreds if not thousands of deconversion” reports, constituting a vast, public-domain archive, charting individuals’ loss of faith at the beginning of the twenty-first century,” (9) few scholars have thoroughly analyzed the prevalence and significance of such documented experiences. Deconversion narratives may be loosely characterized as “spiritual autobiography,” a term used primarily to refer to Christian practices which, “trace the progress of an individual believer from a state of sin to a state of grace, where the conviction takes hold that salvation has been guaranteed by God,” (Sim 2001) in that they tend to describe the social and emotional experiences of individuals as they rethink their religious identity.

Whether one lumps them in with confessional testimony or considers them to be a unique form of personal narrative, what is important is that deconversion narratives serve to explicate the characteristics of a broad swath of self-identifying atheists both for themselves and for online readers. In this sense, deconversion narratives must be considered “techniques/technologies of the self,” specific practices such as journaling by which individuals create a fuller understanding of who they are and the subject-positions which they inhabit. We must recognize:

The ‘subject’ is *produced within discourse*. This subject *of* discourse cannot be outside discourse, because it must be *subjected to* discourse. It must submit to its rules and conventions, to its dispositions of power/knowledge. The subject can become the bearer of the kind of knowledge which discourse produces.” (Hall 1997, 55)

What one gains in a latitudinal examination of deconversion narratives is an understanding of a particular subject-position which emerges out of the atheist discursive formation. As Foucault argues, participants in any discursive formation come to understand their own identities in terms of the available language, present at a certain time and place, which can be reasonably employed to formulate identity. Without explicitly declaring limitations on subjectivity, in other words, discursive formations limit the positions which the subject can inhabit by providing a limited repertoire of terms which can be reasonably applied to the subject and by normatively condemning alternative forms of subjectification. (Foucault 1978, 52) Thus, the rules which define atheist subjectivity reified in deconversion narratives “operate not only in the mind or consciousness of individuals, but in discourse itself...according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field.” (Foucault 1978, 63)

Importantly, deconversion narratives are best understood in relation to the significance of confessional literature in Christianity. Foucault consistently describes Christianity as a uniquely confessional religion:

Christianity is...a confessional religion...Each person has the duty to know who he is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to others in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself. (Foucault 1988a, 40)

For Foucault, the emphasis on confession serves to infuse Christian identity with power dynamics, limiting the kind of discourse that can be appropriately employed by the Christian subject. In contrast to the view of Christianity as a kind of ideology imposed by a unified institution onto an obedient religious community, Foucault emphasizes that the mechanism by which Christian practices are policed “has nothing to do with a code of permitted or forbidden actions, but is a whole technique for analyzing and diagnosing thought, its origins, its qualities, its dangers, its potential for temptation and all the dark forces that can lurk behind the mask it may assume.” (Foucault 1988b, 239) This characterization allows Foucault to examine the ways that normative understandings of what it means to call oneself a Christian are not based on decrees by monolithic religious institutions or individual leaders, but by the rhizomatic emergence of various confessional discourses. “The truthful confession was inscribed at the heart of the procedures of individualization by power.” (Foucault 1978, 58-59)<sup>17</sup>

Put differently, Foucault is particularly interested in the ways that confessional practices construct a particularly compelling understanding of truth, “in which the truth is

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<sup>17</sup> Here, Foucault’s discussion of confession echoes his broader attempt to break free of the tendency to regard power as repression enacted by a monolithic form of sovereignty rather than a more productive form of collective performance. “At bottom, despite the differences in epochs and objectives, the representation of power has remained under the spell of monarchy. In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king.” (Foucault 1978, 88)

corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated...in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it.” (Foucault 1978, 62) Because confession is consistently framed as an individualistic endeavor in which knowledge is not imposed on the subject but emerges naturally through the subject’s own introspection, mechanisms of power are masked and internalized:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. (Foucault 1978, 60)

Foucault’s description of confession in the Christian context is applicable in the case of deconversion narratives. The word ‘deconversion’ is already a reference to a particular understanding of Christian conversion as a process enacted by concrete social practices such as confession.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, many deconverts make it clear that they are defecting from Christianity, and thus it may be argued that the predominant approach to the deconversion narrative reflects confessional discursive practices learned by Christian subjects. In any case, the similarities between deconversion narratives and confessional practices are notable from a Foucauldian perspective. First, the veracity of the subject’s account is confirmed by an emphasis on introspection which allows the subject to imagine that their newfound identity, by virtue of its previous embeddedness in the depths of their psyche, was untouched by the politics of social discourse. For Foucault, such a conviction actually serves to mask the mechanics of power by locating the forces

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Power 1997, 180-190; Rambo 1995

which govern subjectification in the individual rather than an external source. It is precisely this relocation of power which Foucault finds most problematic, as it serves to insulate power dynamics from criticism and analysis, for such criticism would have to be leveled against the self. If one is able to imagine that their identity is a natural expression of their innermost being rather than an imposed ideology, then, one is that much less likely to suspect that they are influenced by social forces and explore alternative forms of identification. Second, in both deconversion narratives and confessional practices, one sees a kind of double articulation in which subjects narrate their own experiences for the sake of their readers as well as for their own formulation of their religious identity. As Foucault argues regarding confession, this awareness of the audience further bolsters the political nature of discourse by positing readers as validators of experience and, in turn, the self as the validator of the experience of others. Such a move, to Foucault, serves to naturalize the conviction that all experience contains an element of truth which can and must be continuously scrutinized in order to rule in those forms of identification which accord with that truth and to rule out those which do not. (1978, 60)

Along these lines, it is important to remember that deconversion narratives are not simply factual accounts of a historical process. Rather, they constitute a form of literature in that they are willingly published for others to read and frequently invoke the subjective emotions and opinions of the largely anonymous authors. The public nature of deconversion narratives implies that, in some sense, they already involve a performative component. Writers of deconversion narratives are free to express their thoughts and experiences as they would like them to be read knowing that their readers have no ability to confirm or deny their accounts. Furthermore, the sheer number of deconversion stories

may create an incentive for writers to make their accounts as interesting and dramatic as possible so as to avoid monotony. This is not to commit the intentional fallacy and assume that all writers of deconversion narratives are simply creating fictional stories for the sake of entertainment; rather, it is to note that deconversion narratives, as virtually all attempts at autobiography, may be exaggerated or selectively told so as to pique the interest of readers.

It is perhaps for the sake of readers, then, that deconversion narratives appear strikingly similar to discourse employed in religious communities. Wesley Kort's claim that "a religious community retains and rehearses its characteristic words and acts to maintain its identity..." (Kort 1975, 5) could easily be applied in the context of deconverted atheists. By keeping in mind the similarities between deconversion accounts and historical literature, one can attend to the ways that "for both the artist and the religious person or group the creative act actualizes community. The discipline becomes a process in which images of the artist and the reader are created and brought together." (Kort 1975, 5) Just as Foucault demonstrates how narratives of the self serve to construct limited subject-positions, Kort's conclusions concerning literature demonstrate how the location of deconversion narratives somewhere between literature and history makes them particularly effective in "creat[ing] author and reader just as author and reader create them...by having certain properties with which the author and the reader, like it or not, have to cope." (Kort 1975, 18)

Finally, we must keep in mind that the formation of subjecthood which occurs in deconversion narratives is not limited to the writer, but serves to normativize the very

definition of 'atheist' for all those who read and identify with deconversion narratives.

As Hall (1997) writes in reference to Foucault:

But the discourse also produces a *place for the subject* (i.e. the reader or viewer, who is also 'subjected to' discourse) from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense. It is not inevitable that all individuals in a particular period will become the subjects of a particular discourse in this sense, and thus the bearers of its power/knowledge. But for them – us – to do so, they – we – must locate themselves/ourselves in the *position* from which the discourse makes most sense, and thus become its 'subjects' by 'subjecting' ourselves to its meanings, power and regulation. (1997, 56)

What does this mean for the examination of what it means to be an atheist? First, it indicates that the definition of 'deconverted atheist' is not solely in the hands of popular figures like Richard Dawkins, but is continuously constructed out of a discursive formation in which many individuals participate. As thousands of deconversion narratives are compiled on the internet, a picture begins to emerge of the deconverted atheist based on the discursive tropes most frequently employed. This is not to say that all atheists can be characterized by the discursive moves isolated in deconversion narratives. Rather, it is to point out that this particular body of literature – deconversion narratives – is infused with subtle proscriptions on the subject positions of those individuals who choose to identify with and/or contribute to it.

Second, and more specifically, the construction of the atheist subjectivity out of deconversion narratives points toward the complexity and subtlety of identity-formation in atheist discourse. If atheism is almost exclusively understood by its participation in and rejection of religious discourse, then the atheist subject-position which emerges out of deconversion narratives is necessarily tied to notions of subjectivity found in religious discourse. To put it differently, what it means to be a deconverted atheist is not merely based on the language used in deconversion narratives to distinguish religion from

atheism, but also on the language which is borrowed from religion by atheism. Thus, while Bullivant engages in a simple survey of irreligious experiences, consisting of “the emphatic awareness of the *absence* of God, a feeling of ‘loneliness’ or ‘solitude,’ or a sensation of euphoria or despair arising from (or otherwise accompanying) the thought of God’s nonexistence,” a more thematic exploration of deconversion narratives may highlight the implications of the discursive connections between conversion and deconversion rhetoric. The simplistic assertion that religion and atheism are stark and mutually-exclusive opposites imagines that the borrowing of religious language in deconversion narratives is some kind of meaningless anomaly – an interesting use of irony with few rhetorical implications. A more fruitful approach to deconversion narratives would take from Foucault the claim that the sharing of a discursive formation necessarily produces a similar understanding of subjecthood. That deconversion narratives frequently employ religious discourse implies that the atheist subject-position is always already limited by that discourse and what it implies about subjectivity in general. If this particular atheist subject-position emerges out of a discursive practice modeled on and referential to the Christian confession, attention must not be paid solely to the substantive content of statements which define atheism in contrast to religion, but also to the discursive methods by which those statements are formulated and relayed. The posited binary between religion and atheism tends to produce the idea that the borrowing of religious rhetoric in deconversion narratives constitutes mere dicta – rhetorical flourishes which necessarily remain subservient to the atheist commitment to radical distinctness from religion. The Foucauldian, on the other hand, maintains that all discourse is political, and thus that the discursive similarities between religion and

atheism as observed in deconversion narratives are supremely important in understanding atheist subjectivity in its reference to religious language. Keeping our eyes open for those discursive themes which give atheist language a religio-literary quality – those “fragments of ideology” by which culture “invades the system” of representation. (Barthes 1967, 92) – we turn now to the details of deconversion narratives.

### CHAPTER 3: DISCURSIVE THEMES IN DECONVERSION NARRATIVES

*Sometime around my early thirties I stumbled upon evolutionary biology, particularly in the form of Richard Dawkins's books *The Selfish Gene* and then *The Blind Watchmaker*, and suddenly (on, I think the second reading of *The Selfish Gene*) it all fell into place. It was a concept of such stunning simplicity, but it gave rise, naturally, to all of the infinite and baffling complexity of life. The awe it inspired in me made the awe that people talk about in respect of religious experience seem, frankly, silly beside it. I'd take the awe of understanding over the awe of ignorance any day. – Douglas Adams, *The Salmon of Doubt*, 99*

Several websites have become devoted to the collection of autobiographical narratives describing one's transition from religion to atheism. This quote by Douglas Adams graces the top of every page of Richard Dawkins' *Converts' Corner*, and the extent to which its language is replicated by those individuals who write their own deconversion stories indicates that it serves as a kind of master narrative – a measuring stick concerning what it means to become an atheist by which other deconversion narratives are to be compared. The claim that deconversion was a process which culminated in an instantaneous transformation attended by feelings of awe comparable to those found in religious experience is one which, as will soon be demonstrated, occurs very frequently. In this section, I will examine these deconversion narratives expressed on the internet, focusing primarily on Richard Dawkins' "Convert's Corner." I will argue that deconversion narratives tend to reify several motifs geared toward the establishment of atheism as a coherent and exclusive subject-position. I will demonstrate that deconversion narratives tend to borrow religious metaphors and symbols in order to emphasize the importance of one's decisions concerning belief and thus appeal to a broad audience of religiously-oriented readers. Attention will be paid to the ways in which deconversion narratives constitute a particular form of knowledge-production which imposes discursive limits around what it means to be an atheist. "To describe

a...statement does not consist in analysing the relations between the author and what he says...; but in determining what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he [sic] is to be the subject of it.” (Foucault 1972, 95-96)

Ultimately, I mean to demonstrate that deconversion narratives tend to rely on a somewhat paradoxical view of individualism in which the converted atheist embraces their agency through the defection from a purportedly indoctrinating religious tradition while discursively belying that agency by describing their atheist identity as an inevitable manifestation of their true or inherent self. What is important for the sake of my argument is that such narrative strategies serve to simultaneously define atheism through discursively-implied exclusions centered on an approach to agency wherein one’s actions are constrained by scientific truth rather than impelled by the desire for emotional comfort. Along these lines, I will argue that deconversion narratives construct a ‘cultural repertoire’<sup>19</sup> which serves to normalize atheist identity around core notions of liberation from indoctrination and an ambivalent type of inherent individualism. The rules which define atheist subjectivity reified in deconversion narratives “operate not only in the mind or consciousness of individuals, but in discourse itself; they operate therefore, according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field.” (Foucault 1978, 63) Consequently, I argue that the approach to agency highlighted in atheist deconversion narratives serve to legitimize and motivate a sense of urgency in convincing others to abandon their religious beliefs – not as a monolithic ideological mission but as the logical corollary of available subject-positions for those engaging in the discursive modes utilized in deconversion narratives.

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<sup>19</sup> “Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action.’” (Swidler 1986 273)

The examples which follow form a trajectory which demonstrates the tendency in deconversion narratives to distance atheism from a strong sense of individual agency,<sup>20</sup> beginning with implicit denials of agency and progressing toward the more explicit. This trajectory begins with religious symbolism which implies that deconversion is a process which happens *to* the individual, rather than a choice rooted in the individual's own desires. Similarly, the use of what I call "crisis rhetoric," language which highlights social or emotional disturbances associated with deconversion, also serves to imbue deconversion with its own inertia, highlighting the degree to which deconversion can occur even when the individual claims to resist atheism as an identity. Finally, this trajectory will terminate in language which explicitly denies the possibility of viewing atheism as a chosen identity, framing atheism instead as something which is inherent or in-born. It is my contention that this trajectory points to a common denominator in deconversion narratives – the rejection of one's individual role in becoming an atheist – and that this rejection of agency ultimately serves to justify atheist evangelism as a process immune to the forces of ideology.

## RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM

In empirical studies of those who have deconverted from religious fundamentalism, deconversion is generally seen as a gradual process of individuation (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1997) While some deconversion narratives on the internet

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<sup>20</sup> By 'agency,' I mean to discuss the degree to which deconversion is eschewed as a self-willed process motivated by individual choice in favor of discourse which describes deconversion as occurring without or despite the efforts of the deconvert.

reflect this gradual movement, one of the most common motifs in narratives describing the move from religion to atheism is an instant and permanent turning point in autobiography. Statements describing a precise moment after which all religious questioning is easily resolved or dispelled appear in varying forms throughout deconversion narratives. Amanda Hibbers describes an “epiphany” in which “everything fell into place.”<sup>21</sup> Arielle presumes to have experienced an epiphany even though she cannot pinpoint its exact timing: “I don't know when it happened, but I know at some point it all clicked together and made sense to me.”<sup>22</sup> B.A. Niechlanski similarly describes deconversion as a moment of epiphany: “All of a sudden I received this flash of light, this epiphany, of tremendous disbelief.”<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, deconversion narratives often describe a moment of epiphany which replicates the style of conversions as revelatory experiences. Most of these writers may be unaware of the religious heritage of a concept like ‘epiphany,’ originally referring to the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles through the visit of the Magi. Nonetheless, what is significant is that epiphany-rhetoric seems to maintain pseudo-theological trappings, reflecting something which is “shown to”<sup>24</sup> the individual. Deconverts frequently use the language of epiphany to intimate that the moment of deconversion was one which occurred unpredictably and suddenly, as if having a source other than the mind of the individual undergoing transformation. The epiphany motif occurs frequently in Christian conversion narratives, marking “the time when the hand of the divine is most plainly visible; conversion narratives overflow with expressions of supernatural agency,

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<sup>21</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter\\_508285](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter_508285), 8-30-2010

<sup>22</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter\\_465840](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter_465840), 5-4-2010

<sup>23</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=10#letter\\_465759](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=10#letter_465759), 5-4-2010

<sup>24</sup> Greek *epi*, "on, to" + *phainein*, "to show"

in which the individual feels guided, or coerced, or enraptured by a divine presence.” (Buckser & Glazier 2003, xii) Whether a term like ‘epiphany’ used in these contexts constitutes a religious concept is debatable, but it is sufficient for the purposes of this argument to show that the unpredictable suddenness of transformation connotes that the individual assumed a more passive than active role in becoming an atheist; the claim is usually that deconversion ‘happened’ according to its own inertia and that the individual undergoing deconversion did little to consciously enact the transformation.

In many cases, the motif of instant transformation is accompanied by more explicitly religious language. Wyatt, for example, uses a number of religious themes to signal a sense of revelation to the point that his deconversion is regarded as an acceptance of atheism rather than a willed decision: “It was my hour of enlightenment, my hour of supreme revelation. ... At this point I accepted atheism and have not looked back.”<sup>25</sup> The language of ‘revelation’ here implies that the wisdom of atheism could not be discovered by the efforts of the individual but could only be revealed to the deconvert from an external source, demonstrating that the deconvert’s role was one of passive reception. Anonymous chooses to use religious rhetoric ironically: “It was a revelatory experience to me, if you’ll excuse the term... Ironically, I see the only path to anything approaching the paradise envisioned by many religions is to reject superstition and irrationality.”<sup>26</sup> Another anonymous writer describes their deconversion as a revelation, stressing the instantaneousness of their transformation: “It was last November, shortly before my nineteenth birthday, that I flipped to the first page and was hit with a revelation that was

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<sup>25</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=6#letter\\_476205](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=6#letter_476205), 6-3-2010

<sup>26</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=3#letter\\_500752](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=3#letter_500752), 8-15-2010

as astonishing and unexpected as a slap to the face. ... The moment I read those words I became an atheist.”<sup>27</sup>

Another motif connected to the notion of deconversion as an instantaneous transformation is a sense of confession or testimony, implying that true atheism requires an explicit and outward declaration – “a public declaration of the decision to convert ... leading to an experience of divine and group affirmation.” (Percy 2000, xvi) Dustin, for example, “was finally able to take the plunge and say out loud "I am an Atheist..." It felt like a wave of relief washed over me. I could finally breath.”<sup>28</sup> Robin similarly emphasizes the unexpected instantaneousness of her deconversion, indicated by the precision with which she remembers the moment and location of epiphany, as well as the importance of verbally declaring her unbelief and the powerful life-transforming emotions associated with that declaration: “I walked through the kitchen, and a third of the way through the living room then came to a dead stop. "There is no god," I said...The last of the chains fell off, a huge weight lifted.”<sup>29</sup> One writer who identifies as “Dude, I’m Free” describes the loss of faith as a process propelled by verbalization: “Without even realizing it I began to mouth the words ‘There is no god. There is no god.’ ... After about 30 seconds I gasped. Bam! Ohhhhhh. There really is no god. I sat at my computer in stunned silence...”<sup>30</sup> Jeremy similarly describes the declaration of atheism – an act which he seems unable to prevent – as the precise moment in which his identity was transformed:

Within the past year, I was having a discussion with a friend about spiritual matters, and the words came out of my mouth: "I really don't believe in

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<sup>27</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter\\_480503](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter_480503), 6-15-2010

<sup>28</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter\\_465821](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter_465821), 5-4-2010

<sup>29</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=9#letter\\_465698](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=9#letter_465698), 5-4-2010

<sup>30</sup> <http://new.exchristian.net/2010/06/awaken-from-coma.html>, 6-1-2010

"God"... "So you're an Atheist then?" my friend responded, and I answered emphatically "Yes!". The instant I said that, I felt thousand ton lead weight lifted off of my shoulders. 30 plus years of guilt and shame by the standards of my parents' religion disappeared. I felt like a free man for the first time in my entire life.<sup>31</sup>

This verbal declaration often appears to rigidify the binary opposition between one's prior identity as a religionist and one's new identity as an atheist. The verbal clarity of the atheist identity in polar opposition to that of the religionist serves to conceal the possibility of imagining an identity between religion and atheism by making such identification literally inarticulable (and accordingly unsettling). The difficulty in locating one's identity between atheism and religion thus informs "how identity might be utilized in an attempt to shape the conduct and convictions of a given audience, for they determine what kinds of claims about identity are intelligible in the first place." (D. Anderson 2007, 8) This negotiation of intelligibility is subsequently one of the primary means by which "the rhetorical self" comes to be defined "by discursive commitments that prevent its coalescence into other selves." (D. Anderson 2007, 168) If we agree with Foucault (1978) that "the positions of the subject are also defined by the situation that it is possible for him to occupy," (52) those statements which emphasize the intelligibility of atheism through verbal declaration appear to normatively exclude non-atheist forms of identification. Critically, the subject-positions articulated in these narratives frequently connote the same lack of agency implied by epiphany; statements of verbal declaration often seem to imply that the moment of deconversion is one which occurs spontaneously and against the better judgment of the speaker. The deconvert very rarely writes of a precise moment at which they deliberately *decided* to become an atheist – the words come out of their mouth, as if voiced by a force external to their own conscious mind.

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<sup>31</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter\\_484761](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter_484761), 6-29-2010

By framing deconversion in religious terms, writers draw on symbols which “express the fundamental convictions that every individual’s beliefs are of momentous import, that they are a matter of choice, and that a person has a moral obligation to believe responsibly.” (Barbour 1994, 51) In turn, this language may serve to make one’s narrative appealing to a broad array of religiously-minded readers by giving “conscientious struggles and development a dramatic form and significance that is more than merely personal.” (Barbour 1994, 52) While Barbour’s conclusions partially explain the prevalence of religious rhetoric in deconversion narratives, I would like to highlight the ways that religious symbolism often serves to downplay the importance of individual agency in choosing atheism. We have already seen how the epiphany motif frequently echoes the Christian view of transformation as a kind of ‘road-to-Damascus’<sup>32</sup> event which is divinely enacted on the unsuspecting and passive individual. Furthermore, narratives which stress the moment of verbal declaration also seem to subtly downplay the individual’s agency, such that their sudden declaration of atheism comes as a shock even to them.

As such, a number of deconversion narratives deploy explicitly religious or quasi-spiritual rhetoric in ways that seem to relocate the agency behind deconversion away from the individual. In most cases, religious symbolism seems to imply that the individual undergoing deconversion assumed a passive role, merely *receiving* epiphanical wisdom in a bolt-from-the-blue instant. Though deconversion narratives ostensibly reject the notion of a higher agent imposing transformation on the individual, they nevertheless

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<sup>32</sup> References to the “road-to-Damascus” occur frequently in comparing personal transformation to the experience of Paul outlined in Acts 9 and Corinthians 9:1 and 15:3-8 in which he was instantly transformed into a servant of Christ. The episode is particularly salient in this discussion of deconversion narratives as it involved an unpredictable and instantaneous transformation and was marked by powerful personal ramifications for Paul, who was temporarily blinded.

tend to frame deconversion as a process which occurs without the individual's execution of willpower.<sup>33</sup> While the lack of individual agency in deconversion is often intimated with religious symbolism, it is often implied using another kind of discourse – crisis rhetoric – which, while common to religious conversion narratives, does not rely so heavily on explicit religious metaphors.

### CRISIS RHETORIC

Deconversion narratives often frame the move from religion to atheism as one surrounded by powerful emotions of guilt, anguish, catharsis, and chaos, and attended by difficult social consequences such as the loss of friends and family. We have already seen that a number of deconverts describe the loss of faith as having eased an emotional burden, but crisis rhetoric appears in a variety of forms throughout deconversion narratives. In particular, one sees two predominant, though not mutually exclusive, forms of crisis rhetoric. In the first, the future deconvert experiences increasing degrees of emotional pain associated with their religious tradition followed by a feeling of catharsis upon embracing an atheist identity. In the second, the deconvert experiences more

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<sup>33</sup> The fact that deconverts rarely assign agency to an external agent like God should not lead us to conclude reductively that atheists reject superstition. Instead, I wish to propose that the largely unspoken presumption that atheists reject superstition is what enables deconverts to feel justified in discursively belying their own agency. The atheist, it seems, is always already an active agent in control of his or her own destiny; thus, describing deconversion as a revelation or an epiphany can be forgiven as irony or rhetorical strategy. From the perspective of discourse, the deconvert has their cake and eats it too – their atheism makes them a free agent by definition, while their language removes them from a position of responsibility in enacting their own deconversion.

emotional anguish following their loss of faith as they struggle to find meaning in a world stripped of their long-held systems of evaluation.<sup>34</sup>

The first form, in which deconversion is framed as resolving a sense of crisis, occurs perhaps more frequently. Typically, these narratives describe feelings of guilt associated with an increasing tendency to question religious dogma or desire better answers to spiritual questions. Dan writes, “I turned my doubts and misgivings into a new philosophy and lifestyle...I can now enjoy life free of the guilt of sin and fear of eternal damnation.”<sup>35</sup> Teresa emphasizes the catharsis associated with embracing atheism: “To say it was a release is an understatement. I had suffered with night horrors for years - specifically from thoughts of the Devil.”<sup>36</sup>

In these examples, the desirability of atheism is enhanced by the feelings of catharsis and liberation that it arouses after an impending feeling of crisis stemming from dissatisfaction with religious doctrines or structures. As with the use of religious language, we may understand these motifs as attempts to frame deconversion in terms which are understandable to readers from diverse religious backgrounds who may be experiencing similar feelings of anguish. We may agree with Barbour that such rhetoric serves to emphasize the importance of one’s beliefs:

Most autobiographical versions of deconversion portray a central crisis that changes the narrator dramatically and suddenly...This pattern of tension, climax, and resolution conforms to the basic norms of Western dramatic theory since Aristotle. Conversion narratives with a central crisis have a clear structure that guides readers’ expectations, and yet the form is versatile, easily adapted to a wide variety of kinds of personal transformation. (Barbour 1994, 50-51)

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<sup>34</sup> Stephen Bullivant has made note of these two strains of rhetoric, choosing to call them “positive” and “negative” forms of irreligious experience. (Bullivant 2008, 10)

<sup>35</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter\\_508346](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter_508346), 8-31-2010

<sup>36</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=2#letter\\_508283](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=2#letter_508283), 8-30-2010

At the same time, deconversion must be understood as a particular kind of knowledge production in which widely-recognizable religious discourses are utilized to reconstitute identity. As Gauri Viswanathan puts it, “The history of religious transformations cannot be written outside the framework of these dual impulses: of knowledge interrupted and then transformed from dissent into *assent*.” (Viswanathan 1998, xvii)

In the second form of crisis rhetoric, individuals emphasize the negative emotional and social consequences which occurred after embracing atheism. In many cases, these negative consequences are highlighted alongside parallel positive consequences associated with feelings of intellectual honesty. I wish to argue that this emphasis on intellectual honesty may serve to demonstrate the irreversibility of one’s decision to abandon religion. Terri, for example, emphasizes that the loss of intellectual certainty associated with deconversion, while causing great emotional strife, also guarantees that the loss of faith is irreversible based on the principle of intellectual honesty:

I lay stunned and injured in the metaphorical rubble trying to get my senses back for quite some time. Even after it happened I did not want to accept it ... [Now I see] my life for what it actually is rather than what I wanted it to be or thought it was. Only then could I see that all my beliefs, all my certainties were based on pure wishful thinking... if, like me, your faith sustained you...then you want to hang on to it, against all reason... Once you step outside there really is no going back not unless you are prepared to live your life knowing you are living a lie just to make yourself feel better....<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to the narratives which describe liberation from the pain caused by religion, Terri emphasizes the positive aspects of religion in order to demonstrate that the loss of faith is not a decision to be taken lightly – it is a decision which must be made on the principle of truth rather than comfort. This notion of intellectual honesty at the cost

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<sup>37</sup> <http://www.humanistlife.org.uk/2010/06/faith-no-more-a-cautionary-tale/>, 6-1-2010

of religious comfort appears throughout this second type of crisis-based narrative. Writers emphasize the irreversibility of deconversion by divorcing the desirability of religious belief from the possibility of ignoring ‘the truth’ of atheism. The Apostate writes, “I am depressed because I am scared. Yet, I know the truth. Or at least what I think is the truth. And I can't unlearn whatever I did learn. And I can't switch my brain off and not worry and get depressed.”<sup>38</sup> Ann also stresses the irreversibility of deconversion by privileging intellectual honesty over individual desires: “Once the facts were laid before me I could no longer force myself to believe, even if I wanted to. I did want to believe because religion had been a great comfort for me...however, I can not be intellectually dishonest and so I am an atheist.”<sup>39</sup>

The second form of crisis rhetoric in deconversion narratives does not appear to simply borrow the discourse of catharsis common to conversion narratives. Particularly, the emphases on post-deconversion trauma appears to prioritize intellectual honesty over emotional security so as to transform such traumas into a badge of identity distinguishing ‘true atheists’ from ‘fair-weather atheists,’ as it were. At the same time, such language frequently serves to demonstrate the irreversibility of deconversion, forever situating the return to religion as willingly living a known lie. Keeping agency in mind, crisis rhetoric appears to serve a similar function to the use of religious symbolism in framing deconversion as a process which has its own inertia that somehow transcends the agency of the individual. One might say that while religious symbolism implies that deconversion is a process which happens *to* a passive subject, crisis rhetoric implies that it is also a process which happens whether the subject wants it to or not. One can see

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<sup>38</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter\\_471528](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter_471528), 5-19-2010

<sup>39</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter\\_471452](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter_471452), 5-19-2010

here the kind of discursive move isolated by Talal Asad (1993) to reduce religion to “the moods and motivations of the individual believer,” (39) and thus privilege rationality in matters of public identity. What is most important is that this discourse serves to subjugate the emotional desires of the subject to the principle of objective reason in the process of identification. The emphasis on intellectual honesty clearly serves to imply that once the ‘truth’ of atheism has been realized, the deconvert has no choice but to continue forward, for to return to religion would be to lie to oneself. In this case, Viswanathan’s claim concerning conversion may not be applicable to deconversion: “As a knowledge-producing activity, [conversion] shifts the focus away from visible markers of difference (such as race or gender) to the distance in viewpoints emerging from the pragmatics of communication. Such gaps in communication are the starting point for conversion’s reconstructive role in initiating movement between opposing viewpoints.” (Viswanathan 1998, xv) If deconverts articulated the dissimilarity between atheism and religion as merely a pragmatic difference of communication, deconversion might be regarded as a destabilizing process. However, the emphasis on rationality as having a legitimate hold on truth serves to relocate essential difference from the visible to the invisible (the willingness to subjugate agency to rationality) and definitively restrict movement between opposing viewpoints. These statements imply a particular understanding of agency in which the ideal of self-determination is celebrated at the same time that the deconvert highlights the dangers of agency when it lends itself to ideology. As religion is repeatedly described in experiential terms, rationality becomes a “regime of truth” (Foucault 1980, 133) which enables the deconvert to imagine atheism as an

identity divorced from the corrupting influence of ideology, which preys only on emotional weakness.

In other words, because (religious) ideology is primarily understood in deconversion narratives as the corruption of agency, then those narratives frequently balance the idealization of agency with an emphasis on intellectual honesty which serves to insulate atheism from that corruption. Hence, both religious symbolism and crisis rhetoric appear to implicitly undermine the notion that deconversion is a process motivated by one's individual desires. In some cases, however, the attempt to remove the role of individual agency from the process of deconversion occurs more explicitly.

## INHERENT ATHEISM

One of the most common motifs found in deconversion narratives is the notion that one's atheism is inherent or latent. For example, many deconverts claim that they have always been skeptical toward religious claims, even when self-identifying as belonging to a particular religious tradition. Peter writes, "I always even as a child questioned what was fed to us children by those who taught us."<sup>40</sup> Michael similarly emphasizes his inherent immunity to religious 'brainwashing': "I have been going to religious schools my whole life and I remained untouched by their brain washing".<sup>41</sup> Raymond goes so far as to regard his atheism as an in-born trait: "I was seemingly born

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<sup>40</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=3#letter\\_500758](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=3#letter_500758), 8-15-2010

<sup>41</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=4#letter\\_492544](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=4#letter_492544), 7-24-2010

with inability to accept beliefs on faith, an ineluctable determination...to proportion the strength of my beliefs to the strength of the evidence for them.”<sup>42</sup> Ivan also sees atheism as something hard-wired: “I could never believe in the existence of gods. My b[r]ain is simply not wired that way.”<sup>43</sup>

Frequently, deconverts frame their prior religious identity as something forced upon them rather than a genuine religious belief. William regards his religious background as an imposed restriction on his natural atheism: “Even at a very young age I never was convinced that any of it was true but as a child who has a choice?”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, one anonymous writer claims that his/her religiosity was merely the result of conditioning, presumably betraying his unconditioned tendency toward atheism: “I live in a conservative area in the US. I was very "religious" as a child, though in hindsight I think my devotion was more of a conditioned response to my environment.”<sup>45</sup> The notion that one’s religious background was merely a survival mechanism masking one’s inherent skepticism occurs frequently, as in Mike’s claim, “I think I have always been an atheist but had to keep it quite so as not to offend my friends and family.”<sup>46</sup> Robert also explains his childhood religious affiliation as a result of indoctrination betraying his natural proclivities: “I had always had doubts, but I was indoctrinated (abused) since childhood, so I tried to be a good Christian for my fundamentalist father and Lutheran pastors.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> <http://www.sfu.ca/philosophy/bradley/Fundamentalist%20to%20Free-thinker.pdf>, 2004

<sup>43</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=6#letter\\_476551](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=6#letter_476551), 6-5-2010

<sup>44</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter\\_485320](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter_485320), 7-1-2010

<sup>45</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter\\_483020](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=5#letter_483020), 6-23-2010

<sup>46</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=4#letter\\_487658](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=4#letter_487658), 7-10-2010

<sup>47</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=9#letter\\_465741](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=9#letter_465741), 5-4-2010

For those deconverts who regard atheism as an in-born trait, their religious background is framed as a source of cognitive dissonance associated with going against their true nature. Rose writes, “I suspect I was unable to believe in any god at birth. However, like most of your converts I relate to being forced by parents to attend Sunday school and eventually be confirmed into the Lutheran faith the same year I graduated from high school - all those years, I cried and fought but in the end I gave into their demands.”<sup>48</sup> Ashlyn similarly emphasizes the futility of her attempts to betray her true atheism: “i tried and tried and tried to be the best little christian i could and it just wasnt possible.”<sup>49</sup> Just as crisis rhetoric serves to intimate that deconversion can occur against the desires of the individual, the language of inherent atheism here implies that the true atheist is incapable of maintaining a religious attitude despite their best efforts.

Additionally, many deconverts claim that, while their atheism was in-born, they simply did not realize that they were atheists. This realization is often regarded as a refusal to continue lying to oneself. Tom, for example, demonstrates a common tendency to imagine atheism as a tabula-rasa condition distinct from religious belief: “Every human is born an atheist until ‘educated’ otherwise. Thank you for helping me, at the age of 54 to regain my atheism.”<sup>50</sup> Dan again emphasizes the cognitive dissonance associated with trying to betray his inevitable atheism, thus framing his deconversion as a realization that he was always an atheist:

But, after all, you can't help what you believe. I soon realized that my sense of logic simply would not allow me to believe in God. There was no use torturing myself trying to fight this fact. ...Atheism and humanism are who I am. I am happy now because I am not trying to be someone I'm not. In my heart of hearts I like to believe that the teenager who looked down on gay couples and women

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<sup>48</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter\\_473778](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter_473778), 5-26-2010

<sup>49</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter\\_470503](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter_470503), 5-16-2010

<sup>50</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=6#letter\\_475920](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=6#letter_475920), 6-2-2010

who had abortions was little more than a misguided youth who had not yet realized his true beliefs.<sup>51</sup>

Max also sees deconversion as a return to an identity which lay dormant underneath religious affiliation: “thank you for...allowing me to finally stop holding back the rational part of me that thought for the longest time that god doesn't exist, but just didn't want to admit it to himself... I can now accept them because that is what I truly believed all along, even if I didn't want to admit it to myself.”<sup>52</sup>

Deconversion narratives, as demonstrated, often construct the notion that atheism is inherent or in-born. One's former religious identity is regarded as an inauthentic performance masking a truer atheist identity. Religion is regarded as a fallen state of sorts, and deconversion is regarded as a return to one's more authentic identity – a stripping away of false labels. As with religious symbolism and crisis rhetoric, this motif seems to undermine simplistic notions of agency. On the one hand, atheism is regarded as an individualistic endeavor marked by a highly skeptical attitude toward authority. On the other hand, this skeptical attitude is present seemingly from birth, such that deconverts apparently cannot help but pursue their own agency. At the same time, statements about inherent atheism tend to portray religion by necessity as a restriction on agency. If atheism, connoting individualism and rejection of authority, is the natural state of humankind, then religion is necessarily a means of suppressing that agency. “What goes without saying because it comes without saying,” (Bourdieu 1977, 167) to borrow a Bourdieuan approach to discourse, is a naturalized connection between atheism and individualism which disguises the possibility that atheism is as much an “education” of agency as religion. To put it differently, to regard religion as an emotional corruption of

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<sup>51</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter\\_508346](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter_508346), 8-31-2010

<sup>52</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=9#letter\\_465721](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=9#letter_465721), 5-4-2010

agency and atheism as a kind of detached agency governed by the impersonal rules of rationality is to imply that only religion is ideological precisely by conceiving of ideology as a “state of mind” rather than “a set of practices that ‘foreclose’ the potentially infinite meaning of various cultural elements and relations in determinate ways.” (Bell 1992, 191)

This analysis points inevitably toward the issue of evangelism. The notion of inherent atheism intimates that every religious individual contains within them an atheist trying to escape. Hence, to deconvert is purportedly not to embrace a new performative identity, but to uncover one’s true and latent identity yearning for release. These examples from deconversion narratives demonstrate a common tendency to undermine the notion that the individual plays an active role in choosing their atheist identity. By way of conclusion, we must ask why the rejection of individual agency occurs so frequently in deconversion narratives, keeping in mind that “every statement...always belongs to a series or a whole, always plays a role among other statements, deriving support from them and distinguishing itself from them: it is always part of a network of statements, in which it has a role, however minimal it may be, to play.” (Foucault 1978, 99) While one can only speculate, I would like to point toward the possibility that the abandonment of agency serves a particular function in connecting atheist identity to a demand for evangelism.

## ATHEIST EVANGELISM

The language of internet atheism is rife with emphases on the importance of openly declaring one's atheism and convincing others to do the same. Frequently, the necessity of evangelism is motivated by the claim that atheism has a monopoly on truth, and that it is this truth which distinguishes ordinary atheists (those who simply reject religion) from a normative understanding of atheism as a positive commitment to spreading the "good news." Cagri, for example, distinguishes between 'ordinary atheists' and those who spread the objective truth about life, echoing the emphases on intellectual honesty found in crisis rhetoric: "we shouldn't be ordinary atheist...we should spread the truth about life. Forget about subjective phenomena of "truths". We must spread the "realities" of life! And realities are objective."<sup>53</sup> Chris sees evangelism as the "job" of the atheist, implying a host of negative connotations associated with any form of atheism divorced from evangelism: "Therefore its my job as a atheist ...to take this opportunity to lead a new generation into progress which can only happen through non-belief."<sup>54</sup> Michael similarly refers to atheism as a kind of occupation, stressing that atheism is a commitment to action more than a statement concerning one's religious beliefs: "My name is Michael, and I am an atheist. Not only do I NOT believe in a higher power, I actively teach those close to me that most organized religion is a crime on humanity, and truly believe it a detriment to society."<sup>55</sup> Rudy uses evangelism to distinguish between not-yet-deprogrammed atheists and deprogrammed atheists, invoking a whole series of normative connotations:

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<sup>53</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter\\_508957](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts#letter_508957), 9-1-2010

<sup>54</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=4#letter\\_496943](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=4#letter_496943), 8-6-2010

<sup>55</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter\\_473533](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=7#letter_473533), 5-25-2010

As a not-yet-deprogrammed atheist, I was not upset by religion. I could easily go to church for a friend or relative without any negative emotions... Now that I know what damage religion has done and is still doing to the world, I have become passionate about my atheism and anti-theism...I am really a different kind of atheist ...Some of the ideas I have had are as follows. \*Not-yet-deprogrammed atheist: Naïve atheist, infected atheist, uneducated atheist, programmed atheist, or recovering atheist. \*Deprogrammed atheist: Informed atheist, educated atheist, cured atheist, recovered atheist.<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, deconversion narratives construct a strong connection between self-identifying as an atheist and being willing to demonstrate this identification boldly, often by working toward the deconversion of others. In each of these cases, the *doxa*<sup>57</sup> that atheism is defined by a commitment to evangelism intimates that such a commitment springs inherently from the subject-position itself without needing further explanation.<sup>58</sup> The emphasis on evangelism is intertwined with claims concerning what it means to call oneself a true atheist, which in turn is shaped by the language of deconversion narratives. “Thus conceived, discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his discontinuity with himself may be determined.” (Foucault 1978, 55) If the language of deconversion narratives repeatedly implies and openly declares atheism to be an identity which is relatively divorced from individual agency, then it follows that the primary factor which distinguishes the true atheist from the not-yet atheist is the realization that they have always already been an atheist. By this logic, then, the demand to evangelize appears to follow naturally from the discursive moves in deconversion narratives to frame atheism as a kind of *tabula-rasa*, even Edenic, state. In a world

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<sup>56</sup> <http://new.exchristian.net/2010/07/two-types-of-atheist.html>, 7-11-2010

<sup>57</sup> That which is neither questioned nor known to be known by which “every established order tends to produce...the naturalization of its own arbitrariness” through the “play of assumptions.” (Bourdieu 1977, 164)

<sup>58</sup> I might further appeal to Roland Barthes to claim that this process is one of ‘mystification’ by which the arbitrary/historical connection between atheism and evangelism is disguised in order to naturalize the association between the two. (Barthes 1972, 9)

where objective truth reigns supreme, there is an atheist inside of everyone waiting to be freed from the bonds of religion. Those who have undergone the deconversion process, normatively defined and reified, are thought to know firsthand that the rules of religious tolerance need not apply, for atheism isn't really a matter of choice at all – only a matter of truth.

### COMING OUT ATHEIST

There is another way that deconversion narratives touch on the issue of choice. Richard Dawkins, among others, has explicitly connected the process of deconversion to the rhetoric of “coming out” deployed in queer<sup>59</sup> communities. To Dawkins, the claim that many atheists remain “in the closet” – that is, they are unwilling to admit their atheism to those around them – serves to bolster an argument concerning the demographics of atheism in America. “I am persuaded that the religiosity of America is greatly exaggerated. Our choir is a lot larger than many people realise. Religious people still outnumber atheists, but not by the margin they hoped and we feared.” (Dawkins n.d.) By this reasoning, Dawkins claims that polls which show atheism comprising a small minority relative to the religiosity of the general population are conservative and that there are, in actuality, many more atheists who simply choose not to identify as such in

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<sup>59</sup> I use the term ‘queer’ as “an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications... [describing] those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.” (Jagose 1996, 1)

public.<sup>60</sup> Thus, many atheists have made “coming out” a cornerstone of their visions for an atheist movement. “Our choir is large, but much of it remains in the closet...It follows that a major part of our consciousness-raising effort should be aimed, not at converting the religious but at encouraging the non-religious to admit it — to themselves, to their families, and to the world.” (Dawkins n.d.) Frequently, the dominant view of closeted atheists is laden with negative characterizations. Those who refuse to admit their atheism are “mouthing the words sotto voce with head bowed and eyes lowered,” according to Dawkins (n.d.), and a number of other writers have echoed these pejorative depictions of silent atheists. Dave Silverman, for example, directly targets closeted atheists when he writes, “Your self-isolation is unhealthy, both mentally and physically, and you need to rectify it.”<sup>61</sup> Closeted atheists are often portrayed as victims of the Christian Right<sup>62</sup> who are actively hurting the atheist community by leaving outspoken atheists alone on the battlefield. Hence, the existence of closeted atheists is frequently regarded as a civil rights issue affecting “the last repressed minority in America.” (Kurtz 2000)<sup>63</sup>

Dawkins’ Out Campaign is more than an attempt to draw closeted atheists out of the closet so that they can support the atheist movement. The discursive connection between atheists and queers is frequently reified in deconversion narratives so as to imply something about atheism as an identity. Specifically, the use of “coming out” rhetoric in deconversion narratives implies that being an atheist entails the same social stigmas as being gay in American society. Additionally, such rhetoric serves to intimate that, just as

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Dawkins 2006, 18, 26, 65

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[http://www.winchmark.com/planetfreebook/Classic\\_collection/classic\\_books\\_author\\_S\\_PDF\\_edited\\_filenames/Silverman.Dave%20!Coming%20Out%20-%20Atheism,%20The%20Other%20Closet.pdf](http://www.winchmark.com/planetfreebook/Classic_collection/classic_books_author_S_PDF_edited_filenames/Silverman.Dave%20!Coming%20Out%20-%20Atheism,%20The%20Other%20Closet.pdf), 3/18/2011

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> See also Cimino & Smith 2007

one cannot choose one's sexual orientation, neither can one choose to betray their inherent atheism. Subsequently, deconversion narratives sometimes demonstrate a tendency to equate atheism with queerness both in terms of its social ramifications as well as its implications for subjectivity.

With regards to social ramifications, it is not uncommon to read deconversion narratives which compare atheism to queerness without calling into question the sexual orientation of the writer. For example, writers of deconversion narratives may claim that the process of admitting their atheism to others had ramifications comparable to those experienced by newly-outed queers. One anonymous writer claims that, when they told their family that they were an atheist, "I might as well told my family I was gay."<sup>64</sup> Eddie Cameron similarly uses a comparison to coming out as gay to demonstrate his fear of ostracization: "I almost feel like I am a homosexual, in fear of what repercussions my profession may bring."<sup>65</sup> Another anonymous writer claims: "Coming out as an atheist will be a bit like declaring ones rampant, proud homosexuality."<sup>66</sup> Sandra Schott also makes it clear that she does not identify as queer, and yet presumes to know what it must feel like to be queer after having come out as an atheist: "Coming out as a 'born again athiest"<sup>67</sup> is how I imagine Gays feel and felt 'coming out of their closet!'"<sup>68</sup> In these examples, writers do not identify as queer, but adopt "coming out" rhetoric to indicate

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<sup>64</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter\\_473533](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter_473533), 5-25-2010

<sup>65</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=13#letter\\_466540](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=13#letter_466540), 5-4-2010

<sup>66</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=18#letter\\_466389](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=18#letter_466389), 5-4-2010

<sup>67</sup> The rhetoric of being "born-again," a reference to John 3:3 in which Jesus tells Nicodemus that he would not see the kingdom of God unless he was "born again," is popular among evangelical Christians. Notably, the notion of being born again seems to serve a similar function to the use of religious rhetoric in intimating that identity is something unambiguously given rather than fashioned. For example: "Identity is determined by birth, and when it comes to our eternal destiny, God relates to us based on our new birth or lack thereof... Trying has nothing to do with being a Christian. You are either born again and a Christian by virtue of that birth, or you are a non-Christian still in your sins." (Evans 2005, 27)

<sup>68</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=36#letter\\_465810](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=36#letter_465810), 5-4-2010

that their atheism has made them a victim of social stigmatization. Whether this stigmatization can be verified in the workplace or society at large, it is obvious that some atheists choose to align themselves with the queer community as a means of expressing their fear of losing standing with peers and superiors as a result of vocalizing their otherwise invisible identity. The degree to which public discourse is saturated with religious language serves to raise the stakes of the decision to “come out,” such that to remain in the closet is regarded by some as a survival mechanism connoting weakness and shame.

In other examples, writers of deconversion narratives do not merely align themselves with the queer community, but explicitly connect their own queerness with their atheism, often claiming that the two facets of their identity were inextricably linked. Steve, for example, claims that before he came out as both atheist and bisexual, he “lived with agnosticism on both fronts.” His experiences of questioning both his sexuality and his religious views seem to have been so similar that they were mutually reinforcing: “So, when I finally accepted that I really was gay, I decided that, as with sexuality, spirituality is a personal affair, no matter what societal pressure I might feel to remain compliant...In the end, both my 'liberal faith' and my 'bisexuality' fell down together like a house of cards.”<sup>69</sup> One anonymous writer embraces both their atheism and their gay identity as a single badge of pride in the face of stigmatization: “Demographically, I have the extraordinary fortune to personify the two most reviled characteristics an American can possess in 2007. I'm a gay atheist — GaYtheist for short.”<sup>70</sup> Mark Hotsenpiller similarly draws comparisons between his atheism and his sexual orientation. In both cases, he

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<sup>69</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=30#letter\\_466021](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=30#letter_466021), 5-4-2010

<sup>70</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=36#letter\\_465813](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=36#letter_465813), 5-4-2010

claims that coming out was merely a matter of realizing that he was already gay and an atheist:

I am an atheist. I can now state that I have believed in no gods all my life; it's just taken 54 years to be able to verbalize it. It was a real revelatory moment in my life, much like when at 18 I recognized that I was gay. I have always been gay, but I learned to put a label on my feelings, and I understood myself better... It's much like realizing one's gayness, and then discovering a world of other gay people.<sup>71</sup>

In Mark's deconversion narrative, one begins to get a sense of another implication which follows from the connection between queerness and atheism. In recent years, the majority of those fighting for gay rights have embraced and advanced the argument that sexual orientation is something in-born. (Brookey 2002, 33) By regarding sexual orientation as something genetically determined, members of the gay rights movement are able to demand constitutional protection for all sexual orientations. From a political perspective, it is easier to demand protection for those traits which individuals have no control over; as with race, to punish persons for qualities that they did not choose is to enact arbitrary discrimination. It is possible that this atheist discourse borrows the discursive strategies of the queer movement in order to serve a similar function in intimating that atheism, like race and sexual orientation, is a characteristic which one cannot control and which can only be arbitrarily stigmatized. For example, Alom Shaha writes in *The Guardian*, "Just as people who are gay don't have a choice about it, I don't think I have a choice about being an atheist – I suspect I am somehow predisposed to be a non-believer and am grateful that I've been fortunate enough to live in a country where I can openly express that non-belief." (2010) Similarly, Edward Tabash writes, "Now, many will argue that being gay or lesbian is not a matter of choice and should therefore

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<sup>71</sup> [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=37#letter\\_465785](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=37#letter_465785), 5-4-2010

not be a basis for discrimination...We have no intellectual choice other than to see the universe as a natural place, with no powers within it that can violate the laws of nature.” (Tabash n.d.) The deployment of “coming out” rhetoric in deconversion narratives may help bolster the claim that atheism is an in-born trait akin to sexual orientation. As Brookey (2002) has noted, such an argument may appear particularly compelling in combating prejudice based on religion, as it questions why God would create an individual with forbidden characteristics. (32) Again, a feeling of persecution provides much of the grounding for this alignment of atheism with queer identity; to remain in the closet is already regarded as a form of oppression, as it is based on an arbitrary stigmatization of a quality over which the atheist has no say.

The implications of “coming out” rhetoric for questions of agency has been raised by a number of poststructuralists in the study of gender and sexuality. For example, Shane Phelan has criticized the notion of “coming out” for intimating that one’s sexual identity is always static and unambiguous and that only one’s awareness of it is open to transformation:

The privileging of lesbian identity, and the need for truth that underlies this privileging, is displayed in the whole cluster of ideas manifested in the phrase *coming out*. The phrase is meant to suggest that the process of declaring one’s lesbianism is a revelation, an acknowledgment of a previously hidden truth. By implication, coming out is a process of discovery or admission rather than one of construction or choice. (Phelan 1993, 773)<sup>72</sup>

In other words, the rhetoric of “coming out” in the contexts of both atheism and queerness may serve a similar function to the use of religious rhetoric in deconversion narratives. The stark division between being in and out of the closet serves to isolate questions of identity around a public declaration, which in turn glosses over and

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<sup>72</sup> For similar critical engagements with the rhetoric of “coming out,” see Creet 1995, Sedgwick 1990

undermines the possibility that one's identity may not be so easily defined. If the predominant question concerning one's identity is whether one is willing to admit that they are queer, then the prior question of what it means to consider oneself queer is eschewed and the assumption that sexual identity is always already determined becomes all the more convincing. By imagining the process of verbally coming out as the exclusive of predominant means by which identity is transformed, it is implied that all understandings of sexual identity which cannot be articulated in terms of "coming out" rhetoric are non-transformative by comparison; that is, sexual identity is presumed to remain static and unambiguous until it is verbalized in the process of coming out. As Phelan argues concerning sexual identity, such a view is overly reductionist and serves to mask the degree to which sexual identity, rather than existing in a fully-formed state waiting to be discovered by the conscious subject, is always being formed through discursive practice: "Coming out is partially a process of revealing something kept hidden, but it is more than that. It is a process of fashioning a self ... that did not exist before coming out began." (Phelan 1993, 774)

The same can be argued in the context of deconversion narratives. As atheism is increasingly defined exclusively around the question of whether one is in or out of the closet, it becomes more difficult to interrogate definitions of atheism according to other measures. By this implicit logic, atheism is not understood as a chosen identity, but as a willingness to accept a hidden identity that was already self-originated according to its own logic of emergence. Thus, "coming out" rhetoric seems to serve the same function in removing agency from the process of becoming an atheist as that of religious and crisis rhetoric. By making one's willingness to publicize their atheism the predominant means

of determining who is correctly understood to be an atheist, the possibility that atheism is a more nuanced identity influenced by personal desires and choices is subjugated to the notion that every atheist is united by an awareness of a common subjectivity – one which is not fashioned but which is discovered within the psyche of the individual where it is necessarily shielded from the corrupting influence of ideology. In this fashion, a thematic trend has been highlighted in which the notion that each individual chooses their own atheist identity, while being embraced at the level of explicit statements concerning the inherent individualism engendered by atheism, is downplayed via rhetoric which implies that atheist subjectivity is discovered more than it is fashioned. To better understand how this view of subjectivity is reified in discourse, we must ask two final questions: First, what does this contradictory view of agency articulated in deconversion narratives communicate to participants regarding the formation of identity? And second, what political function may such a view of agency serve in the formation and maintenance of an internet atheist community? It is with these questions that I conclude.

## CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS & CONCLUSION

In examining the most common motifs found in deconversion narratives, one can see a trajectory toward a particularly normative understanding of what it means to be an atheist – a circumscription of subject-position which repeatedly implies that the most fundamental question of atheist identification is a particular approach to agency. The use of religious and quasi-religious symbolism in describing the experience of deconversion indicates that disbelief is an identifying characteristic on par with religious affiliation – one marked by an often precise and irreversible moment of transformation which intimates just how important and fundamental one’s beliefs are in defining identity. The use of crisis rhetoric similarly paints atheism as an identity wrapped in powerful emotional effects and marked by a brand of intellectual honesty which forever forecloses the possibility of living the lie of religion. Furthermore, crisis rhetoric often serves to unify an atheist community around a sense of shared persecution, implying that one’s atheist identity, because it comes at a cost, must be taken seriously by both atheists and religionists alike.

In addition, readers of deconversion narratives are frequently confronted with the claim that atheism, despite being marked by an embrace of individual agency, is something in-born and natural. Hence, deconversion is repeatedly framed as a negative process which strips away a false religious identity to reveal the atheist kernel latent in every individual. The use of language which depicts atheism as a kind of *tabula-rasa* identity untainted by indoctrination, existing before the corruption of individual agency,

intimates to readers that evangelism is not a matter of convincing religionists to put on a new identification, but of drawing out the latent atheist within them.

Finally, deconversion narratives frequently distinguish between a dysfunctional form of atheism amounting to religious apathy and a purer form of atheism marked by a commitment to the good work of deconversion. Barbour has convincingly demonstrated that the religious symbolism which occurs throughout deconversion stories may serve an implicitly evangelistic function, making such stories more appealing to potential future deconverts who are familiar with the common language of conversion and religious experience. Crisis rhetoric also tends to support such a function, by reifying the notion that one's decisions concerning religious belief are of paramount importance both in enabling individuals to live a fulfilling life and in constructing communal identity around shared experiences.

The motif which fuels this trajectory toward evangelism is perhaps a uniquely atheist portrayal of agency. Religious symbolism, after all, frequently constructs deconversion as a revelation which hits the individual like a bolt from the blue. Similarly, crisis rhetoric often paints deconversion as a process which is out of the hands of the deconvert, either because it follows inevitably from a growing sense of anguish and a 'sink or swim' moment, or because a commitment to intellectual honesty fundamentally disables the deconvert's ability to carry on in their religious milieu without producing an unsustainable amount of cognitive dissonance. Despite the common emphasis on individual agency in atheism, the process of deconversion is repeatedly regarded as having its own inertia. Even when deconversion is presented as an extremely

difficult process, it is one that cannot be resisted – once the ball has started rolling, it is only a matter of time before religion falls apart at the seams.

Similarly, the claim that atheism is inherent clearly undermines simplistic notions of agency. If deconversion is understood as a return to an innocent state before the corruption of religious indoctrination, it is a return which rescues individual agency from the suppressing tendency of religion. All of this is to say that the message reiterated in deconversion narratives is the notion that deconversion is not a positive choice on par with switching to a new church – it is a purely negative act in which one realizes that there is no choice. Deconversion narratives perhaps serve to relocate agency such that the choice is not between religion and atheism, but between atheism masked behind intellectual illusion and intellectually-honest atheism. If everyone is born an atheist and then covers that atheism with an inauthentic religious identity, then perhaps discursively undermining agency serves to motivate atheist evangelism by distinguishing it from religious evangelism. Religious evangelism, it is implied, relies on corrupting one's agency by suppressing their inherent atheism. Atheist evangelism, on the other hand, does not impose one understanding of identity on individual agency because deconversion is nothing more than a deconstruction of ideology. If religion is regarded as the ideological corruption of one's inherent individualism, then atheist evangelism is, by contrast, a process which rescues that uncorrupted individualism precisely by removing agency from the equation. Any other form of evangelism is then regarded as indoctrination which preys on the vulnerability of the inquisitive mind, and only atheist evangelism can be understood as categorically distinct from indoctrination because it purportedly liberates the agent while paradoxically shielding the agent from corruption

by imagining deconversion as an agentless process. After all, the reasoning goes, ideology implies the corruption of choice, but atheism isn't really a choice between belief and disbelief. Instead, atheism is regarded as the recognition that the choice between belief and disbelief is an illusion waiting to be dismantled. Deconversion narratives tend to reify the notion that only by giving up the illusion of religious choice can one rescue the very notion of agency, such that atheist evangelism becomes the only acceptable form of authority precisely because it enables one's liberation from all other forms of authority. Deconversion narratives imply that atheist evangelism is the only legitimate form of indoctrination by discursively removing agency from the process of deconversion, thus framing deconversion as the only process immune to ideological corruption.

If many deconversion narratives seem, in various ways, to intimate to readers that the deconvert plays a largely passive rather than active role in becoming an atheist, attention must be paid to the implications of this denial of agency. One way to approach the question of why deconversion narratives so frequently portray the transition to atheism as one relatively devoid of the execution of willpower by an active agent is to consider P. Steven Sangren's discussion of "alienated power."

In *Dialectics of Alienation: Individuals and Collectivities in Chinese Religion* (1991), Sangren "attempts to define the structures of alienation by means of which individuals produce themselves and social collectivities, on the one hand, and by which society produces both itself and individual subjects, on the other." (67) Sangren draws his discussion of alienation from Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, a process by which human relations are mystified as social relationships are increasingly imagined

in terms of objectified relationships between commodities and capital. In *Das Kapital*, Marx claims that commodities produced through human labor are inscribed with societal values which are then divorced from the processes by which they were created, such that the commodities themselves are imagined to inherently contain such values and qualities. The society which gave rise to such products and attributed them with social values, in other words, collectively forgets the createdness of those products and comes to regard them as self-produced entities with their own immutable characteristics. The prime example of this fetishism occurs in the context of currency. Any unit of paper money, for example, is rather arbitrarily ascribed a certain worth which is divorced from the actual cost of the paper and labor which went into its manufacture. Yet, for the capitalist society to function, it is necessary that the members of that society agree upon the value of currency, which necessitates a kind of collective ignorance of the fact that the currency merely paper. Instead, it is taken as a given that the value of the money which has been artificially determined is actually a quality which inheres to the currency itself.

Sangren, who draws on a similar move by Terence Turner (n.d.), sees this attribution of symbolic power to objects in religious discourse, in which symbolic power is ascribed to religious referents despite the fact that those religious concepts were manufactured by human intellect. Sangren's argument is particularly salient in examining Chinese religion where deities are often imagined in parallel to human institutions. (Sangren 2000, 212) Nonetheless, Sangren's conclusions can easily be applied to the Judeo-Christian discourse to which atheism frequently refers. Put roughly, Sangren's argument reads like this: A community or society collectively imagines a deity – in this case, the Judeo-Christian god. This God predominantly reflects and modifies

human social institutions like the church, the ideal community, and ideal relationships between individuals. This god, in turn, is fetishized in the sense that it is imagined not as the creation of society, but as the creator which predates and structures human society. By this logic, the commandments to engage in ethical behavior are not externalizations of principles constructed out of human communities; instead, the human world is understood to be a reflection of the supernatural realm. This attribution of agency to God allows members of human society to forget that they are the ones discursively creating and reifying the supernatural realm: “But because these powers of production are attributed to the deity, perceived as the possessor and not the product of such powers, both individuals and collectivities come to have a mystified or veiled form of self-consciousness.” (Sangren 1991, 67-68)

What is perhaps most important for the sake of the argument here is that such processes of alienation do not only lend a sense of self-evidence to cosmological views – “the processes in which these alienated representations are produced are, at one and the same time, the processes in which both cultural subjects and social collectivities are also produced.” (Sangren 1991, 67) By imagining the structure of human society as something which follows from rather than gives rise to the commandments of God, society’s members may more easily reify the notion that their individual and collective identities are as they should be. This, for Sangren, does not mean that society tends to produce a static understanding of relationships; rather, it gives society the discursive means by which it may reformulate and restructure itself without risking the instability that would otherwise arise from such changes. Because God’s attributes and commandments are alienated representations of the human world, changes to the human

world may be imagined as divinely-enacted. By this logic, there is little risk of societal instability, for any discontent caused by such social shifts is directed toward the divine realm where it can be mediated by ritual means. Those who truly enacted such transformations – society at large – are free from blame in disrupting social stability for they are constantly deferring agency to an alienated divine power.

One sees this alienation of human agency in Judeo-Christian discussions of free will. While most Christians today embrace the notion that God imbued them with the freedom to choose their own path in life, one regularly sees a countervailing tendency to imagine that God creates each individual so as to best actualize His plans. The dominant theological view appears to accept that there are limits to free will, such that God's plans may trump the desires of the individual. Importantly, this complicated view of human agency appears to confirm many of Sangren's conclusions concerning the political function of religion – if God is the most powerful agent of personal and historical change, there is little use in blaming human individuals for those social changes which can be argued to follow from theological adjustments. Ergo, for example, the Vatican may change its position on the existence of Limbo and enact a political transformation concerning the acceptability of miscarriage and abortion through an adjustment to theological reasoning. Here, the Judeo-Christian insistence on God's permanence and immutability may permit a lesser degree of flexibility in cosmological views relative to the Chinese context. However, this rigidity is somewhat resolved by the theological claim that humans can only ever achieve a partial understanding of God's qualities and thus that changes to theological reasoning do not imply that God Himself has changed. By this reasoning, Sangren's claims appear applicable. Even if social changes can not

easily be argued to follow from changes in God's will, they may still be justified as steps in the fulfillment of God's unchanging plan for history or as more accurate understandings of God's qualities and commandments.

Sangren's discussion of alienated power appears useful in understanding the approach to agency adopted by mainstream Judeo-Christian theology. As in the Chinese milieu with which Sangren is familiar, God's existence appears to mystify the constructedness of individual identities and large-scale social transformations. Furthermore, Sangren's conclusions may also be adaptable to the context of deconversion narratives. Certainly, many deconversion narratives demonstrate the first step in Sangren's (1991) process of alienation by which "the subject's awareness of its role in self-production is partially repressed." (78) Deconverted atheists routinely claim that their transition to atheism was out of their control and that they had no choice but to identify as atheist. While deconverted atheists frequently idealize a sense of individual autonomy by stressing that they are free from indoctrination, the use of religious language, crisis rhetoric, and the motif of inherent atheism intimate that this autonomy was, to a large degree, somehow determined. Yet, Sangren's argument does require some adaptation if it is to apply in this context. Most obviously, while deconverted atheists may sometimes downplay their own role in self-production, this productive power is not attributed to an externalized deity as in religious language. (Sangren 1991, 78) On occasion, the deconverted atheist may appeal to a loose understanding of fate or serendipity,<sup>73</sup> but there is perhaps never a non-ironic appeal to a personalized agent which controls one's identity as an atheist. However, this fact may not require a reevaluation of

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<sup>73</sup> See for example [http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter\\_465833](http://richarddawkins.net/letters/converts?page=12#letter_465833), 5-4-2010; <http://new.exchristian.net/2010/07/two-types-of-atheist.html>, 7-11-2010

Sangren's (1991) claim that the self-production of cultural subjects "requires as its self-bounding 'other' a collectively produced representation of power." (80) In deconversion narratives, this collectively produced representation of power may still exist in more implicit form. While those who regard atheism as a simple replication of religious fundamentalism might claim that science comes to represent this power – that science becomes the fetishized God which legitimates the deconversion narrative – perhaps the discursive relationship between atheism and religion creates a situation in which religious representations of power remain dominant.

It is important to remember, in other words, that Sangren's account of the creation of cultural subjects does not require positing any monolithic ideology. Cultural subjects do not simply internalize publicly constructed meanings; instead, "such meanings are produced in the very activities that produce both subjects and social collectivities." (Sangren 1991, 80) As a result, the production of selves is a process always open to contestation and negotiation as members of a discursive formation participate in the activities which come to define communities and individuals. Foucault's (1978) insistence on the multivalence of power, seen in the claim that "power comes from below" and is "exercised from innumerable points," (94) is echoed in Sangren's view of alienated power as a process fuelled by individuals and yet erroneously attributed to more monolithic powers:

The alienated nature of representations of this productive power results in a 'compromise which allows a measure of subjective consciousness of creativity of new meaning, on condition that the basic nature of that creativity remain obscured' (T. Turner, n.d.). Individuals' commitments to ideological misrepresentations of the sources of social productivity are simultaneously commitments to ideological misrepresentations of their own powers of self production. (Sangren 1991, 80-81)

This degree of flexibility in the formation of selves means that, in the context of deconversion narratives, it is not necessary to pinpoint a specific alienated power in the form of a deity controlling the ideological development of atheists. What is important is that it is possible for deconverted atheists to misrepresent their own powers of self-production. For Sangren (1991), this possibility is enacted by a kind of dialectic between the individual and the community, in which the agency of the individual is masked (and thus freed) by the alienation of the agency of the community – collective representations of power serve to shift attention away from individual executions of agency. (81) On one hand, it is valid to note that the frequent appeal to intellectual honesty in deconversion narratives may help implement this function – the “truth” of science perhaps allows individual atheists to misrepresent their own desires in deconverting. On the other hand, if one maintains that atheists and religionists appear to inhabit the same discursive formation, one can argue that deconversion narratives do not need to explicitly invoke an alienated power like scientific discovery for such an alienated power has already been established by religion. The question of God’s existence underlies all atheist discourse and ensures that atheist language is always already only intelligible in reference to the language of religion. In other words, perhaps God remains the alienated power at play in deconversion narratives, despite the atheist conviction of God’s nonexistence. Ultimately, for Sangren (2000), a discursive community must mystify the connection between communal ideals and their social origins in order to meet the “structural requirement that the cultural (i.e., arbitrary) origins of the legitimacy of social order and structures of authority be masked.” (212) In the context of deconverted atheists, the primary structure of authority which need be masked is the discursive dependence on

religious language which nonetheless emerges throughout deconversion narratives. Thus, “an objectified entity external to society,” that is, religious language, is granted “a kind of creative power...that is in fact the process of society’s reproduction of itself.” (Sangren 2000, 212)

What makes deconversion narratives unique in relation to Sangren’s discussion of religion is that the fetishization or alienation here is itself mystified, such that few atheists willingly admit that the atheist is defined in relation to religious language. As Bullivant (2008) notes, the indebtedness of deconversion narratives to religious language has been largely overlooked by atheists themselves, who appeal to reason and rationality while ignoring the prevalence of irreligious experiences as motivators of personal transformation. (16) In deconversion narratives, it seems, the process of alienation which necessarily involves the construction of external loci of agency to obscure the agency of the individual is balanced by a discursive rejection of the kind of supernaturalism that Sangren sees in religion. Thus, one sees in deconversion narratives the mystification of individual agency found in religious language, and yet these narratives rarely carry this process to the point of the externalization of power to anything in specific. What remains is a general sentiment that atheism is an identity which is not governed by individual desires without a clear indication of where the levers of power actually reside.

The absence of a clear alienated power in deconversion narratives, however, may only offer support for the claim that atheist subjecthood owes more to religious language than is often imagined. What is important is that the function of alienation may remain intact. To Sangren, the mystification which arises out of the alienation of power plays an important social role. For one thing, the externalization of individual agency onto

communal deities prevents a kind of rampant solipsism in which members of society are unable or unwilling to identify with the views of others: “Communal icons help to foster social solidarity and to legitimate structures of authority.”(Sangren 1991, 80) Furthermore, the mystification of individual agency gives societal structures a degree of flexibility in that social transformations can be attributed to divine processes rather than political maneuvers. (Sangren 1991, 81) In the context of deconversion narratives, these functions may still be achieved without the deification found in religion. Such deification serves primarily to obscure individual agency, but it may not be the only means by which such mystification can occur. If atheism is only intelligible in reference to religion, perhaps the prevalent emphasis on divine agency in religious language makes such atheistic deification redundant and unnecessary, enabling deconversion narratives to borrow the function of alienation without providing their own defenses of external agency. In effect, it may be precisely because they refer so frequently to religious language and religious conceptions of God that many atheists are able to imagine that they played a passive role in their deconversions without positing the existence of an active enactor of their transformations. If deconversion narratives tend to fetishize material reality to the point that the external world seems to possess its own agency capable of transforming human subjects, we may view such fetishism as a disavowal which enables atheists to simultaneously indulge and deny religious rhetoric, such that “what has been tabooed nevertheless manages to find a displaced form of representation.” (Hall 1997, 267) Put differently, we might agree with Homi Bhabha that the disavowal enabled by fetishism “is a non-repressive form of knowledge that allows for the possibility of simultaneously embracing two contradictory beliefs, one official and one

secret, one archaic and one progressive, one that allows the myth of origins, the other that articulates difference and division.” (Bhabha 1986, 168) In the case of deconversion narratives, the ‘official’ belief that atheists are in control of their own destiny is belied by the ‘secret’ implication that one cannot truly choose to be an atheist at all; the ‘archaic’ conviction that atheism is an identity bestowed upon individuals constitutes a myth of origins that unifies readers around a collective subjectivity while the ‘progressive’ belief that only the atheist has seized control of their own agency serves to articulate difference between atheists and religionists.

Perhaps the difficulty of imagining an external agent in an atheist context is precisely what encourages many deconverted atheists to belabor their lack of agency as a kind of counterbalance. If Sangren’s theory of alienation describes a dialectical process by which alienated powers are imagined to take agency away from individuals who simultaneously and self-consciously confer agency upon those powers, perhaps deconversion narratives are unique in that they largely imagine a unidirectional process by which atheists are portrayed without agency and the alternative process in which external actors are imagined to gain agency is ignored and even prohibited.

At first glance, Sangren’s theory of alienated power may seem to conflict with Foucault’s account of confessional practices. According to Sangren, for instance, the creation of individual subjectivities is ultimately validated by communal understandings of the supernatural realm, while for Foucault, it would seem that the validity of one’s subject-position is guaranteed by those confessional techniques of the self which rely on introspection. In both cases, however, what is important is that the processes by which individuals come to understand their own subjecthood are mystified in discourses which

relocate power. For Foucault, confessional practices serve to relocate the locus of power internally, such that one's subject position emerges naturally from the depths of their soul. For Sangren, communal practices such as public testimony serve to relocate the locus of power externally, such that one's subject position follows naturally from supernatural redirection. In deconversion narratives, one can see both of these tendencies. On the one hand, deconverted atheists frequently echo the language of confession in imagining that their atheism lay dormant underneath their religious affiliation waiting to be released by realization and verbalization. On the other hand, many deconverted atheists emphasize that their innermost desires pointed only toward religious belief, but that they were unable to actualize such desires in the face of overwhelming external factors such as scientific rationality and a demand for intellectual honesty.

Thus, the factor which enables a synthesis of Foucault and Sangren's views of subjectivization is the degree to which some atheists remove individual agency from the process of deconversion. Crucially, this shunning of individual agency is primarily made possible by the givenness of religious language which, in its deployment in deconversion narratives, intimates that subjecthood is rarely a matter of personal choice. Because deconversion narratives routinely refer to religious language, the assumption that one's subjectivity is anything but an individual decision is pervasive.

Accordingly, we return to the question, "what is an atheist?" but by now, the question reads more like "what do many atheists assume about identity and subjecthood and from whence do those assumptions come?" In discussions of atheism as a philosophy, there is a regularly repeated mantra that atheism is a lifestyle defined by

individual agency and rational decision-making; there is a prevalent claim that atheism, unlike religion, gives individuals the freedom to make their own decisions without the corrupting influence of structures of ideology like clerical institutions and rigid ethical guidelines. However, the rhetoric of deconversion narratives demonstrates that this claim actually masks that the loci at which dynamics of power operate are immanent in the discourse of atheist deconversion itself. In fact, what it means to be an atheist is perhaps laden with more circumscriptions of subjecthood than definitions of atheism, such that the agency of the deconverted atheist is more limited than it might first appear. Put in Foucauldian terms, perhaps the incitement to articulate one's atheism as a subject-position in deconversion narratives results not in a pluralization of atheist subjectivities, but instead in a more homogenized understanding of atheist subjecthood – one that is “stricter, perhaps, but quieter.” (Foucault 1978, 38) Whether the laws of science dictate that everyone is born an atheist until they are trained in the art of intellectual honesty or whether God made atheists the way they are, the message reiterated in many deconversion narratives is that to be an atheist is not to affiliate oneself with a monolithic ideology on par with religious dogma. Yet, there is an ideology at play – it is simply one which emerges from multiple discursive points in deconversion narratives and which is constantly masked by language which imagines the deconvert as an object rather than subject of personal transformation. Because deconversion narratives so frequently refer to and employ religious language, perhaps a particularly objectified understanding of subjectivity lies at the heart of the alienation of individual agency which occurs in some atheist discourse. While deconverted atheists rarely imagine an external force or deity which transformed them into atheists, there remains a recurrent appeal to truth, couched

in terms of intellectual honesty and scientific language, which undermines a strong emphasis on individual agency.

This is to say, while deconverted atheists obviously reject the religious “hypothesis” of God’s existence, the assumption that one is not truly in control of their own identity is perhaps not so easy to discard. In the same way that Christian language often tows the line between maintaining humanity’s free will and God’s omnipotence/omniscience in creating human subjects as He sees fit, the simultaneous embrace and mystification of individual agency appears to remain intact in atheist discourse which borrows and modifies religious language. As with confessional language in the Christian context, deconversion narratives routinely replace choice with truth by locating the levers of personal transformation in an internal realm untouched by social forces. At the same time, as with ritual behavior in the milieu of religious worship, deconversion narratives routinely externalize and fetishize that same notion of truth, having been discovered in the innermost depths of the individual psyche, to the level of an alienated power which overrules the desires of the individual. This emphasis on truth as originating from an external reality serves to mask that “its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.” (Foucault 1978, 60) Accordingly, many deconversion narratives serve to mask the role of the individual in becoming an atheist, and thus insulate the process of deconversion from the polluting effects of power dynamics, by simultaneously internalizing and externalizing an objectified understanding of truth. The truth of atheism and what it means to be an atheist, it is frequently implied, may be discovered by looking outward at the discoveries of science or by looking inward at the depths of one’s core identity, but it certainly cannot be reduced to an arbitrary and thus

ideological construction created out of a discursive formation. The preceding analysis of deconversion narratives, however, demonstrates that such a conception is better understood as a political strategy than a statement of fact. The notion that atheism is an identity discovered, enacted, and verified by an impartial force, whether constituted in the universe at large or the individual self, is enabled by the discursive overlap between atheist and religious rhetoric – an overlap which allows deconverts to rhetorically undermine their own agency by borrowing language which connotes a passive understanding of subjectivity as that which is *created* rather than *creative*. It is a notion which serves to mask the degree to which the atheist subject is fashioned through participation in collectively normativized discursive practices and which, for that very reason, is as imbued with the workings of politics as every other form of identification.

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## ERIC R. CHALFANT—CURRICULUM VITAE

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### Education

**Whitman College: Bachelor of Arts in Department of Religion** 2008

*Academic focus: atheism, secularism, continental philosophy*

**Thesis: Seeds of Evolution: The Diversity of Contemporary Atheism**

This thesis utilized comparative analysis of five popular contemporary atheist figures (Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Jacques Berlinerblau, Michel Onfray) to demonstrate that, contrary to arguments posited by thinkers like Alister McGrath that atheism is stagnant and unsustainable as a strain of thought, atheism contains diversity and potential for future growth, particularly in terms of dissimilar visions of a possible atheist or postreligious society.

*Thesis was defended on April 24, 2008 (committee chaired by Professor Walt Wyman and included Professors Robert Morrison and Melissa Wilcox).*

**Wake Forest University: Master of Arts in Department of Religion** 2011

*Academic focus: atheism, secularism, post-secularism, continental philosophy, ritual studies, body theory, death of God theology*

**Thesis: Thank God I'm an Atheist: Deconversion Narratives on the Internet**

This thesis will analyze the rhetoric of deconversion narratives on the internet, arguing that such narratives frequently borrow and employ religious rhetoric in ways that downplay the importance of individual agency in becoming an atheist. This approach to agency will be examined through a Foucauldian lens to argue that such rhetoric serves to construct particular atheist subject-positions which discursively legitimize atheist evangelism as a process purportedly immune to the forces of ideology.

*Thesis to be defended in May 2011 (committee chaired by Professor Tanisha Ramachandran and includes Professors Lynn Neal and Jarrod Whitaker)*

### Research and Publications

**Rhetoric and Film Studies Department Research Assistant** Summer 2009

I researched and wrote for a forthcoming textbook on rhetoric. Under the supervision of Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Film Studies and Director of Forensics at Whitman College, James Hanson, I wrote on theories and principles of rhetoric, focusing on the diversity of religious argumentation. The book, *Argument in Context*, publication pending completion, is ongoing through a Perry Grant.

**Collegiate Debate** 2003 - 2009

As a competitive, nationally ranked debater and debate coach researching various political and critical topics, I committed thirty hours a week or more to research. My research specialties were in religion and atheism, continental philosophy, and Middle Eastern politics.

**Dictionary of Forensics** 2008

Chalfant, Eric R., Entries for the Dictionary of Forensics. West Coast Publishing: Fountain Valley, CA. 2008.

Entries included definitions of key terms in continental philosophy.

**West Coast Lincoln Douglas Handbook** 2008

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## **Significant Honors**

Graduated Cum Laude with honors in the religion department. Passed oral examinations with distinction.

*Brattain Scholar* for academic merit. Whitman College, 2003-2008

*Presidential Scholar* for debate merit. Whitman College, 2003-2008

*Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) Academic All American*, for overall academic and debate performance 2008

First annual *Winston Cup* recipient, given to the top debate team at Whitman College 2008

*Becky Galentine Memorial Speaker Award*, given annually to the top speaker at the Northwest Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA) Championships Debate Tournament 2008

*2<sup>nd</sup> place. Dovell Gose Oratory Competition*. Whitman College 2007

Over 50 awards in eight years of competitive speech and debate at high school and collegiate levels.

## **Conference and Teaching Experience**

**Assistant Coach in Policy Debate, Whitman College** 2008-2009

As a full-time policy debate coach, I worked closely with 16 college debaters, including one team ranked among the top 16 teams in the nation. I conducted research and traveled to three to five tournaments per semester to coach teams in competition.

**Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion (SECSOR) Conference** 2011

I presented a portion of my thesis (on atheist rhetoric and new media) in a panel on the varieties of religious experience in America in May 2011.

**Lab Leader and Lecturer in Policy Debate, Whitman National Debate Institute (WNDI)**

Summer 2004-2009

I led teaching duties that included teaching and leading research efforts on National Forensics League topics, basic drilling on debate techniques, lectures on debate theory and useful philosophical positions for use in debate rounds, debriefing and discussion of practice debates, and organizing camp staff for their accompanying duties.