CONGREGATION AMONG THE LEAST RELIGIOUS:
THE PROCESS AND MEANING OF ORGANIZING AROUND NONBELIEF

by

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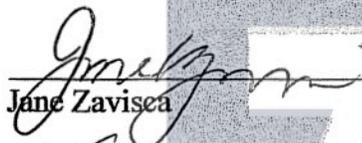
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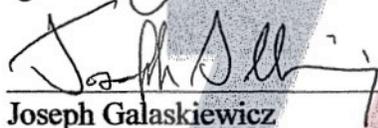
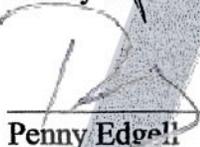Joseph Galaskiewicz   Date: August 6, 2019

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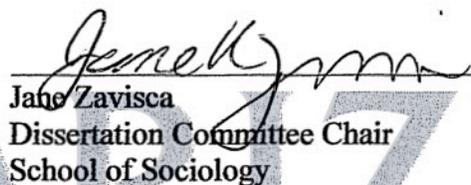
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Final approval and acceptance of this dissertation is contingent upon the candidate's submission of the final copies of the dissertation to the Graduate College.

I hereby certify that I have read this dissertation prepared under my direction and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement.

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DEDICATION

For my Dad, my favorite skeptic.

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ABSTRACT

Every week in Houston, Texas, hundreds of atheists meet all over the city to socialize, attend educational talks, volunteer, protest injustice, or meditate in the company of other nonbelievers. That people congregate based on a *lack* of belief may seem counterintuitive, yet in Houston, a growing number of nonbelievers are participating in local groups that cater explicitly to those who do not believe in God. Researchers have produced recent work on atheist stigma, personal identity development, and collective identity, while work that addresses nonreligious organizations usually focuses on action within a single organization, or presents many organizations as a united collective without investigating the specific and diverse functions that different organizations may serve. To this point, little sociological research has investigated the variation that exists among nonreligious organizations at the local level.

This dissertation addresses the question of why nonbelievers join these organizations when there are many alternatives that also have nothing to do with religion. Additionally, with numerous options available, how do nonreligious organizations distinguish themselves from one another? To answer these questions, this dissertation draws on data collected during eight months of participant observation in eight nonreligious organizations in Houston, as well as interviews with 70 nonbelievers who exhibited varying levels of commitment to the organizations— including some who were not involved at all. I employ theories of identity and boundary-work at both the individual and organization levels to further explore the process and meaning of organizing around nonbelief.

I find that one significant way nonreligious organizations differ from other voluntary associations is that members share the experience of having a stigmatized identity. For some nonbelievers, joining a nonreligious organization is a form of stigma management, in that it

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provides a space where they can meet like-minded others and express themselves without reservation. Although this is one of the main reasons nonbelievers give for seeking out nonreligious organizations, I find that these organizations offer a variety of activities beyond social gatherings, and may include events that are educational, charitable, political, or spiritual in nature. Nonreligious organizations resemble religious congregations in many ways, but some capitalize on this familiar approach to community building more explicitly than others. Some nonbelievers are drawn to these "godless congregations" *because* they emulate churches, some participate *despite* this resemblance, and others avoid the congregation model while choosing to participate in other nonreligious organizations instead. I find that participation in these groups is not necessarily a clean, linear progression, and that nonbelievers display varying degrees of commitment to organizations. Finally, I find that nonbelievers differentiate themselves from conservative religious believers by constructing strong moral boundaries based on a set of common secular values. If nonbelievers wish to communicate their values to outsiders, they may do so in the context of organized nonreligion, thereby mitigating the popular assumption that atheists are amoral. My findings show that organized nonreligion is as diverse a phenomenon as organized religion, and that nonreligious organizations can vary considerably in their activities, goals, and appeal to potential members.

Compelling evidence suggests that the American religious landscape is undergoing a significant transformation as numerous outlets report steady declines in affiliation, participation, and belief. An increasingly secular United States, evidenced in part by the organizations described in this dissertation, could have wide-ranging implications—including shifts in public policy and cultural values—since nonreligious worldviews are correlated with a multitude of social factors, from socioeconomic status to beliefs about social justice.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On any given Sunday in Houston, Texas, between November 2014 and June 2015, my homepage on the community building social media platform Meetup.com may have contained announcements for any of the following events:

9:30AM – HOUSTON OASIS – Regional Blood Drive

10:00AM – THE HUMANISTS OF HOUSTON – Atheists Helping the Homeless

10:30AM – HOUSTON CHURCH OF FREETHOUGHT – Community Gathering

10:30AM – HOUSTON OASIS – Weekly Gathering

10:30AM – THE HUMANISTS OF HOUSTON – Freethought Coffee Social

11:00AM – GREATER HOUSTON SKEPTIC SOCIETY – Brunching Skeptically

12:00PM – HOUSTON OASIS – Potluck Luncheon

12:00PM – HOUSTON ATHEISTS – Westside Meet-up

None of these organizations restrict activities to Sunday mornings and afternoons (nor are these the only such organizations in Houston), although this is often the most active time of the week for the city's nonreligious community. That these "nonreligious organizations" compete for nonbelievers' attention at a time typically reserved for spiritual devotion exposes the strange social space that such organizations occupy.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

THE PARADOX OF ORGANIZED NONRELIGION

That people congregate based on a *lack* of belief strikes many as counterintuitive. People join voluntary groups for a myriad of reasons: because group membership increases self-worth and sense of identity (Tajfel 1982); because their own interests and preferences match that of an

organization (Rothenberg 1989); because they seek mutual support and believe in organizational goals (Waddington and Whitston 1997); or because they hope to make a difference and live meaning lives (Klandermans 2001). However, regarding nonreligious organizations, one can still ask: What explains the irony of joining *these particular* organizations when there are so many other alternative voluntary communities available (e.g., clubs, sports leagues, professional associations, other communities on Meetup.com) that have nothing to do with religion?

During the course of this research, several recurring themes emerged that, when considered jointly, can help explain the draw of these particular organizations for some nonbelievers. First, an individual is unlikely to participate in organized nonreligion if their nonreligious identity is not important to them. In other words, an individual is unlikely to make use of a nonreligious identity in everyday situations if it is not salient (Stryker 1968). Labeling oneself an atheist is a deliberate act, which—much like the development of other identities— often occurs after a period of self-reflection and meaningful social interaction. It is a process that can result in one's nonbelief becoming a salient piece of one's identity (LeDrew 2013a). From this perspective, organized *non*religion emerges as an appealing option to those for whom this identity is significant. In this dissertation, I also apply the concept of identity to the organization level, exploring how social action in the context of an organized collective can communicate information about who the organization is what its goals are.

Second, nonreligious organizations mimic (some to a greater degree than others) a recognizable organizational form that is already deeply associated with many of the benefits nonbelievers hope to attain through participation. Religious groups are one of the most familiar and arguably most successful organizational structures associated with community: When people move to a new city and want to make friends, meet potential romantic partners, or simply

become familiar with their community, they may search for a church to join. For those who are

not religious (especially the formerly religious, and especially those for whom their nonreligious

identity has become salient), a *non*religious community is the next obvious place to look,

especially as nonreligion only exists as a social phenomenon relative (and in opposition) to

religion.

Finally, nonreligion organizations—unlike other voluntary civic organizations or

associations—directly address the deviant status of nonbelief. Religious belief is normative and

expected in the United States, whereas atheism—once revealed—is stigmatized. Stigma can

produce a reaction in others and prompt an atheist identity to become salient, and organizations

can provide safety in numbers: A stigmatized individual can feel confident, validated, and

protected among those who are understanding and supportive. Therefore, joining a nonreligious

organization could be a strategy for managing a stigmatized identity by providing a space to

connect with like-minded others, or acting as a vehicle through which one can convey to

outsiders a moral, normalized nonreligious identity.

When the puzzling question of *why organized nonreligion exists* is addressed through the

framework of these themes, further questions surface. What are these organizations like and what

do they do? How similar *are* they to churches? Do any patterns exist that can help explain

whether or not nonbelievers will become active in nonreligious organizations? How are

nonreligious identities and values constructed and maintained, and do nonreligious organizations

play a role? The goal of this dissertation is to answer these questions while exposing the

variation that exists in the nonreligious community at the local and organizational levels.

In this introductory chapter, I will introduce the growing literature focusing on

nonreligion, while each chapter will further discuss concepts relevant to the specific questions at

hand. Next, I will discuss methods of data collection and analysis and describe the data; again, individual chapters will describe the particular methods and data used to answer questions posed in that chapter. Finally, I will briefly introduce the chapters that follow.

BACKGROUND: NONBELIEF IN THE UNITED STATES

I define "nonreligious organizations" as groups that offer prearranged events, activities, and services to those who identify with nonreligious labels such as atheist, agnostic, skeptic, freethinker, humanist, or secularist.[1] Thus, these groups are specifically *not* religious, not merely religiously neutral (Eller 2010). This distinguishes such groups from those that are referred to as "secular organizations" throughout sociological literature, especially in the subfields of organizational and non-profit studies. Although "secular" is a term embraced by the nonreligious community, scholars generally use it much more broadly, encompassing all aspects of social life without religious ties (e.g., a public university is secular, but not nonreligious). To differentiate, I generally use the word "nonreligious" throughout this dissertation when speaking of organizations, people, and ideas that are defined in opposition to religion (though this is not a term that is universally used in such a way by nonreligion scholars).

In order to situate these organizations in the broader religious and cultural landscape, this section will review recent trends in religious affiliation and belief, recent contributions to the literature on nonreligion and its relationship to other sociological subfields, and some different ways to think about organized nonreligion that will be discussed in greater depth throughout this dissertation.

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[1] See Shook (2017) for definitions and discussion of secular labels.

Recent Trends in Affiliation and Belief

The United States has seen a dramatic recent shift in the religious landscape beginning in the early 1990s. Prior to 1990, the proportion of adults in the United States who claimed "no religious affiliation" (also known as the "nones") was fairly stable at around seven percent. In just a decade, the proportion of nones doubled to 14 percent of the population. Since then the rate of increase has slowed but is still rising. Today, around one in five American adults now claims no religious preference—a trend largely driven by Millennials. Explanations for this trend include demographic and political shifts (Hout and Fischer 2002), the failure of religious institutions to adapt to these shifts (Wuthnow 2007), and personal experiences involving education, misfortune, and social networks (Zuckerman 2012).

FIGURE 1.1: Trends in Religious Nonaffiliation and Disbelief
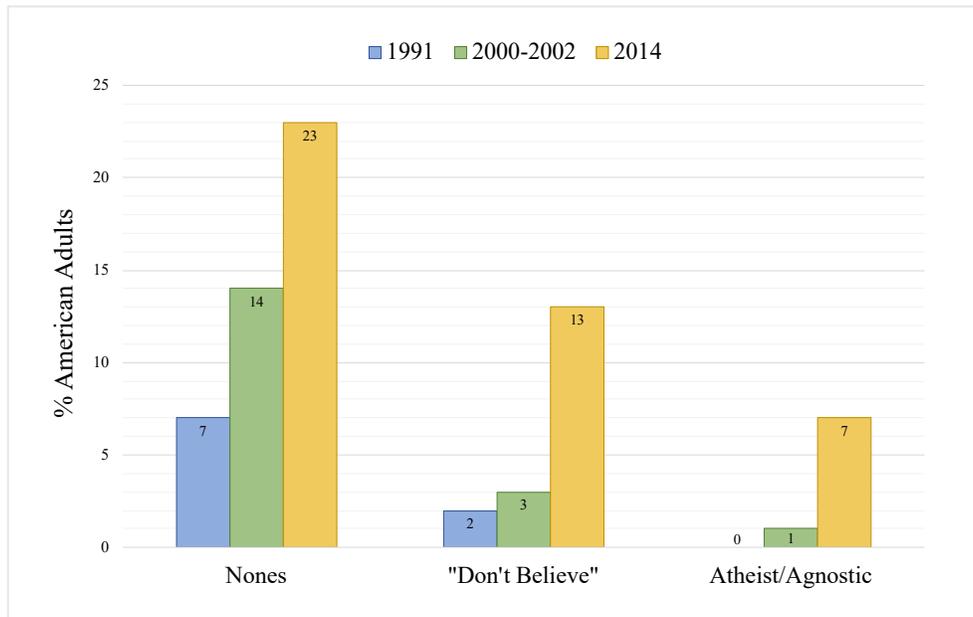
However, scholars of religion are quick to point out that "no affiliation" is not synonymous with "no belief," and that the nones are comprised largely of those who still retain some level of religious or spiritual belief, despite disengagement from organized religion (Packard and Hope 2015). Still, the number of self-identified atheists and agnostics is rising, as is

the percentage of people who claim that they do not believe in God, seen in Figure 1.1 (based on data from Hout and Fischer 2002; Kosmin et al. 2008; American Mosaics Project 2014; Hout and Smith 2015; Pew 2015a, 2015b).[2]

Since atheists are generally defined as people who do not believe in God, the discrepancy in Figure 1.1. between "Don't Believe" and "Atheist / Agnostic" is puzzling at first glance. However, recent surveys find significant discrepancies between people who say they do not believe in God and people who self-identify as atheist: In 2014, the second wave of the American Mosaic Project found that although only three percent of Americans self-identify as atheist, an additional ten percent will claim elsewhere in the survey that they do not believe in God. Likewise, among my own respondents, I find that not all nonbelievers refer to themselves as atheists.[3]

Atheists Versus Nonbelievers

Nonreligion is associated with a number of terms; if nonreligious individuals choose a label at all, they may use words such as atheist, agnostic,[4] skeptic, freethinker, humanist, or secularist to describe themselves. My own respondents largely self-identified as atheists, but most of them used multiple labels, which can convey nuance and sometimes vary depending on the audience. For example, one respondent, Sara, said, "I call myself an atheist, a secular humanist, a skeptic…for several years I labeled myself as agnostic. I have several words for it. To make it simple, I'm just a nonbeliever." Sara is an atheist, but also used the term nonbeliever as an all-encompassing, nonpolitical term that simply conveyed a lack of religious belief.

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[2] The percentage for "Atheist/Agnostic" in 1991 is shown as zero because surveys at this time generally did not differentiate between self-identified atheists and agnostics and those who said they do not believe in God; if respondents claimed to not believe in God, they were assumed to be atheist or agnostic.

[3] About 15 percent of respondents preferred labels like "humanist," "secular," or "none" over "atheist."

[4] Atheism is a statement of belief, whereas agnosticism is one of knowledge. The terms are not mutually exclusive, and many of my respondents identified with both labels (i.e., they are agnostic because they *do not know for certain* that God does not exist, but they are atheist because they *do not believe* God exists).

Throughout this dissertation, I too use both the terms "atheist" and "nonbeliever" to mean "someone who does not believe in God," though their connotations differ subtlety. I do not use these terms arbitrarily; generally, like Sara, I prefer the more inclusive term "nonbeliever" when discussing the broad category of people who do not believe in God in order to account for subtle distinctions in connotations attached to various nonreligious labels. I will use the term "atheist" when referring to those who specifically self-identify as such—all atheists are nonbelievers, but not all nonbelievers call themselves atheists. When referencing other works, I generally use the term originally employed by the authors.

Nonbelievers tend to be thoughtful and discerning regarding the labels they use, and for good reason. Functionally, "atheist" and "nonbeliever," or "don't believe in God," communicate the same basic (dis)belief regarding supernatural deities; however, claiming an atheist identity can be a political statement (LeDrew 2013b), with consequences that not all nonbelievers are willing to accept. Cragun and colleagues (2012) claim that the strongest predictor of discrimination toward the nonreligious is self-identifying as atheist or agnostic, which "represents a more pronounced out-group status than one would have as merely an irreligious person or a disbeliever" and may more readily be perceived as a "threat to the status quo" (108). In this view, it is the word "atheist" (and also "agnostic") that is stigmatized, and it elicits stronger reactions than if one simply claims disbelief in God. It is this perceived stigma—and its potential consequences—that allows only three percent of Americans to self-identify as atheist on surveys, despite over thirteen percent responding that they do not believe in God.

However, some research has found no significant difference in prejudice directed toward atheists versus other nonbelievers. In other words, people are just as likely to negatively evaluate a self-identified atheist as they are someone who simply says they do not believe in God. In one

study (Swan and Heesacker 2012), researchers designed a vignette in which participants evaluated a character, Jordan, who was described as either religious, an atheist, or not believing in God. Other times, religion was not mentioned. The researchers found that "alerting participants to Jordan's lack of belief in God had functionally the same effect as calling Jordan an atheist outright" (38) and concluded that nonbelief itself drives negative attitudes toward the nonreligious, not the word "atheist." Additionally, when revisiting their 2006 work, Edgell and colleagues (2016) found that negative attitudes toward atheists had spilled over to other nonreligious identities: for instance, to the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNRs), who are not as disliked as atheists but are still associated with a "dangerous trend" toward religious nonaffiliation. Still, even if the general population reports disliking *all* nonbelievers, atheists and agnostics report more instances of discrimination than those who do not claim these labels: Self-identified atheists and agnostics are more outspoken more likely to be activists than those who attach no label to their nonbelief, which could draw negative attention. They are also more likely to feel strongly about their identity and therefore could be more sensitive to negative messages.

A Brief History of Nonreligion Research

Trends toward an increasingly nonreligious global society have piqued the interest of contemporary researchers, who define nonreligion as "anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion" (Lee 2012:131). Historically, however, social scientists dedicated little attention to the empirical study of nonbelief. In 1971, Colin Campbell published a comprehensive book titled *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, hoping to "stimulate the development of just such a tradition" (2013:lvii). The following year an edited volume titled *The Culture of Unbelief* was assembled, including papers and reflections—written by prominent figures within the sociology of religion including Peter Berger, Thomas Luckman, Robert

Bellah, Bryan Wilson, and Talcott Parsons—that were presented at the First International Symposium of Belief in Rome in 1969 (Caporale and Grumelli 1972). A review of these works the following year suggested they would no doubt "give rise to an immense amount of scholarly discussion" (Jones 1973:291). Unfortunately, this early sociological work on nonreligion fell largely "on deaf ears" (Zuckerman 2010:vii).

Campbell offered some suggestions as to why sociologists had viewed (and continued to view) the nonreligious as unworthy of serious scrutiny. First, under the influence of positivism, early sociologists like Comte and Durkheim viewed religious behavior as irrational and unscientific: It was religious *belief* that required explaining, not *un*belief. Religion, they predicted, would eventually be replaced by science as an explanation for natural phenomena, and occupations and civic associations would replace churches as sources of community and collective identity, rendering religion as a social institution obsolete. Second, the historical dominance of the functionalist perspective within the sociology of religion also deterred scholars from searching out scenarios in which religion was not perceived as universal or beneficial. Third, nonreligion is often viewed as a force that promotes individualism rather than integration, suggesting that researchers have been reluctant to view nonreligion as a *social* phenomenon rather than an individual one. Finally, lack of sufficient data—currently being remedied—had prevented sociologists from properly understanding the dynamics of nonreligion.

Despite religion's declining influence as a social institution over other areas of social life, scholars recognize that it remains significant in American society. Secularization theory, originally predicting religion would become all but obsolete, has received heavy criticism: the late 20th century brought religious revival and politicization around the world, and scholars began to either reject the theory or fundamentally rework around its limited claims (Edgell

2012), opting for a "softer" interpretation of secularization in which religion is transforming rather than disappearing (Gorski and Altmordu 2008). This transformation, including the movement away from formal religious affiliation, has become a popular area of study as researchers are looking more closely at the various combinations of believing and belonging, which include groups like the spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNRs) and cultural Christians (Hastings 2016; McClure 2017).

Contemporary social scientists have taken up renewed interest in nonreligion, evidenced by a plethora of recent publications;[5] research groups and centers like the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) and the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC); secular studies programs like the one at Pitzer College developed by Phil Zuckerman; and entire journals and conferences dedicated to nonreligious studies. Social scientists have recently explored topics like prejudice and discrimination, identity, the lived nonreligious experience, and the role played by technology and social media. The social significance of nonreligion is especially evident as more people organize themselves into coherent structures that reject religion and religious belief.

METHODS AND DATA

Qualitative methods were ideal for answering the questions about process and meaning that I was interested in, particularly in regard to identity: What does it mean to be a nonbeliever and how do those self-identities inspire collective, organized action? I conducted 80 observations among eight local nonreligious organizations in the Houston area, over a period of eight months. I also conducted 70 semi-structured in-depth interviews with founders, leaders, and members of

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[5] Rather than summarizing this extensive literature here, I will engage with the research as it is relevant to each chapter at hand. See Smith and Cragun (2019) for a review of this literature from the mid-2000s to the present.

these groups, as well as people who were not actively involved.[6]

Interviews, in particular, can help researchers understand how their respondents "make sense" of the world they live in and their interactions with others. However, some cultural scholars have argued that interviews offer little insight into cognitive processes because social action is often the result of snap judgments made by intuition. Jerolmack and Khan (2014), for instance, argue that ethnography is better suited to explain social action and overcome the inconsistencies between attitudes and behaviors found in interview data. Pugh (2013), however, argues that interviews allow researchers to uncover the "embeddedness of the individual actor":

> Although people surely evince different cultural schemas to explain away particular problems, they have a sense for what counts as honorable behavior in their cultural world, which may or may not mesh with their innermost predilections. Their meta-feelings are a demonstration of the degree to which they are cultural migrants, a measure of the distances they have traveled from their early social contexts shaping the meanings of their early experiences, to the strictures of the cultural milieu in which they find themselves today (64).

For most of my respondents, becoming a nonbeliever was an *achieved* identity, acquired over time after the loss of a religious identity and/or the discovery of nonreligious labels. Their narratives revealed a significant amount of self-reflection, including consideration of how this identity shift altered the way they interpreted the world and engaged with others. Although narratives do not always align perfectly with past or planned action, there is normally little reason to assume respondents lie about having engaged in the action they report (Vaisey 2014). I interviewed many individuals who also participated in events that I observed (as recommended

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[6] These 70 interviews came from a pool of 125 interviews completed in Houston in 2014-15. Attributes of the chosen 70 respondents are similar to attributes of the sample as a whole. See Table 1.1 for comparisons.

by Vaisey 2009) and found virtually no concerning inconsistencies between the two.[7] However, to avoid any such discrepancies, multiple sources of data should be considered, as interviews alone may not fully capture how individuals make decisions and judgments (Vaisey 2009; Vaisey 2014).

It is true that the experiences of nonreligious individuals and organizations in Houston may not be representative of those in other cities or regions. To address the problem of generalizing a single case to the larger population, researchers employ the extended case method—most often associated with Burawoy and colleagues—alongside ethnographic fieldwork. Essentially, the method "deploys participant observation to locate everyday life in its extralocal and historical context" (Burawoy 1998:4) and claims that a single case can tell us more "about society as a whole rather than about the population of similar cases" (Burawoy at al. 1991:281). From the perspective of the extended case method, "deviant or unique cases are especially interesting, because they provide for ways of developing or extending theories…rather than identifying an empirical fact about society" (Small 2009:21). Houston is a unique city in a number of ways (further described below), providing new theoretical insights. By collecting data from multiple sources within Houston over time, I was able to obtain a sample of data that was both thick and rich (Fusch and Ness 2015). Finally, to account for any discrepancies in what *organizations* actually do versus what they say they do, I conducted qualitative content analysis on organizations' websites, social media pages, and physical documents and handouts distributed at meetings.

Online content, handouts, fieldnotes, and transcripts were all coded line by line and analyzed using the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti. An initial

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[7] I also believe the gap between what people say they believe and how they actually behave is a fascinating aspect of social inquiry in and of itself.

coding scheme was developed based on previous research and relevant theoretical concepts, involving categories such as individuals' religious histories, identity development, "coming out," stigma, boundaries, and organizational involvement and activities. As analysis of the empirical data commenced, new codes and sub-codes emerged inductively, allowing me to refine my categories and selectively re-code earlier documents (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

The Site

Houston, Texas, is a unique city in a number of ways. With a population of 2.3 million, it is the fourth most populous city in the United States and projected to overtake Chicago within a decade. The metropolitan area, often called Greater Houston, is slightly larger in area than the state of Vermont. It feels like a hybrid city of sorts, combining the compact urban centers typical of Northeastern and Midwest cities like New York or Chicago with Sun Belt suburban sprawl. With up to 26 lanes at some points, the Katy Freeway is one of the widest highways in the world.

Houston is demographically diverse. No single ethnic group makes up a majority of the city's population, and younger generations are even less white—over 70 percent of the under-20 population of Harris County is African American or Hispanic. In some ways, Houston is more progressive compared to the rest of Texas: Positive attitudes toward immigration and diversity have been steadily increasing (Kinder 2019), and Houston was one of the first major cities in the United States to elect an openly gay mayor.

Houston is also more religious than most metropolitan areas. Compared to the national average, Houston has more Christians, and in particular more Evangelical Christians (Pew 2014). It is home to 37 megachurches that have a combined weekly attendance of 640,000 (Holeywell 2016). Only about 18 percent of Houstonians are religiously unaffiliated (Kinder 2018); in fact, Houston is among the least secular metropolitan areas in the US (PRRI 2018). Why, then, choose

Houston, Texas, as a field site for research on religious unbelief? Why not conduct research in

San Francisco, Seattle, or Portland, Oregon, where the secular populations are nearly double that

of Houston's (PRRI 2018)? The simple answer to this question is that my interest lay in

organized nonreligion, and there are a lot of active nonreligious organizations in Houston

compared to other cities. Houston had more nonreligious organizations, with more (online)

members, and offering more events than any other city I investigated leading up to my selection

of a field site. This was particularly advantageous given my interest in uncovering diversity in

the local nonreligious community: By conducting qualitative research in a city with more

organizations and a greater variety of meetings, the full range of reasons people give for joining

organizations and the types of meetings they are drawn to would be discernible. But why was

this the case?

One of my interview respondents, Jack, described a combination of factors that align in

such a way as to help atheism thrive in Houston, while it may not in other places. Jack was

originally from northern England, which he described as very tolerant of, if not indifferent to,

nonbelief. Being a nonbeliever in the United Kingdom, he said, simply doesn't raise eyebrows

like it does in the United States. Jack—much like other Britons whom I interviewed for this

project—described the lack of significance attributed to religion in his home country: "Religion

just wasn't an issue there…if I was in the UK, I wouldn't even be thinking about it. I wouldn't

even be thinking about [joining a nonreligious organization]…because there isn't the same

discrimination there." Others from the UK whom I interviewed even claimed they did not label

themselves atheists until they moved to the US because they never felt a need to do so. Since

religion was rarely a topic of conversation, there was no reason to label oneself an atheist, let

alone incentive to join or form a nonreligious organization.

Later in his life, Jack moved to Huntsville, Alabama, and had a different experience with religion. Jack described Huntsville as very religious, hostile toward and intolerant of diversity, and an overall unpleasant place for a nonbeliever to live:

> My ex-wife was also atheist, and the kids have grown up atheist. And we were definitely discriminated against as soon as the neighbors realized we weren't going to church on Sunday morning. I mean, they stopped their children playing with our children…the religion was so strong there—and Huntsville is not a very big place, about 250,000—and it was below the critical mass to create a non-theistic community.

Despite atheists in Huntsville perhaps feeling a desire for a cohesive nonreligious community, Jack described the environment as a risky place to "come out" and openly identify as an atheist.

Houston, however, appears to be in a goldilocks zone between high and low levels of secularity, allowing nonreligious organizations to thrive. Jack expressed the conditions that contribute to Houston's success in this arena in two sentences: "I think the thing that drives me to join an organization is the simple fact that I do feel like I'm an isolated minority. And it's a safe environment to look for friends in, that's the bottom line." In other words, social isolation plus a safe space encourages minorities to seek out one another. Figure 1.1 visualizes this hypothesized relationship, showing that the number of nonreligious organizations in a given area will rise as the area becomes less religious—and presumably more tolerant of nonreligious activity. At a certain point, however, the number of organizations will begin to drop again, as secularity becomes a taken-for-granted aspect of everyday life and nonbelievers no longer feel the need to organize.

FIGURE 1.2: Proliferation of Nonreligious Organizations by Level of Secularity
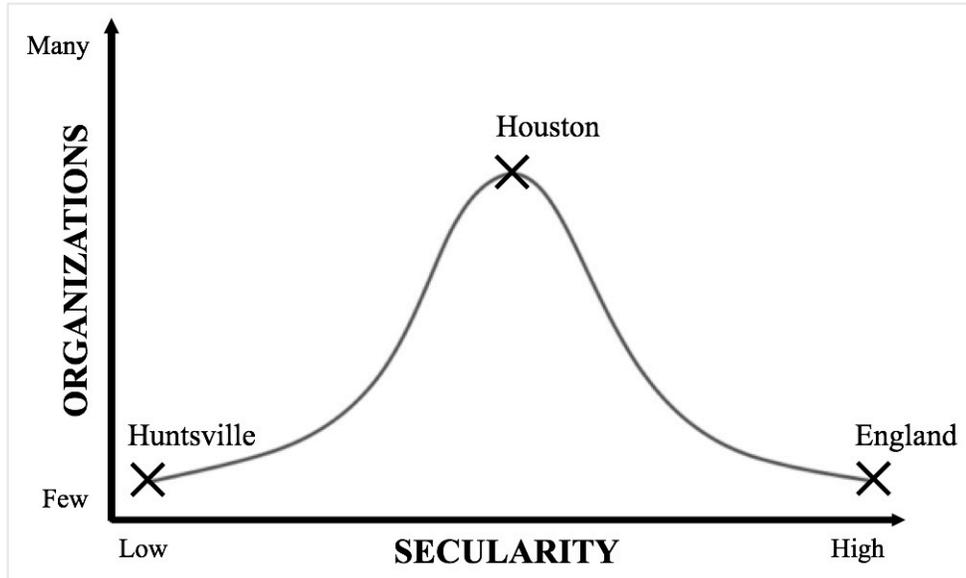
Houston sits at the apex of this bell curve for several reasons. On the one hand, Houston is a huge city. It is—as another respondent described it—cosmopolitan: one of the most diverse cities in the US, racially, ethnically, culturally. Houston is home to a large number of nonbelievers, if only because it has a large number of people.[8] At the same time, Houston is still a part of Texas, firmly located in the Bible Belt and not far removed from the Deep South. Religion is prevalent enough that nonbelievers expect to encounter it in everyday interactions. My respondents reported hearing religion in political rhetoric (both locally and nationally), seeing it make its way into public classrooms, and frequently being asked, "Where do you go to church?" upon meeting new acquaintances. Nonbelievers in Houston may feel a greater need to organize in response to religion than someone in England, and they may feel safer doing so than in a place like Huntsville.

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[8] According to the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, a lower percentage of Houston's population is nonaffiliated relative to the general US population (around 20 percent versus 23 percent). Thus, the prevalence of nonreligious organizations in Houston cannot be accounted for by a disproportionate slice of the population identifying as secular.

However, this should not suggest that cities or regions that are more or less religious than average cannot produce successful nonreligious organizations. For example, some research has described successful atheist groups in rural areas, even in the face of resistance and marginalization from religious others (Ritchey 2009). Conversely, the Sunday Assembly—a secular organization that emulates church services—was founded in London, despite nearly half of Britons having no religious affiliation (Bagg and Voas 2010). Further research in a range of settings is needed to confirm any concrete patterns of organizational vitality, though García and Blankholm (2016) suggest that nonreligious organizations tend to emerge in US counties with larger populations of Evangelical Protestants.

The Organizations

National organizations like the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation have existed for decades and established local chapters. However, the rise in both formal and informal nonreligious organizations—and increasing variation in the characteristics of organizations—has continued in recent years as they have harnessed the power of the Internet to coordinate action, which has been especially effective at the local level (Richter 2017).

For this project, I conducted participant observation among eight local nonreligious organizations in Houston, each hosting regularly scheduled, recurring events open to the public; that is, all organizations discussed here sponsored events that occurred weekly, biweekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually, which anyone could attend. These organizations would host or promote a variety of gatherings that may appeal to different niches or draw in different types of nonbelievers (Silver et al. 2014; Fazzino and Cragun 2017; Mastiaux 2017).

Houston hosts four large nonreligious organizations: Houston Atheists, Humanists of Houston, Greater Houston Skeptic Society, and Houston Oasis. About 85 percent of the events I observed for this project were sponsored by one of these four organizations. All eight groups advertised a variety of upcoming events via the social networking site Meetup.com in order to attract members, and at the time of fieldwork, these organizations had combined memberships of over 5,000 online members.[9] Here, I will provide brief descriptions of each of the organizations I observed; for further discussion of the types of events they sponsor, see Chapter 3.

Houston Atheists (HA) had (at the time of fieldwork) over 2,500 Meetup members, calling itself "the world's largest atheist community," and offering its members "opportunities for social networking, education, and community service…including educational seminars, dinners, coffee socials, happy hour gatherings, star-gazing events, holiday parties, movies, sports/games, hiking and camping, as well as kid-friendly family get-togethers at locations such as the zoo, museums, and the beach."[10] HA held recurring meetings in various neighborhoods around the Houston area, as well as a monthly coffee social and book club. On their website, they claim to also accept those who call themselves freethinkers, agnostic, or secular humanist instead of atheist.

Humanists of Houston (HOH) describes its 1,000+ members as people who "do not merely hold a naturalistic worldview based on reason, but are also concerned with living ethical, meaningful lives with concern for our fellow human being," and may include "humanists, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and freethinkers."[11] They host a monthly citywide

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[9] Since people can (and often do) join more than one nonreligious organization (Langston et al. 2017), the number of unique members could be significantly less than 5,000. Additionally, many (perhaps most) of these members never actually attend in-person meet-ups.

[10] https://www.meetup.com/Houston-Atheists/

[11] http://humanistsofhouston.org

gathering, as well as several community meetings in different parts of the city. Like HA, they also host a monthly coffee social; various special events; and several specific clubs that meet throughout the month, like the Ideas Club, Women's Club, and the Religion, Ethics, and Society Club.

Greater Houston Skeptic Society (GHSS), also with just over 1,000 members, caters to all "rational" individuals interested in "critical thinking, skeptical inquiry, and the scientific method." Like the other groups, the Skeptic Society claims to not limit itself to atheists. They state: "While many skeptics are indeed atheists, non-theists, agnostics, humanists, etc., and while religious claims, questions, and actions are often the concerns of good rationalists, this group is NOT solely geared for promoting atheism. Atheism is one conclusion (arguably the correct one) of rational evaluation of evidence for gods."[12] The group holds two social gatherings each month, titled "Brunching Skeptically" and "Skeptics in the Pub," along with various special events—some of which overlap with those promoted on the HA and HOH Meetup pages.

On Meeup.com, Houston Oasis (often shortened to Oasis), with less than 300 members, appears to have a significantly lower membership than the other groups. However, Oasis has over 600 members in its private Facebook group, while the other groups have fewer members on Facebook relative to Meetup, suggesting the atheist, humanist, and skeptic groups manage their activities primarily via Meetup, while Houston Oasis members engage online largely via Facebook. Still, despite its smaller online membership, the organizational structure of Oasis varies substantially from the other nonreligious organizations in Houston: It is a "godless congregation" that meets on Sunday mornings for music, a secular talk, and coffee. The group describes itself as "a secular community that meets weekly to enjoy fascinating talks, live music,

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[12] https://www.meetup.com/HoustonSkeptics/

and friendship."[13] Like the other Meetup groups, Houston Oasis claims to welcome members with various nonreligious identities, but unlike the other groups, they claim to accept religious individuals as well, with the provision that "as long as you accept others for where they are on their journey, you will be accepted in return." For further discussion of the Houston Oasis and the significance of the "godless congregation" organizational form, see Chapter 4.

Smaller groups in the Houston area (online memberships of less than 100) that regularly hosted events included: the Houston Church of Freethought (HCoF), providing "benefits of traditional church membership…to those who are uncomfortable with supernatural beliefs: community and fellowship with those of like mind";[14] Houston Black Non-Believers (HBN), a "secular group [that exists] for the affirmation and promotion of moral and ethical character in the black community";[15] Natural Spiritualists (NS), who "see value in ritual, meditation, etc. without supernatural interpretations or purposes for them";[16] and a local chapter of the national organization Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (AU), whose members "promote and protect religious freedom in Texas and in Houston by educating, speaking out, monitoring state and local developments and rallying citizens to defend religious liberty."[17] Some of these groups also coordinated action with an Austin-based organization, Atheists Helping the Homeless (AHH)—such as donation drives and giveaways—though I did not directly observe this group.

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[13] https://www.houstonoasis.org/about-us
[14] https://www.facebook.com/groups/44192061402/about/
[15] https://www.facebook.com/pg/houstonblack.nonbelievers/about/?ref=page_internal
[16] https://www.meetup.com/spiritualnaturalistsocietyhouston/
[17] http://auhouston.org/about-us/#au-2

The Respondents

I conducted a total of 125 semi-structured in-depth interviews while in Houston; for this project, a nonrandom selection of 70 interviews that mirrored the diversity I knew to exist in the sample at large was selected to be transcribed and coded. Table 1.2 shows side-by-side demographics of the selection compared to the entire sample. Ultimately, I turned away over 150 requests for interviews due to time and resources restraints. However, very little new information was obtained from later interviews—I had reached saturation long before the 125th interview was completed (Small 2009; Fusch and Ness 2015).

My sample of interview respondents shares many demographic characteristics with those of previous research on nonreligion. Slightly over half of respondents were male, over two-thirds were white, about three-quarters had a bachelor's degree or higher, and three-quarters identified as politically left-leaning, with a median age of 43 (ranging from 20 to 84). Additionally, most participants grew up with some degree of socialization in Protestant Christian denominations, though I also interviewed people who were raised Catholic, Mormon, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and nothing in particular.[18] Most of my respondents self-identified as atheists, but some preferred to go by other labels (see Table A.2 in Appendix A for a list of each respondent's preferred labels). The respondents in my sample tended to be more highly educated and slightly more liberal than the typical atheist—who is already, on average, more highly educated and liberal than the general population (Pew 2015b). It is possible that highly educated nonbelievers were more familiar with higher education and social science research, and therefore more willing to participate. The established correlation between education and left-leaning politics would help explain the higher percentage of liberals who participated in the study.

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[18] Previous religious affiliation (as well as level of previous devoutness to that tradition) and its relationship with current nonreligious organizational behavior will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

TABLE 1.1: Summary of Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Selection Analyzed N (%)	Entire Sample N (%)
Age*		
18-34	22 (31.4%)	37 (29.6%)
35-49	23 (32.9%)	38 (30.4%)
50-64	18 (25.7%)	36 (28.8%)
65+	7 (10.0%)	14 (11.2%)
Gender		
Female	32 (45.7%)	53 (42.4%)
Male	38 (54.3%)	72 (57.6%)
Race/Ethnicity		
Arab	2 (2.9%)	3 (2.4%)
Asian	6 (8.6%)	12 (9.6%)
Black	5 (7.1%)	9 (7.2%)
Hispanic	8 (11.4%)	12 (9.6%)
White	47 (67.1%)	87 (69.6%)
Other	2 (2.9%)	2 (1.6%)
Education		
High School	3 (4.3%)	6 (4.8%)
Some college	7 (10.0%)	14 (11.2%)
Associate's	6 (8.6%)	8 (6.4%)
Bachelor's	28 (40.0%)	53 (42.4%)
Master's	22 (31.4%)	36 (28.8%)
PhD/MD	4 (5.7%)	8 (6.4%)
Political Views		
Conservative/Republican	3 (4.3%)	4 (3.2%)
Libertarian	6 (8.6%)	11 (8.8%)
Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated	14 (20.0%)	20 (16%)
Liberal/Democrat	35 (50.0%)	66 (52.8%)
Progressive/Socialist	12 (17.1%)	24 (19.2%)
	N = 70	N = 125

*Mean/median age of selection: 43.8/41.5; Mean/median age of entire sample: 44.8/41.5

Respondents were recruited directly from group meetings, via Meetup mailing lists or

Facebook posts (depending on the recommendation of group leaders), and by word-of-mouth and

snowball sampling. Since there is no obligation to attend meetings after joining nonreligious

groups online, by sending requests for interviews using Meetup and Facebook (rather than

recruiting solely from group meetings) I was able to reach people with various levels of involvement with the organizations, including founders, leaders, regular attendees, those who attend occasionally or rarely, those who used to but no longer attend, those who have not yet attended but intend to, and those who have no interest in attending face-to-face meetings or events. Mailing lists are therefore an effective means of reaching individuals who are not actively involved in an organization—who may be members of an organization in spirit but not in practice. However, it is not an effective strategy for locating individuals who are even further removed from nonreligious organizations and may not be aware that such organizations exist; if this were the only means of sampling nonbelievers, those who have no ties to a nonreligious organization would remain unreachable. In addition to group mailing lists—which could reach online members who do not attend meetings—snowball sampling allowed me to reach those who had no affiliation, virtual or otherwise, with the organizations. When it became clear that more people had volunteered to be interviewed than I could possibly make time for, I selected those individuals who would provide the greatest amount of variation in my sample—while still reflecting the demographics of nonbelievers in general—in order to account for possible differences in experiences based on these identities.

Interviews ran an average of 90 minutes. The shortest interview lasted about 30 minutes, while the longest was nearly four and a half hours. Interviews occurred at a time and place of the respondent's choosing: usually a public spot like a café or restaurant, although they occasionally took place at someone's home. Prior to the interview, respondents received an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the interviews, as well as potential risks and benefits of

participating. All but one respondent agreed to be recorded. With a few exceptions, all

respondents quoted in these pages were given pseudonyms.[19]

An interview guide can be found in Appendix B. I asked all respondents about their

pathways to nonbelief (if they were raised religious or secular, how they came to identify with

the nonreligious label they use today) and the impact it has had on interactions with others (if

they are open about being nonreligious, how others respond to their lack of belief). I asked all

those involved with a nonreligious organization how they came to hear about the organization,

the kinds of meetings and activities they participate in, and if they belong to other voluntary

associations. For those with leadership or organizational roles, I asked about the history and

motivations of the organization and the level of success they believed the group had experienced.

During the course of the interview, I did not voluntarily disclose my own (non)religious

identity without being prompted, although respondents nearly always asked once the

questionnaire was completed (and oftentimes sooner), when I asked if they had any further

questions for me. Some respondents (particularly women) became more relaxed and forthcoming

once disclosure of this stigmatized identity was mutual.

Chapter Outlines

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters. In this **introductory chapter**, I have

suggested that a combination of identity salience, organizational familiarity, and stigma

management have made organized nonreligion appealing to nonbelievers, even in the face of

alternative voluntary communities that do not require religious identification or belief. In the

following chapters, I use data collected during eight months of fieldwork to investigate the

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[19] A few respondents who were outspoken about their atheism specifically requested that their real names be used if quoted. I also use the real names of individuals in prominent leadership positions when they spoke about the public aspects of their organizations. If these individuals were quoted discussing their personal histories and experiences, they were given pseudonyms.

nature of stigma faced by nonbelievers and the strategies they use to manage it, the different types of nonreligious organizational activity offered to nonbelievers, the paths that lead individuals to organizational involvement, and the boundaries that nonbelievers draw to distinguish themselves from religious others.

In **Chapter 2**, "Stigma Management in Nonreligious Organizations," I further discuss the negative attitudes Americans hold toward atheists and the strategies that nonbelievers use to manage this stigma. I pay special attention to organizing as a form of stigma management. Though an organization's goal might be to reduce the stigma of atheism, or to "normalize nonbelief," individual members typically do not describe their involvement in these terms. However, normalization might be a micro-level effect in the lives of members as they meet "sympathetic others" who share their experiences, even if normalization at the cultural level is occurring at a slower pace.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe the different forms that nonreligious organizations in Houston take, including diversity in structure, activities, and membership. In **Chapter 3**, "Organizational Variation in a Local Nonreligious Community," I focus on the different ways Houston's nonreligious community organizes itself, developing a typology of events that these organizations offer their members (social, educational, political, charitable, and spiritual). This variation in activity—that is, the broad offering of events and their distribution across organizations—implies variation in nonreligious organizational identity, similar to variations in nonreligious individual identity.

Chapter 4, "'We Are Not an Atheist Church!' How Nonbelievers Construe Community," further explores a specific case of organized nonbelievers: a "godless congregation." On the surface, such organizations resemble typical religious (Protestant

Christian) congregations: Participants meet on Sunday mornings for coffee, music, and a lecture and organize various events in which the community can take part. However, absent from such gatherings are references to deities or supernatural beliefs. I explore how godless congregations are distinct from other organizational structures that cater to the nonreligious. I suggest that this case could provide insights for secularization theory by demonstrating the appeal of organized nonreligion, even in the face of rising disaffiliation and religion's decreasing influence as a social institution.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the individual level, including nonbelievers' motivations and the meaning they derive from their nonreligious identities. In **Chapter 5**, "Motivation, Participation, and Disengagement: Pathways Through Organizational Involvement," I discuss in greater detail how nonbelievers describe their own reasons for joining, not joining, and leaving organizations. I also show how former religious identity and devoutness can affect current organizational affiliation and degree of involvement. I find that while a strong previous religious identity did not necessarily predict nonreligious organizational behavior, a weak religious identity (or no affiliation) predicted noninvolvement. This suggests that, although some respondents who were raised nonreligious were actively involved in nonreligious organizations, nonreligious organizations are still most appealing to those who were raised with some degree of meaningful religious socialization.

In **Chapter 6**, "Theists as 'Other'? Moral Boundaries Based on Secular Values," I examine the boundaries that atheists place between themselves and religious believers, and the conditions under which they are constructed and enforced. I find that mutual atheism is often discussed as an indicator that two individuals may have other, more important beliefs in common; it is these qualities that establish in-group/out-group distinctions. In other words, I find

that these symbolic boundaries are not based on religious belief per se, but rather around a common set of secular values. As a group, nonbelievers value autonomy, tolerance, and evidence-based thinking, and they express acceptance of individuals who also embrace these values, regardless of their belief in the supernatural. In most cases, it is conservative or fundamentalist believers—not religious believers at large—who are "othered" by atheists.

Finally, in the **concluding chapter,** I discuss this dissertation's contributions to sociological literature in areas such as religion and secularism, culture, organizations, and social movements. Opportunities for future research could include investigating secularism in different cities and regions, and tracking how nonreligious organizations evolve as nonbelief becomes increasingly normalized.

CHAPTER 2

STIGMA MANAGEMENT IN NONRELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS

Nonreligious organizations occupy a unique niche compared to other types of secular organizations (e.g., clubs, sports, hobbies, civic associations). In the Introduction, I suggested three reasons that organizing around a *lack of belief* may be appealing. First, religious nonbelief is often an achieved status, and those who adopt specific labels to describe their disbelief (e.g., atheist, agnostic, secular humanist, skeptic) have likely ruminated on this transition to a deviant status, potentially making the lack of belief a salient aspect of one's identity.

Second, religious organizations are ubiquitous in American society. As an institution, religion provides meaningful relationships and answers to difficult questions for its adherents. Since nonreligion is a relational concept that only exists in opposition to religion (Lee 2012, 2015; Quack 2014), it stands to reason that the former may take on some characteristics of the latter, including organizational aspects. Because of this association (which will be explored further in Chapter 4), organizing around a lack of religious belief could be an appealing source of meaning and community in the absence of religious belief—even in the presence of alternative secular organizational affiliations.

A third reason—and a new contribution to the literature on atheist stigma—is that joining a nonreligious organization could be a strategy for managing a stigmatized identity. Stigma and the negative feelings and experiences attached to it can enhance the salience of an atheist identity, and stigma sets nonreligious organizations apart from other community-oriented groups that aren't organized around such experiences. Organizations can also provide safety in numbers: A stigmatized individual can feel confident, validated, and protected surrounded by others who are understanding and supportive.

This chapter will answer a series of questions concerning how individuals experience atheist stigma. *First*, how do nonbelievers perceive their stigma? Do they sense negative perceptions in their interactions with religious believers? *Second*, what are the consequences of revealing their stigmatized status? Can nonbelievers recount instances of feeling personally disliked or distrusted as a result of disclosing their nonreligious identity? *Finally*, what strategies do nonbelievers use to avoid or mitigate the consequences of stigma? Specifically, what role do organizations play in the management of this stigmatized identity? I find that the nonbelievers in my sample are acutely aware of their stigmatized status, and often experience consequences for revealing their identity that are consistent with the findings of other research. In addition to common strategies like passing and selectively disclosing their identity, I argue that nonreligious organizations can also play an important role in stigma management, particularly in local contexts.

I will begin this chapter by contextualizing my argument with a review of the literature on atheist stigma, which often focuses on the negative attitudes that Americans at large hold toward nonbelievers. To move the discussion on atheist stigma forward, I will draw on Goffman's observations on stigma management: specifically, by examining the connection between stigma and organizations through the lens of Goffman's "sympathetic others" and extending it to the experiences of nonbelievers.

ATHEIST STIGMA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Negative Attitudes and Stereotypes of Atheists

Americans in general—who tend to identify as religious—dislike atheists. Even without personally knowing any atheists, Americans see them as a symbolic category of people who are least likely to share their view of what society should be and are often perceived as a threat to

American values (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Cook, Cottrell, and Webster 2014). The nonreligious are stereotyped as immoral, elitist, judgmental, cynical, and hedonistic (Edgell et al. 2006; Harper 2007).[20] In one study, Christians were asked to imagine their lives without religion; they imagined living chaotic, selfish lifestyles devoid of emotion and meaning (McAdams and Albaugh 2008).

This dislike encompasses both private and public life: Americans are less willing to approve of their child marrying an atheist or to vote for an atheist politician compared to other minority groups (Edgell et al. 2006; Baker and Smith 2015). Atheists are underrepresented in Congress relative to their proportion of the population—potentially opening up public policy to religious bias—and acceptance of atheists is growing more slowly than acceptance of other historically disadvantaged groups (Edgell et al. 2006; Franks and Scherr 2014). These negative attitudes are not just held by the religious; some nonbelievers also make assumptions about one another based on stereotypes (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011; Wright and Nichols 2014).

Why do people tend to harbor such negative attitudes toward atheists in American culture? Are religious adherents more prone to prejudice in general than the nonreligious? The empirical evidence is inconclusive. Studies find that in some cases highly religious people are more prejudice, while in other cases the opposite is true (Duck and Hunsberger 1999; Jensen 2006; Zuckerman 2009; Wright and Nichols 2014). However, considering the "assumed causal relationship between religion and morality" (Gervais 2014:1), Americans intuitively assume that religious belief deters immoral behavior, and therefore atheists are prone to immoral behavior (Galen et al. 2011; Wright and Nichols 2014). In a series of psychological experiments, Gervais

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[20] Though some atheist stereotypes could be construed as neutral or even positive, such as nonconforming, opinionated, and individualistic (Harper 2007).

and colleagues have shown that participants were more likely to find immoral and taboo acts such as rape, homicide, bestiality, and incest to be more representative of people who don't believe in God than other stigmatized minority groups (Gervais et al. 2011; Gervais 2014). The researchers interpret these results not to necessarily mean that all atheists are consciously thought to be homicidal sexual deviants, but that for the majority of Americans, atheism represents a sort of ethical "wildcard": We distrust atheists because we are unsure of the norms they follow. An atheist may not exhibit any culturally-agreed-upon signs of immorality, but what is to stop them? Without religion (specifically, without fear of eternal punishment), what motivates an atheist's commitment to upholding societal norms, which are widely perceived to have religious foundations (Wright and Nichols 2014)? Gervais and colleagues (2011) suggest that this distrust of atheists, and the uncertainly surrounding their beliefs, drives much of the anti-atheist prejudice.

This distrust toward atheists has persisted over time: Although in 2016 Muslims had surpassed atheists as the most disliked group, attitudes toward atheists have remained stable over the past decade, despite the increased visibility of atheism due to social media and the New Atheist movement[21] (Arcaro 2010; Cimino and Smith 2011, 2012; Edgell at al. 2016). According to Heiner (1992), those nonbelievers who are outspoken and organized are considered especially deviant, and often associated with nonbelievers as a whole.

Finally, although atheists are often perceived as lacking morality, no historical or empirical data support this claim. In fact, atheists tend to be more highly educated than the

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[21] "New Atheism" is the name given to the brand of atheism that rose in popularity and visibility in the mid-2000s, following a string of best-selling books that included *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* by Daniel Dennett, *Letter to a Christian Nation* by Sam Harris (who had also published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* in 2004), and *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. The books were controversial due to their strident criticisms of religious institutions and beliefs.

general population, with education being more directly correlated with lower criminality and other desirable attributes (Zuckerman 2009; Beit-Hallahmi 2010). Atheists vehemently reject the idea that their disbelief makes them inherently immoral, sometimes even claiming moral superiority over religious believers—a topic discussed further in Chapter 6.

Discrimination, Psychological Distress, and Well-Being

Revealing a concealable stigma exposes a stigmatized individual to potential discrimination. Some research finds that it is self-identified atheists who experience the harshest penalties for rejecting religion, since atheists tend to be more outspoken and stronger in their disbelief (Heiner 1992; Cragun et al. 2012); the word "atheist" effectively construes a symbolic other that weaker labels—like "secular" or "none"—do not (Edgell et al. 2006). While the majority (78%) of nones[22] do not experience discrimination based on their religious nonaffiliation, self-identified atheists and agnostics report twice as much discrimination as nones more generally, particularly in work, school, and social contexts (Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012). Hammer and colleagues (2012) found that atheists who report discrimination experience it "to varying degrees, including slander; coercion; social ostracism; denial of opportunities, goods, and services; and hate crimes" (43), with nearly all reporting slander (witnessing anti-atheist comments and messaging) and coercion (feeling pressured to pray, attend worship services, or deny atheism), and over half reporting social ostracism (feeling rejected or isolated from family, friends, or coworkers). Although threats and instances of physical assault against atheists are rare in the United States, they are not unheard of (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Hammer et al. 2012; Brewster et al. 2016). However, other research suggests that people

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[22] Defined in the Introduction as those with no religious affiliation. This includes atheists, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, nothing in particular, and those who believe in a higher power and/or personal God, but choose not to affiliate with any specific religious tradition.

harbor negative attitudes toward those who do not believe in God regardless of whether or not they are identified as atheist (Swan and Heesacker 2012), and even those with weaker secular identities are evaluated negatively (Edgell at al. 2016).

Stigma and discrimination have also been linked to psychological distress, particularly for marginalized groups such as racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities (Weisz and Quinn 2018; Ouch and Moradi 2019), and even among those who have shed their stigmatized blemishes, such as in the case of the formerly overweight (Levy and Pilver 2013). Similarly, negative perceptions held by others can be a source of loneliness and psychological distress for nonbelievers (Weber et al. 2012; Brewster et al. 2016). Though discrimination may be a consequence of disclosing a stigmatized identity, concealment of that identity is associated with lower overall well-being (Abbott and Mollen 2018). However, discrimination based on group identification "may increase identification with that devalued group" (Doane and Elliott 2015:131), and stronger identification with like-minded others can create a sense of belonging and improve well-being (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

This vicious cycle of oppression and empowerment plays out in organizational contexts as well. In spite of the fact that out atheists are more likely to experience discrimination (Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012), they may also experience higher well-being than closeted atheists (Beals, Peplau, and Gable 2009), and even feelings of independence and empowerment (Smith 2011), if outness is also accompanied by "higher connectedness to other atheists and positive emotions about atheist group identification" (Abbott and Mollen 2018:702). This suggests that while self-identifying as an atheist can lead to discrimination, identification with a collective can act as a shield against the negative effects of such discrimination. Heiner (1992) further suggests that when atheists organize to "neutralize their deviance…they become haughty,

self-righteous, and smug, much like their oppressors. This further alienates them from the religious community and thus further increases the likelihood of their oppression, contributing to the continued survival of the deviant subculture and, therefore, of the religious community" (18). A recent example of such a cycle is New Atheism: While the movement has given atheists visibility and provided closeted or isolated nonbelievers the comfort of knowing they are not alone, it has also cemented negative stereotypes of atheists as angry and confrontational and produced a cottage industry of Christian apologists (Arcaro 2010). Stigma management, then, is an ongoing issue with which nonbelievers must contend.

APPLYING GOFFMAN'S FRAMEWORK TO ATHEIST STIGMA

That nonbelief is stigmatized is all but taken for granted in the nonreligion literature. Research on atheist stigma often cites Goffman's 1963 classic, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Stigmatized Identity*, but applications of Goffman's theoretical work rarely extend beyond defining the term and describing some of its core features: A stigma is an attribute that somehow marks the possessor as different from (and less desirable than) the norm. Nonbelief is the type of stigma perceived as "blemishes of individual character" (4): a sort of moral failing, as the research summarized above confirms. Also in the case of nonbelief, the stigma is discreditable: an attribute that is not readily apparent to others and can be concealed.[23]

However, Goffman provides another useful analytic framework for further considering atheist stigma: the role of "sympathetic others" in managing a stigmatized identity, particularly for those who become stigmatized later in life.

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[23] Examples of similar stigmas that are also discreditable blemishes of character include homosexuality, some diseases and disabilities (including mental illness), or a criminal record.

Socialization into a Stigmatized Identity

According to Goffman, the pattern of socialization into stigma that someone experiences will affect how they perceive and experience their stigma. Goffman describes four types of socialization patterns,[24] and the case of atheism typically fits into the third: becoming stigmatized later in life. The vast majority of my interview respondents became atheists as adolescents, young adults, or older adults; a few said they realized they didn't believe in God when they were children, some were raised with no affiliation, and one claimed to be raised an atheist by atheist parents. Even those raised with weak or no religious affiliation report going through a process of "discovering atheism" and coming to self-identity as an atheist, rather than "nothing in particular" (Smith 2011).

When someone becomes stigmatized later in life, they have already internalized the characteristics that society deems normal and acceptable, and those that are considered deviant. After adopting a non-normative identity, they must learn how to avoid the consequences that accompany the stigma. This reevaluation of one's identity may be accompanied by uncertainty regarding how others will accept them, and ambivalence regarding their relationship to others who possess the same stigma.

Sympathetic Others

To make sense of the uncertainty and ambivalence that accompanies resocialization, stigmatized individuals may seek out "sympathetic others," whom Goffman defines as 1) those who share the stigma, and 2) "the wise," who are sensitive to the plight of the stigmatized.[25] Such groups can provide a "circle of lament" where one can find support and acceptance (20), as

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[24] The four patterns of socialization are: 1) always stigmatized and socialized into that identity; 2) always stigmatized but protected from consequences until later in life; 3) becoming stigmatized later in life; 4) socialized as an outsider and later introduced to normative society, where the stigma becomes apparent.
[25] In 2019 we might call them allies.

gathering with sympathetic others allows individuals to express themselves without reservation and help them cope with the consequences of embracing a stigmatized identity (Simmons 1969; Heiner 1992).[26]

Goffman describes a few of the roles stigmatized individuals may take up when they connect with sympathetic others, all of which are applicable to nonbelievers. They may form a lobby or action group to promote a relevant cause, such as nonbelievers advocating for the separation of church and state and protesting perceived attempts by government officials to erode that barrier. Others may support or contribute to publications that give a voice to the stigmatized and detail instances of discrimination and mistreatment by the public. On this matter, Goffman writes, "no matter how small and how badly off a particular stigmatized category is, the viewpoint of its members is likely to be given public presentation of some kind. It can thus be said that Americans who are stigmatized tend to live in a literarily-defined world" (25). Though written in 1963, these words are eerily prescient: The rise of the Internet and social media have provided a new and effective medium to share written information about atheism and allow nonbelievers to connect with one another at unprecedented levels. Furthermore, some stigmatized individuals, after being more vocal and becoming more well-known and well-connected, might become "professionals," essentially making a career of broadcasting the grievances and desires of their category. This professionalization not only occurs on a national scale in groups like American Atheists, Freedom From Religion Foundation, and Center for

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[26] Goffman observed that although stigmatized individuals of a common category may possess a tendency to form small, like-minded groups, not everyone comprising this "category" will be drawn to collective action or frequent interaction. Still, "[w]hether or not those with a particular stigma provide the recruitment base for a community that is ecologically consolidated in some way, they are likely to support agents and agencies who represent them" (1963:23-24).

Inquiry, but also at the grassroots level: In Houston, one organizer estimated he spent the equivalent of a second full-time job organizing and attending meetings.[27]

Goffman suggested that in most cases, stigmatized individuals will be able to connect with others who understand their social position and make them feel valued and normal. However, these relationships can be complicated:

> Given the ambivalence built into the individual's attachment to his stigmatized category, it is understandable that *oscillations may occur in his support of, identification with, and participation among his own*. There will be '*affiliation cycles*' through which he comes to accept the special opportunities for in-group participation or comes to reject them after having accepted them before. There will be *corresponding oscillations in belief about the nature of own group and the nature of normal*…. The relationship of the stigmatized individual to the informal community and formal organizations of his own kind is, then, crucial. *This relationship will, for example, mark a great difference between those whose differentness provides them very little of a new 'we,' and those, such as minority group members, who find themselves a part of a well-organized community with long-standing traditions*—a community that makes appreciable claims on loyalty and income, defining the member as someone who should take pride in his illness and not seek to get well (38, emphasis mine).

Unpacking this passage, there are several implications for the case of nonbelief. First, identification evolves over time, given exposure to different types of nonbelievers and different ideas about the role of nonbelief in one's life. For instance, at one point a nonbeliever may more

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[27] Although at the local level, organizers tend to keep their day jobs.

closely identify with the passion and outrage associated with the New Atheist movement, but eventually may step away from an activist role if the identity becomes less salient. Second, participation in nonreligious organizations is not a dichotomous in-or-out variable, but changes over time.[28] Third, attitudes toward and relationships with both other nonbelievers and believers may change over time. Finally, organizational participation is predicated upon someone's connection to nonbelievers as a collective. Individuals may identify closely with their stigmatized peers at some points, but not at others. When someone embraces their stigma—when it becomes more salient and identification with others who share the stigma is strongest—organizations are the most crucial. They emphasize pride and acceptance of one's identity, which can be vital resources for stigma management. Goffman's comments on sympathetic others are especially helpful in interpreting the role of organizations in stigma management.

METHODS AND DATA

Data for this chapter come from the interviews with 70 nonbelievers, the majority of whom self-identify as atheist, even if this is not the term they use when discussing their nonbelief with others (see Table A.2 in Appendix A for a list of labels used by each respondent). During these in-depth semi-structured interviews, I asked respondents about the nonreligious labels they use, how they discuss their nonbelief with others, consequences of disclosing that unbelief (both perceived and experienced), and their organizational affiliations and behaviors. Regarding organizational preferences, I pay close attention to discourse about how organizations have helped respondents personally and whether respondents believed organizations have helped improve attitudes toward nonbelievers as a whole.

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[28] Fluctuations in organizational affiliation and participation will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

RESULTS

Perceptions of Stigma and Its Consequences

Nonbelievers are well aware that religious belief (specifically, Christianity) is the norm in the United States and that their nonreligious identity is stigmatized (Weber et al. 2012). One respondent, Amara, discussed her own post-graduate research on Christian privilege at historically black colleges and universities:

> It's like, the fact that your religion gets taken care of…you know, the scheduled days off like Christmas break, Easter, all that stuff. All those things are part of privilege. I mean, at graduation ceremonies they pray to God and they say, "In Jesus' name, Amen." At graduation!… At the football game, you're praying before a game in Jesus' name. Like, that's nuts. Why are we praying at a football game? What if there are players on the team that need a Muslim prayer? Or a Hindu prayer? Why not just *not* pray at all?

Many of my respondents were familiar with studies describing perceptions of atheists (e.g., Edgell et al. 2006, Gervais et al. 2011), and few were surprised by the results. Their statements describing how they thought others view nonbelievers echoed that of previous research on nonreligion. Tim lamented that many religious adherents seemed uninformed about what atheism is: " Most people, they don't know anyone—or they don't know they know anyone—that's atheist and so they have these ideas about atheists and stuff, like, some people just assume if you don't believe in God you must be a devil worshipper—you know, Satanism." Carrie also reflected on perceptions of atheists, as well as her own experiences interacting with other nonbelievers: "In the past, the atheists that had the spotlight were kind of the angry, you

know, demeaning-of-everyone-else type of atheists. But we haven't actually met very many atheists that are like that [at the nonreligious organizations in Houston]."

It is not only believers who make such assumptions. The perception that nonbelievers look down on religious people (i.e., that atheists are smug, elitist, and believe themselves to be superior to and more intelligent than believers) is so engrained in the public consciousness that it is a common assumption even among nonbelievers (Gervais et al. 2011; Wright and Nichols 2014). For example, when I asked about his attitudes toward religious believers, Luis said, "I'm actually internally cringing at how many answers you may have gotten from other atheists, which is 'They're stupid and they're all dumb.' But I don't feel that way." He also spoke of religion's influence on human culture and the strength of religious socialization, adding, "That [people] become religious or identify as religious is something I would expect. I don't think it's bizarre that atheists are a minority of the population." His impression of atheism, and what the "typical" nonbeliever is like, in some ways paralleled that of the general population. This assumption, however, was not representative of my sample; though critical of religious doctrine and institutions, most of my respondents stop short of claiming all believers are less intelligent.[29] Tracy also made negative assumptions about nonbelievers, which made her hesitant to attend a local atheist meet-up:

> Tracy: I just typed in "atheist" on Meetup[.com] and I saw that there was a
> Houston Atheist group. So I joined it, but it took me a year to actually go to my
> first meet-up because I was so nervous. Aside from my ex-husband I had never
> met anyone who was an atheist, that I know of. I'd never talked about it, and so I

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[29] See the section titled "Scientific Authority" in Chapter 6 for a more nuanced discussion.

didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if the people would be like me, or if

they would be something different, you know, so it took—

Amanda: What were you afraid that you might encounter?

Tracy: I don't know! There's such a negative stereotype of atheists, and that's all

I'd ever known of atheists. And so, I don't know, in my head I thought, like, it

would be a bunch of goth men or something [*laughs*]! I didn't know! And then I

showed up and it was just regular people. And then I just started going all the time

and I made a lot of friends.

Tracy's use of the term "goth" makes an association of atheists with another deviant subculture

that is stereotyped as violent and fixated on death and the macabre (Haenfler 2010). It is also

telling that she expected to encounter few women at an atheist group meeting, which could have

left her feeling even further marginalized.

Though nonbelievers as a whole are stigmatized, some subgroups experience it more

intensely than others. Racial and ethnic minorities, for example, describe experiences different

from those typical of white nonbelievers. Diego, for example, discussed how the integration of

his ethnicity and Catholicism made it difficult to talk about atheism: "There is a lot of

backlash. We're very Catholic, to the bone. It's part of our identity to an extent. If you're not

Catholic, you're not Mexican—you're not Hispanic…. It's hard to talk to relatives…because

they think it's bizarre or wrong." Tim, a member of Houston Black Non-Believers, spoke about

the invisibility of atheism in the Black community and the feeling that atheism is not "for" them:

"As black atheists we have challenges that no one else in this country has.… My understanding

is—like, for white people there's some intellectual circles where it's not only *not* a liability to an

atheist, it's an advantage… That shit don't exist for us, there's no such thing…. I think a lot of

black people think atheism is something white people do. That's what *they* do." Tim's

observation sheds light on the importance of context when considering atheist stigma. Though

white Americans do experience atheist stigma, Tim observed that "white culture" is not as

innately religious as black culture, and that white people are more likely to occupy spaces (e.g.,

some regions of the US, academia, professional occupations) where nonbelief is tolerated or

even expected, and religiosity is unusual or stigmatized. Indeed, some research has found that in

academia, "emotional, and even harsh, criticism of conservative Protestants is acceptable but

support of conservative Protestants must be couched in academic, dispassionate terms" (Yancey,

Reimer, and O'Connell 2015:332). Highly educated people tend to view conservative Christians

more negatively, especially those who have little contact with believers (Hyers 2008; Ecklund

2010; Yancey 2010). Additionally, though atheists as individuals are a diverse group (like any

social category, both demographically and in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors), data show

that those unaffiliated with religion are more likely to also belong to other privileged groups:

white,[30] male, educated, and middle or upper-middle class (Zuckerman 2009). Minority group

members, then, are likely to experience nonbelief differently than those from majority groups.

Nonbelievers from minority religion backgrounds also experienced nonbelief differently

than those from Christian backgrounds. Rafi, an ex-Muslim, described the process of joining the

national organization Ex-Muslims of North America. According to Rafi, potential members are

screened by the organization's leaders prior to being admitted in order to protect the identity of

ex-Muslims (commonly called apostates or infidels), who can be particularly vulnerable to

prejudice and discrimination from conservative Muslims:

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[30] A point of clarification regarding race and nonaffiliation: Although most nones are white, a higher proportion of
Asian Americans are nones.

There was a Skype interview… [They] asked me questions like, "So what do you think about Mohammad? How did you come to this conclusion [*nonbelief*]? What do you think about transgenderism or homosexuality?"… And then they kind of joke around about some things to see if you're really somebody who could get pissed off… [One of the interviewers] did tell me that there were a couple of times that there was an attempt to infiltrate, but this interview process caught them. They couldn't just lie all the way… [*Later in interview*] We have meet-ups every month…in Houston there are 28 or 29 members [online], but I've only seen, like, 7 or 8. The rest of them are totally underground. They're members, but they don't show up, because they're so scared of—like, if they even get seen with other people, let alone an ex-Muslim, it's going to be trouble for them.

Despite these descriptions of perceived prejudice and judgment, some nonbelievers think the stigma is slowly lessening. One respondent, Ginny, mused, "I want [atheism] to be an acceptable thing…I did not think that in my lifetime I would see gay marriage be a thing, and if we can get that far, we can get farther." Because she saw signs that society was becoming more accepting in some ways, Ginny indicated that she is less guarded about her nonbelief than she used to be. Even Tim, who discussed the significant role that religion plays in the Black community, expressed that he felt people in general were becoming more accepting and "not as shocked anymore" upon learning he was an atheist.

Still, most of my respondents described at least some circumstances in which they would not feel comfortable discussing their nonbelief due to the potential consequences of revealing a stigmatized identity. Consistent with other studies on atheism, most respondents in my sample had not experienced severe consequences (e.g., outright discrimination, personal/physical

attacks), but they described having felt ostracized and judged by family, friends, acquaintances, and coworkers. Sara, one of the more outspoken atheists I interviewed, discussed feeling as though she had let down people close to her, saying, "There were some times where I cried because I was disappointing my mom, and I love her. She's one of the most beautiful human beings alive, and you don't want to disappoint someone like that." Sara also described feeling particularly hurt by a close friend who was shocked to learn she was an atheist:

> That was hurtful, because by then I was established in my nonbelief. I was proud of who I was, not necessarily saying "proud that I'm atheist," but saying "proud of everything that is me": my personality, my beliefs, my non-beliefs—just anything that is me. I was happy with who I was and who I am. So when he thought it was a bad thing for me to be atheist, I told him, you know, please don't be that person. Please don't be the person that acts like it's a bad thing. Just because you believe one way, it's not bad that I believe different.

Most of my respondents avoided discussing religion in the workplace, largely because they tended to view both religion and atheism as private matters, but also out of fear of potential economic consequences. Jenny, a musician who organized music programming for the Houston Oasis, suspected that she had been passed over for gigs because of her atheism. She explained, "I'm not completely out but I'm out enough that if a venue owner wanted to know, is this person somebody I want to hire—it's pretty obvious in the rejections what it's about, even if they don't say it outwardly." Unlike most other respondents, however, Jenny did not curb her criticism of religion in the face of missed employment opportunities, adding, "And that's okay. I mean, I chose to open my mouth, right? So I get to suck it up when bad things happen."

Consistent with the findings of previous research on nonreligion, I found that nonbelievers in my sample were aware of their stigmatized status in American society and most experienced some level of psychological distress at some point, including feeling ostracized, judged, or rejected. To cope with this stigma and its consequences, I found that my respondents commonly practiced three stigma management strategies: passing, disclosing, and organizing.

Stigma Management

In cases where nonbelievers experienced or feared the consequences of revealing their identity, they often responded in ways consistent with research on stigma management: by passing, disclosing, and organizing, all of which are tied to well-being and could be effective ways of coping with stigma (Abbott and Mollen 2018).

Passing

Since belief in (a Christian) God is generally assumed in American culture, atheists are often able to pass as "normal" if they wish, and it is typically the responsibility of stigmatized individuals to signal to others that they do not fit the common assumption. Most respondents were open about their nonbelief in some contexts (e.g., with some friends, spouses, or at atheist meet-ups), but guarded in others. Karl, for example, explains that he is open about being an atheist with most of his friends, but avoids talking about religion and politics at work and with his family: "My parents probably suspect that I am [an atheist], but they don't wanna admit it. It's one of those old things where you just don't talk about it." Likewise, Hattie tries to avoid the subject, but uses different labels depending on the company:

> I try not to be in a position where I have to identify myself in any way [*laughs*], I
> really try not to. I guess it feels like it depends on where I'm at. If I'm with my
> family, I'm an agnostic. If I'm with the humanist group, I'm an atheist [*laughs*]. If

I'm with my husband I'm an atheist. But I don't like to say that. It feels like a bad

word still.

Hattie, an active evangelical Christian into her 20s, came out to her parents after they questioned

her decision to have a Buddhist officiant at her wedding, rather than a Christian minister. She

said of the experience: "I spent a lot of days in therapy [*laughs*] preparing for [the day I would

tell them I wasn't a Christian]. They actually took it better than I thought they would. They

surprised me." Still, Hattie would not identify as an atheist to her parents; she told them she was

no longer a Christian, but danced around the question of whether or not she still believed in a

higher power: "I don't remember exactly what I told [my mom] but I think it was, I don't NOT

believe in God [*laughs*]." Claiming to be agnostic on the existence of God was a way to "soften

the blow" for her devout Christian parents.

Other respondents felt pressured to keep their nonbelief a secret, even if they wanted to

be open:

> Amanda: You mentioned in our email exchange that your husband prefers that
> you stay in the closet. He doesn't want you to be vocal about being an atheist?
> Wendy: He doesn't. He doesn't have a problem [with it], except he's in law
> school and wants to be a judge, and they are elected. It's virtually impossible to
> be elected in Texas if you're not Christian, or appear to be Christian. You must at
> least pass. He thinks if I were to be openly atheist, it would kill his chances of a
> political career or ability to be a judge.

In his discussion of sympathetic others, Goffman discusses those who are stigmatized by

association: By having a relationship with someone who is stigmatized, that stigma can

potentially be transferred to the unaffected individual, with "society [treating] both individuals in

some respects as one" (30). Though Wendy's husband is not religious, he does not wish to be perceived as such, and for good reason: Research shows that people are less willing to vote for atheist candidates than candidates from other minority groups (Edgell et al. 2006). His marriage to an outspoken atheist could cause people to infer that he must also be an atheist.

Disclosure

Nonbelievers have adapted the "coming out of the closet" metaphor popularized by the LGBTQ+ community (Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow 2007; Cimino and Smith 2007; Smith 2011; Cloud 2017). Renee commented on this similarity explicitly: "I think it's like the image people had of gays in the '60s and '70s. I think it's out of ignorance, that they don't know how many people in their families, in their churches, in their neighborhoods *are* passing [*laughs*]." The implication of this metaphor is that atheists, like sexual minorities and other stigmatized individuals, can become more accepted in society if they are open about their nonbelief—the assumption being that once people begin to realize that they know and have frequent contact with nonbelievers, their attitudes will soften (Turner, Hewstone, and Voci 2007).

Nonbelievers may also be encouraged to disclose their identity to others because, like sexual minorities, atheists may experience negative psychological consequences from concealing an important aspect of their identity (Jordan and Deluty 1998). Some of my respondents, like Alma, expressed that passing was simply not an option:

> I never had to hide anything growing up because I was so straight-laced, right? I never had to cover up my footsteps. And I didn't learn how to do that. So when I left the [Mormon] Church, I didn't have any of that, "Ooh, I'm gonna get in trouble"—I knew that I was going to get in trouble [*laughs*], but I didn't have any of that fear, and I didn't have the skills to be deceptive. I'm not good at lying.

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Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey (1997) found that sexual minorities "can and frequently do enjoy selecting and controlling to whom their identities are known" (481). Likewise, nonbelievers usually have the option of disclosing their identity when they want to, in situations they deem to be safe and appropriate. Some—like Hattie—even spend time and resources (in her case, therapy) preparing for the emotional toll of revealing their nonbelief to religious significant others. Some stigmatized individuals can voluntarily display information that convey their stigma, such as wearing a symbol associated with their identity (Goffman 1963). This is seldom an effective option for nonbelievers—some of my respondents even lamented the lack of recognizable atheist symbols. Instead, nonbelievers who wish to disclose their identity must either agree to answer direct questions about their religious belief or bring up the topic themselves. For example, Sara described this playful exchange with her boss, whom she considers a good friend:

> I asked her, would you let me babysit for you? She said, "Absolutely, you're awesome." I said, well, keep in mind, I'm atheist. Would you let an atheist babysit your kids? And she got quiet. And she said, "No, but because it's you, it's okay".... We just kind of laughed, we didn't make it a bigger deal. But I think I gave her something to think about in that instance.

Experiences tend to be more positive when the individual can choose when to disclose, rather than being outed, pressured, or coerced to do so (Schneider and Conrad 1980; Gagne et al. 1997). Forced disclosure can cause nonbelievers severe psychological distress. One respondent, Seth, described his experience being outed as a nonbeliever. Seth described a childhood that revolved around religion; He attended Christian schools and lived four blocks away from his

family's church, where his father was a non-denominational Evangelical pastor. After a gradual

transition away from religion in his early thirties, he began expressing his nonbelief online:

> The first place that I made any sort of confessions was on Facebook. I'm
>
> Facebook friends with a lot of old teachers, pastors, people who went to my
>
> church…. Some former, fellow person-in-the-faith started to sling some bullshit
>
> about some issue…I don't personally attack anyone when I debate them, but I was
>
> like, here's how you're wrong, very unabashedly. And inevitably, someone comes
>
> back with, "Well, if you're a Christian, blah blah blah blah blah blah," you know,
>
> and I was like, in a reply, "Well, I no longer consider myself a Christian."

Shortly after this exchange, while visiting his parents, his father confronted him: "He's like,

'Yeah, so on Facebook you said you're not a Christian anymore'… [One of my Facebook

friends] saw [my comment] and thought it was their Christian duty to inform my parents." Seth

became emotional and struggled to articulate the effect that being outed—and, more broadly,

losing his faith—had on him:

> I got [outed] by this person, so I basically had to tell [my parents right] there, and
>
> it was like, that was—yeah, that was—it wasn't like, you know—there's no
>
> lasting animosity between my parents and I. But that was not a fun day…. This
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> [has been] the most—I hope this doesn't come out as melodramatic at all, because
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> I mean it to be 100 percent matter of fact—this is the most painful thing I've ever
>
> had to go through in my entire life. And as much as I want to see other people
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> liberate themselves [from religion], I want *them* to liberate themselves. I can't
>
> imagine being the person who, in any way—it bothers me to feel like I've ripped

it away from them. Because when [my faith] got ripped away from me…it's a

traumatic thing.

Seth was not only forced to disclose his nonbelief to his parents at a time when he was

not prepared for it, but was also unable to *voluntarily* disclose his newfound identity because he

did not personally know anyone who could relate to his experience. "My whole world just

evaporated [when I lost my faith]," he said. "I was like, I have to talk to other people about this,

or at least just get some kind of—communing with other people, so I went on Meetup and joined

whatever ones were in the vicinity…. I thought, there's probably going to be one person in all of

Houston…[but] I was very comforted." Although Seth confessed that he was not very active in

Houston's nonreligious organizations, their mere existence provided validation that his own

experiences were shared.

Organizing

The most pervasive consequences of stigma are psychological distress and lower

emotional well-being (Quinn and Chaudoir 2009). As discussed previously, nonbelievers—

particularly those who identify with stronger labels like atheist or agnostic, and those who are

more vocal about this identity—often face judgment, ostracism, isolation, and loneliness, much

like other stigmatized groups. Interacting with sympathetic others, or those who share the same

deviant identity, is an important strategy used by nonbelievers to combat the negative

consequences of stigma, and some research has shown that members of nonreligious

organizations experience improved well-being as a result of their participation (Price and Launay

2018). My respondents often framed their participation in nonreligious organizations as a way to

mitigate the psychological effects of stigmatization.

According to Goffman, one of the primary benefits of interactions with sympathetic others is the relief felt at being able to express themselves without reservation. Mandy, when speaking about the stigma of atheism, said, "Atheism is kind of stigmatized in our society. [Atheist meetings are] just a nice place where you can go somewhere and you don't have to worry about offending people or being judged for that." Aimee also described her involvement with nonreligious organizations in Goffman-esque terms:

> I was thinking it could help me make some more friends. It's hard to just go out and meet people, especially when you feel like you're part of a minority group. It is a minority group—it's not outwardly visible, but people would judge you intensely…. I sought them out so I wouldn't have that burden of having to hide my freethought-ness.

Similarly, respondents described joining nonreligious organizations in order to meet people who were more like themselves. Leigh, for example, had recently moved to Houston and joined Meetup in order to meet people with similar interests. She discovered Humanists of Houston, Houston Atheists, and Greater Houston Skeptic Society, and the first meeting she attended was a monthly HOH gathering which included a talk by atheist activist Zack Kopplin.[31] She described being pleasantly surprised by the large group that had assembled for the meeting: "There were so many people, and it had more scientific-minded talks, and I met a lot of people who were kind of like-minded…a couple months ago I decided to start up again, make some more friends. Most of my local friends that I have now I made through these groups." Allison also described nonreligious organizations as a way of meeting friends:

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[31] Zack Kopplin is a secular activist popular in atheist circles for his science advocacy and opposition to teaching creationism in Louisiana public schools.

I was 65 and I'm *so* liberal, and I really can't stand religion. I would go places and they'd go, "Oh, have a blessed day!" And [I thought], I've got to find my own tribe, my own group of people! And I found Meetup…and I found the Houston Atheists, and I was just blown away that a group would call themselves Houston *Atheists*, *and* have their meeting on a property owned by the Second Baptist Church! And I just loved it. I just thought, this is just thumbing your nose at the Baptists, so. I'm just that kind of person [*laughs*].

Interestingly, both Leigh and Allison discuss seeking out like-minded others who share characteristics beyond lack of belief—namely, appreciation of science and liberal politics. Throughout this research, I have found that mutual nonbelief is often perceived as an indication that two people may have other, more significant qualities in common—an idea that will be discussed further in Chapter 6. Seeking out like-minded others in a safe space was one of the main reasons respondents gave for joining a nonreligious organization. In fact, all of the organizations I observed regularly scheduled meet-ups that were primarily social in nature— typically characterized by unstructured conversations in a relaxed atmosphere. The different types of events offered by nonreligious organizations is discussed further in the following chapter.

Nonreligious organizations can also be an effective way to combat loneliness. For people like Seth—whose entire social network was based on a shared religion—becoming a nonbeliever was an isolating experience. When he joined Meetup to look for other atheists, he expected to see very few, but found there were thousands of people who belonged to different nonreligious organizations in the Houston area. Simply knowing that so many others who shared his identity

were nearby and active was a source of comfort. Tim actually surmised that this reassurance of the existence of like-minded others was all that many nonbelievers needed:

> I think in the beginning it was so many people [attending Houston Black Non-Believer meetings] because it was new. It was like, oh my goodness, people like me out there, wow, whoa! But then I think most people, once they come several times and they get over the novelty, it's like, eh. They got other things to do. They have the confirmation, like, I'm okay. There's other people like me. I'm good. I can go about my life, I don't have to doubt, I don't have to worry anymore… I don't think most people need it on a regular basis. They need it every once in a while, maybe.

Tim's observations align with Goffman's theories about the connections between stigma and organizations and oscillations in identification and affiliation.

Nonreligious organizations can be a significant source of support and a strategy for managing atheist stigma, and some nonreligion researchers have begun to explore this connection. For example, Cragun (2015) analyzed the mission statements and histories of some of the largest national nonreligious organizations and found a common aim among them: "the normalizing of nonreligion and nonbelief in the US." Several authors contributing to the edited volume *Organized Secularism in the United States* (2017) find through analysis of national organizations' mission statements and nationwide surveys that nonreligious organizations can be used to help reduce the stigma associated with atheism (Cragun and Manning; Langston et al.; MacMurray and Fazzino; Smith). However, while normalizing nonbelief may be a goal of national organizations, is the same true of local organizations? And is macro-level cultural acceptance a common reason given by nonbelievers for attending a local atheist meeting? When

I asked Mike Aus, co-founder and (at the time) Executive Director of Houston Oasis, to describe the goals of the Oasis, his response was very community-centric:

> To develop a kind of long-term, multigenerational, diverse secular community that's focused on education and service and inspiration, mutual support…I don't wanna get, you know, too melodramatic, but I'd like to see this community be a beacon of the secular life in the Houston area, a place where secularists can come and be at home…. [W]hen a family goes through [some sort of struggle], it's like, how powerful it is that you have this community of allies that are there to support you, to offer ideas, to sign your petitions, whatever. So, [the goal is] to be there for each other as secularists, and, you know, to kind of spread the word.

Mike's vision for Oasis involved reducing feelings of stigma by building an inclusive and supportive community, but not necessarily reducing stigma by bolstering positive attitudes of nonbelievers held by outsiders (though this reaction would certainly be welcomed). Though national organizations might aim to reduce the stigma of atheism, or "normalize nonbelief" (Cragun and Manning 2017), I find that individual members typically do not describe their involvement in local organizations in these terms. However, normalization appears to be an immediate, micro-level effect in the lives of many of my respondents as they meet sympathetic others who share their experiences—recall Tracy's pleasant surprise when attending her first atheist meet-up, which was populated by "regular people" rather than "a bunch of goth men"—even if normalization at the cultural level is occurring at a slower pace.

CONCLUSION

Richard Dawkins once commented that his best-selling book, *The God Delusion*, was not necessarily about "converting" devout believers to atheism, but rather generating "an enormous

upsurge in people who are already sort of atheists, or people who at least aren't very religious…having their consciousness raised to the point that they realize 'actually I am an atheist and apparently a lot of other people are too, and I never realized it'" (Cimino and Smith 2010:139). Though I cannot claim that Dawkins' book—or any other book about atheism published circa the rise of New Atheism in 2006—is responsible for such "consciousness raising" among my interview respondents (many mentioned Dawkins, but only a handful had read *The God Delusion*, and not everyone praised it), the popularity of New Atheism does appear to have lent a certain amount of legitimacy to the label and empowered people to call themselves atheists, or acknowledge their disbelief (Cimino and Smith 2010). Kristin, for example, described the process of coming to identify as an atheist:

> I hadn't really considered it and I hadn't really given myself a name for it, or even really knew anyone that called themselves an atheist. I think that [my husband] saying—when the topic got brought up when we first started dating, him saying "I'm an atheist" made me think, oh, that's a thing. You can *be* that, and there's a title for it…. So I think it was really him saying that out loud that made me realize that would be what I am too…. So probably just his confidence in being able to say, "This is what I am and what I don't believe" and seeing him be okay with that, and just being normal—I think was a big part of [calling myself an atheist]. So that was when I was about 22, [around 2008].

As nonbelief becomes increasingly visible, and as more people recognize and openly acknowledge their nonbelief, they will look for ways to manage this stigma. Some nonbelievers manage their stigma through passing—though this is often accompanied by its own negative consequences, such as lower psychological well-being (Smith 2011). Others choose to disclose

their identity as a way of controlling the conversation and dispelling others' negative impressions of them as individuals and/or nonbelievers as a group. Research on stigma and prejudice finds that direct contact with stigmatized individuals tends to reduce negative attitudes toward the group (Allport 1954; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). There is some evidence that this could be true of nonbelievers as well: Studies have found that an increase in the perceived prevalence of atheists correlated with a decrease in prejudice toward atheists, even in the absence of contact with the stigmatized individuals (Gervais 2011). Other research, however, finds negative perceptions of atheists to be stable over time, despite increased visibility (Edgell et al. 2016).

Most nonbelievers, however, will at some point seek out the support of sympathetic others. Some, like Kristin, have spouses, family members, or friends who are also nonbelievers, or are "wise" to their status. Others, like Seth, came from social networks devoid of sympathetic others. For these nonbelievers, organizations (and the online spaces that often lead them there) introduce them to others with similar experiences. So while researchers have suggested that individuals do not *need* an organizational or group affiliation in order to identify with a collective (Ashforth and Meal 1989), it can certainly help. In other words, stigma management could be a sufficient, albeit unnecessary, rationale for joining nonreligious organizations, which can be an appealing prospect for those who feel lonely, isolated, or discriminated against because of their nonreligious identity. While stigma is a recurring theme throughout this dissertation, other motivations for joining nonreligious organizations will be discussed. In the next chapter, I will look more closely at the different local organizations in Houston that nonbelievers can join, and the different events and services they offer their members.

CHAPTER 3

ORGANIZATIONAL VARIATION IN A LOCAL SECULAR COMMUNITY

American nonreligion is as diverse a phenomenon as American religion, and this includes diversity in organizational structures, activities, and outcomes. To this point, research has primarily utilized nonreligious organizations as either a strategy of sampling for atheists, or as a context in which nonreligious identities are fostered and displayed (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Cimino and Smith 2007; Ritchey 2009; Smith 2011; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; LeDrew 2013a; Smith 2013). Nonreligious organizations are usually referenced abstractly, in passing, or as a united collective, without parsing out the specific and diverse goals that each organization—if more than one exists—in a given geographic area may have. With few exceptions (e.g., Zuckerman 2014; Cragun, Manning, and Fazzino 2017), researchers have not closely examined nonreligious organizations as entities in and of themselves: their variation, how they interact with one another, or the many opportunities such groups afford their members.

Nonreligion scholars have also produced a plethora of work on atheist identity. Recent research suggests that the nonreligious community is a heterogeneous one, that nonreligious identities and the pathways that lead to them may be just as diverse as religious ones, and that "typologies" of nonbelief can be developed (Zuckerman 2012; Silver et al. 2014; Cotter 2015; Mastiaux 2017). Given this variation in nonreligious identities, we can reasonably expect to encounter heterogeneity in organizations as well. This prompts me to ask: What are the different organizational types that exist in the American secular community? How do they differentiate themselves from one another? What benefits and services do they provide for the people who join them? To answer these questions, I extend the concept of identity—which has already been applied to nonbelievers as individuals and groups—to organizations. Recognizing this variation

in nonreligious organizations can provide a more nuanced picture of the context in which individual and collective meaning making takes place.

In this chapter, I conceptualize nonreligious organizational identity as practice-based: by analyzing the action that takes place in the context of the organizations—i.e., the meetings and activities hosted and promoted by eight nonreligious organizations in Houston. I argue that these events are a form of identity work. Snow and Anderson (1987) define identity work as "the *range of activities individuals engage in* to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept" (1348; emphasis mine). The authors highlight that identity work can also occur at the group level. Nonreligion scholars have applied this concept to nonbelievers at the individual and collective levels; in this chapter, I discuss identity work at the organization level.

While there are many ways to classify organizations, I attribute significance to *what atheists actually do* in the context of organizational action, in addition to considering what they say they are (e.g., on their websites, in their mission statements, or during semi-structured interviews). Nonbelievers often reject the idea that atheism is a "rejection identity" primarily defined by a lack of belief (Frost 2017), instead focusing on the significance of *behavior over belief*. Action that takes place in the context of an organization is a way members put their values into practice, signaling who they are and what is important to them.[32] The events hosted by nonreligious organizations reflect their members' priorities, and by focusing on events (i.e., what the organizations do), we can begin to determine their "central character" (i.e., what they are). Through participant observation, interviews, and content analysis, I was able to develop a typology that classifies events as social, educational, political, charitable, or spiritual in nature.

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[32] See Chapter 6 for an in-depth discussion of these values.

An analysis of events may not answer all questions concerning organizational identity, but the distribution of events types across organizations can provide insight into how each organization views and presents itself to potential members, and how they distinguish themselves from other, similar organizations.

NONRELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

Social scientists have no shortage of interpretations surrounding the term "identity." It can be understood both as an internalized aspect of one's self and as a group or collective phenomenon (Owens 2003); in other words, it is a concept that transcends levels of analysis and can be investigated at the individual, group, or organization level (Gioia 1998; Whetten 1998; Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley 2011; Ashforth 2016).

Stryker and Burke (2000) refer to *identity* as "parts of a self composed of the meanings that persons attach to the multiple roles they typically play in highly differentiated contemporary societies" (284). At its most basic, identity theory addresses how individuals reflect on and categorize themselves relative to others. More specifically, *social identity* refers to an individual's knowledge that they belong to a social group (Stets and Burke 2000). While social identity is an individual attribute, *collective identity* is a group characteristic—it is distinct from personal identity, although the feeling of connectedness to others may inform aspects of one's personal identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Klandermans 2002). Collective identity is a shared understanding of "one-ness" or "we-ness" (Snow and McAdam 2000:42) that connects individuals with common interests and experiences to one another (Taylor and Whittier 1992; Polletta and Jasper 2001).

Some nonreligion scholars have examined how nonbelievers construct a shared understanding of what it means to be an atheist through ongoing social interaction with other

atheists and find that collective identity construction often revolves around atheists' minority status and shared perceptions of morality (Cimino and Smith 2007; Smith 2013; LeDrew 2015). Atheists use nonreligious organizations as a way to enact and affirm normative values like sociability, charity, and civic engagement; this reflects a concerted effort by atheists to control public perception of nonbelief as something positive and nonthreatening (Smith 2013). In order for these organizations to survive and succeed, action must also align with the "personal meaning structures and value orientations" of individual atheists (Smith 2013:86), which might include generosity, altruism, community, fairness, and rationality (Guenther et al. 2013; LeDrew 2013a). Researchers also emphasize that personal and collective identity is mutually reinforcing: Morality is central to atheist identity for individuals (Smith 2011), and individuals can come to identify with others on the basis of a shared morality. Atheists may arrive at their nonbelief independently, but as the movement grows, atheists may seek collectives that affirm their own personal worldviews and ideologies (LeDrew 2013a, 2013b). Organizations can also draw on collective identities to help articulate the purpose and goals of collective action (Kraatz and Block 2008; Kraatz, Phillips, and Tracey 2016). Nonreligious organizations, then, can emphasize certain aspects of collective atheist identity in order to cultivate and project an *organizational identity*.

Like individuals and groups, organizations need answers to identity questions like "Who are we?" or "What do we want to be?" in order to successfully interact with and communicate their commonly-shared values and goals to others (Albert and Whetten 1985; Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton 2000; Hatch and Schultz 2002; Pratt et al. 2016). Organizational identity, first conceptualized by Albert and Whetten (1985), is most often defined as the aspects of an organization's character that are central, distinctive, and enduring: It allows an organization to

distinguish itself from others that may share common goals and functions by emphasizing the lasting features that are deemed essential to the "essence of the organization" (265). Such distinctions are becoming increasingly important as nonreligion in the United States begins to resemble the free market model of American religion and nonbelievers have more options to choose from (Kosmin 2017).

Schinoff, Rogers, and Corley (2016) examine how individuals communicate their shared understanding of organizational identity:

> We theorize that identity custodians (individuals seen as communicating identity content on behalf of the organization, Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer, 2013) convey "who we are" through three primary means: saying (i.e., telling members who we are), showing (i.e., modeling behaviors that communicate who we are), and staging (i.e., providing opportunities for members to enact who we are) (220).

Nonreligious organizations "say" who they are most clearly via mass communicated online content, in the "About" sections of Meetup profiles, Facebook pages, and websites. This type of communication is one of the most obvious means of articulating a shared identity (Pratt 2003), yet a full picture of organizational identity should also consider what organizations *do*. In an attempt to frame their personal nonreligious identities as a *positive* identity (something to be *had* rather than something to be *rejected*), nonreligious organizations resort to *action* as a means of communizing what is important and central to who they are as a collective. In fact, all the self-descriptions of organizations I analyzed detailed the things they do as a collective, as well as what they believe.

Nonreligious organizations "show" and "stage" who they are by putting their core values into practice. Additionally, if nonreligious organizations function in part as strategies for stigma management, they do so by hosting events showcasing values that are both 1) important to nonbelievers and 2) contradict negative stereotypes by highlighting members' sociability, charitable inclinations, and social justice credentials. These events communicate information not only about the individuals who participate in them, but also about the organizations that host them.

DATA AND METHODS

There is no standard method of operationalizing and measuring organizational identity, and studies often infer the identity of an organization from sources such as internal documents, interviews, and observations (Foreman and Whetten 2016). I find that organizations communicate their identity (i.e., those core values that distinguish them from other, similar organizations) not only via self-descriptions on websites, but also through action that takes place in the form of sponsored events. The conclusions drawn in this chapter rely on the full dataset collected from fieldwork in Houston: published content, interviews, and observations. The typology described below is based on an analysis of each organizations' direct, self-conscious statements, including their own self-descriptions, mission statements, and individual listings for each event that were advertised on Meetup and Facebook (all available online; see Chapter 1 for descriptions of the organizations); the observations of individual members, their motivations for participating, and the meaning such organizations provide for them; and my own observations made while participating in events.

During my time in Houston, 375 events were advertised to the public via Meetup and Facebook, typically organized, hosted, or promoted by leaders and/or a core group of highly

active members. I coded each of these events according to their primary function, discerned throughout the course of fieldwork: social, educational, political, charitable, or spiritual. Table 3.1 lists examples of events that were classified in each type.

Table 3.1: Examples of Events Within Types

Social	Educational	Political	Charitable	Spiritual
Food and drinks	Talks	Petition signing	Volunteering	Meditation
Entertainment	Book clubs	Protests	5K's	UU/church-
Family-friendly	Discussion groups	Marches	Giveaways	sponsored
Trivia/game nights	Documentary screenings	Activism	Collecting donations	events

The majority of events were easily classified into this typology, which arose inductively over the course of fieldwork. However, some events did not clearly fit into one category and were therefore given two codes. Some events were composed of two equally significant parts. For example, weekly Sunday meetings at Oasis involved a service with a main talk (educational) and a post-service lunch at a different location (social). Likewise, SN events consisted of two disparate components: 20 minutes of meditation (spiritual), followed by a philosophy discussion (educational). A few other events were difficult to classify into a single category due to the absence of a clear, singular function. For instance, HOH's participation in a 5K for the Houston Area Women's Center is given two codes: A fee was collected to participate in the race which would help support the Center's mission (charitable), but HOH members were also motivated to participate as activists bringing attention to the domestic and sexual violence that disproportionately affects women (political). Multiple codes indicate that members may feel motivated to participate in the same event for different reasons.

I further examined this data using correspondence analysis, which visualizes the associations between categorical variables: in this case, the association between nonreligious

organizations and types of events. Implications of the contingency table showing the distribution

of events across organizations and correspondence analysis are investigated further in the

Discussion section, after describing the typology of nonreligious events.

Though I did not attend all 375 events, I was still able to confidently code each event.

Many were recurring events, and all events were accompanied by descriptions on Meetup and

Facebook. Between recorded material, personal accounts, and observations, I was able to

triangulate this data and construct a typology of nonreligious events.

A TYPOLOGY OF NONRELIGIOUS EVENTS

Nonreligious organizations do more than provide a space where people can simply "not

believe in God"; they reflect members' personal and collective identities by offering events that

reflect what is important to those who participate in them. As the number of nonreligious

organizations increases in a given area, they may develop distinctive characteristics and priorities

in order to differentiate themselves from others and attract certain types of believers (Kosmin

2017). The events hosted by a nonreligious organization, then, could serve as a proxy for

organizational identity, insofar as events reflect that which is most central, enduring, and

distinctive about the organization: an organization that hosts primarily social events can be

considered a "social" organization, an organization that hosts primarily educational events could

be considered an "educational" organization, and so forth. For some organizations, this

correspondence between event type and organizational identity aligns neatly. However,

classifying entire organizations is more difficult than classifying an event, and the relationships

between the two are not always straightforward. By examining the *distribution* of events across

organizations, a picture of organizational identity begins to emerge. After describing the

typology of events, I will discuss their distribution and what it suggests about organizational identity.

Social

Some nonreligious organizations are primarily *social* in nature. Houston Atheists, for example, prioritizes providing members a safe space to socialize with like-minded others, where the topic of religion will not be a point of contention. Other research has identified this as a key reason people give for joining an atheist community (Tomlins 2015). In fact, at HA events, religion often was not a popular topic of conversation. Throughout the course of fieldwork, I noticed that if someone was a first-time attendee at these types of events, they were often asked about their religious background, or how long they had been a nonbeliever. It was typically assumed that fellow attendees had "de-converted" from religion or somehow "discovered" atheism. In fact, only one interviewee of 125 explicitly indicated being raised an atheist; all other respondents were either raised in some religious tradition or as "nothing in particular" before they concluded at some point that they did not believe. As these organizations are, by name, *non*religious, this topic often fueled initial conversations between new acquaintances. After these brief "introductory" talks, conversation usually shifted to topics like science, entertainment, or current events.

Still, in the event that the topic of religion did come up, members could rest assured that there would be no need to "come out of the closet" like there might be in other social settings. Pat, a member of HA, had this to say about the group's social gatherings:

> One big thing that can make you uncomfortable if you're looking for friends and you're an atheist is, you know, if the person is religious it's inevitably going to come up, and you're going to have to deal with it. But sidestepping, skipping that

whole issue is nice. So it doesn't mean you're going to like everybody or you're

going to agree with everybody on political issues or anything like that, but that's

one big topic that you can avoid, which is nice.

Being able to disclose a nonreligious identity without risk of judgment was a big draw for

many people who chose to attend these meetings. Regardless of the sponsoring organization,

these events share some characteristics: there is nearly always food, coffee, or alcohol and there

is rarely an agenda. There is also no leader or designated authority figure directing action or

conversation. They are usually held in public spaces like a restaurant or bar, or occasionally at a

group member's home in the form of a potluck. Nearly all of the nonreligious organizations in

Houston offered informal social gatherings throughout the month, though they did not

necessarily prioritize these types of meetings.

Educational

Many of the events sponsored by Houston's nonreligious organizations could be

categorized as *educational*. While some members do become involved to meet social needs,

others say they are looking for "something more" in their interactions with other nonbelievers;

they want to learn something new or engage intellectually in structured discussions. At these

types of events, members can learn about and debate the philosophical merits of atheism and

shortcomings of religion; hold discussions about science, ethics, or social issues; or acquire new

perspectives from outsider groups, like the LGBTQ+ or Black communities. The organizations

may host lectures and presentations (given by community members or guest speakers) or

advertise outside events of interest. These types of gatherings were the most popular among

nonreligious organizations behind social events, and nearly all of the organizations I observed

hosted educational events; even groups that did not regularly host these types of events, like HA,

often promoted those hosted by other organizations on their Meetup and Facebook pages. Organizations that frequently hosted these types of events include Humanists of Houston, Houston Oasis, Greater Houston Skeptic Society, Houston Black Non-Believers, and Houston Church of Freethought.

While the nonbelievers I observed were not always keen on restricting casual conversations to religion and nonbelief, educational events frequently dealt with these topics. For example, sociologist Penny Edgell gave a talk at Rice University, where she presented data from the new wave of the American Mosaic Project, discussing new and persistent trends among atheists and the unaffiliated. She was joined by Anthony Pinn, a black professor of religion at Rice and author of the book *Writing God's Obituary: How A Good Methodist Became an Even Better Atheist*. This event was hosted by the university, but was promoted by several nonreligious organizations, including HA, HOH, and HBN. Pinn has also made appearances as an invited speaker at some of Houston's local nonreligious gatherings.

Topics up for discussion at these types of events varied widely. Sometimes educational events dealt with scientific topics, such as a talk hosted by GHSS about conservation programs at the Houston Zoo. Other times these events focused on social issues, like HBN's discussions about mass incarceration and homophobia in the Black community. Ethical concerns were also a popular topic of discussion, perhaps because nonbelievers are often assumed to lack a moral compass. For example, early in my fieldwork Oasis began holding a monthly discussion group called "Meeting of Minds" focused on ethical issues, such as the death penalty, euthanasia, and organ transplantation. As Mike Aus, former pastor and co-founder of Oasis, said preceding a Sunday morning lecture, "There's so much to talk about when you're not limited to one book."

Political

Another role these organizations can play is a *political* one: they can offer events that focus on raising awareness of church/state issues and providing members knowledge and access to political channels in order to incite change in policies that could be interpreted as favoring religious individuals and institutions, perhaps going so far as to initiate lawsuits challenging such policies. For example, the Houston chapter of Americans United tries to host an event every quarter, although during the course of my fieldwork only one such event was held. It featured a discussion with Ellery Schempp, plaintiff in the 1963 Supreme Court case *Abington School District v. Schempp*, which banned mandatory Bible readings in public schools. However, AU is not a nonreligious organization in the same way that other organizations discussed here are. It was founded in 1947 by Protestant Christians and caters to both the religious and nonreligious who wish to see a government free from religious influence (and religion free from government influence). Many of my respondents spoke of the separation of church and state as a cause that can be supported by believers and nonbelievers alike, an idea supported by social research (Baker and Smith 2009). Still, AU events are promoted by several of Houston's nonreligious organizations for those members who are passionate about issues tying together politics and secularism.

Nonreligious organizations can also encourage political activism, or promote events that highlight secular, political causes (Fazzino, Borer, and Abdel Haq 2014). For example, there was a recurring protest that HOH had been hosting with Amnesty International, in which members met in front of the Saudi Arabian consulate to protest the treatment of Raif Badawi, a liberal blogger who was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1,000 lashes for posting about critical comments about Islam in Saudi Arabia. Another prominent issue plaguing secular Texans during

my fieldwork involved the injection of religion into public classrooms: group members angrily spoke of a new history textbook the state was considering adopting, which cited Moses as an honorary Founding Father of the US.

Respondents often reported being frustrated with this kind of infusion of religion and public policy, both at home and abroad. They spoke of seeking an outlet for such frustrations, but were also cynical about the efficacy of actions like protesting and petitioning. However, I did recognize at least 30 people from Houston who made the two-and-a-half hour drive to Austin for the second annual Texas Secular Convention: an entire weekend of talks on church/state issues specifically facing the citizens of Texas, which hosted panels and presentations with titles such as "The Importance of Secular Education," "Staying in Contact with Your Legislator," and "Effective Ways to Build Coalitions Between Progressive Religious and Secular Communities."

Charitable

Nonreligious organizations might also host *charitable* endeavors, such as providing opportunities to donate and volunteer as individuals or as members of a nonreligious community. Groups like HOH and Oasis hosted at least one charitable event each month (e.g., volunteering at local food banks and donation centers, hosting blood drives), and members of these organizations often participated in monthly giveaways with Atheists Helping the Homeless, a group launched in Austin, Texas, in 2009 that had recently started a chapter in Houston. However, many nonbelievers I interviewed expressed a desire to see more activities like this, and lamented that there were too few opportunities to volunteer with nonreligious organizations. In fact, they recognized that religious groups often do charity very well, and some respondents even volunteered through churches or religious organizations simply because many charities have religious affiliations.

Some members of nonreligious organizations also recognized that disadvantaged nonbelievers might hesitate to obtain services from religious charities, especially if the recipient perceives an expectation to attend the church or somehow become involved with the religious group. Moira, a member of Houston Black Non-Believers, said:

> [A fellow HBN member] and I talked about the plight of the homeless. You know, a lot of these shelters around here are Christian-based, you know, it's that beat-you-over-the-head-till-you-become-a-Christian, whether you are or not, and he would like something secular. Now if you wanna go to church or whatever, that's your business, we're not gonna proselytize. And he said, "I'm pretty sure there's some atheists out there but they have to say they're Christian in order to get services." I said yeah, I'm pretty sure there are.

Not only are secular charities important in that they provide nonbelievers in need a place to go without religious strings attached, but nonreligious organizations that endorse charitable activity can also mitigate the impression that atheists are immoral or indifferent to helping others. For instance, which carpooling together to the Texas Secular Convention in Austin, Rose, an active member of GHSS, told me about a conversation she had with a religious acquaintance. After describing volunteer work she had recently completed, the acquaintance responded, "Why do you bother volunteering if you don't believe in God?" This gave Rose the opportunity to explain that nonbelievers can be moral individuals who enjoy helping others, with no promise of an afterlife in return. By volunteering specifically as part of a nonreligious organization, nonbelievers are engaging in a sort of secular activism that aims to dispel these negative assumptions (Fazzino, Borer, and Abdel Haq 2014; Zuckerman 2014).

Spiritual

Finally, these organizations host events that can be considered *spiritual* in nature, providing a place where members can go to experience emotions traditionally associated with religion—like awe and self-reflection—where disbelief in the supernatural is not only acceptable (as it often is in Unitarian Universalist congregations[33]), but expected. While "secular spirituality" might seem counterintuitive, there are a sizable number of people in these organizations who feel that the idea is compatible with an atheist or humanist worldview. For example, when I asked one of my respondents, Robert, if he thought there was room for spirituality in an atheistic worldview, he gave this enthusiastic response:

> When the light bulb burns out it's gone, and it's sad. Sort of. But it's also kind of awesome because I'm not gonna live forever. I get this one chance to eat ice cream and be with people I love and check out sunsets and visit Canada, and it's great. Is there room for spirituality? Yes. I meditate, that helped me get off drugs. There's room to hold someone's hand and say, you know, I'm just thankful you're in my life and I really love you and I'm really thankful you're my friend, I'm thankful you're my sister, I'm thankful for all these different things…if that's prayer, then that's prayer.… And there's also room for being crass and there's room for the banal as well. The sacred and the profane. I need both of those things. I need comedy clubs where I can go and shout obscenities, and I need moments where I can reflect on just how awesome it is that I exist.

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[33] Unitarian Universalism (UU) is a theologically progressive tradition characterized by the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) as a "new religious movement" (a phrase generally used as a euphemism for religious cults). UU does not fall under the umbrella of mainstream Protestantism because Universalism espouses the universal salvation of all people and that salvation is not restricted to those who hold particular beliefs. Rather, Unitarian Universalists are encouraged to formulate their own understandings of meaning and truth.

Though Robert and several other respondents spoke of spirituality in a way that did not conflict with their nonbelief, most of them did not actually attend events that specifically catered to spiritual nonbelievers. Indeed, of all the types described here, spiritual events struggled the most to maintain a critical mass of nonbelievers to justify continuing meetings. One group in Houston dedicated to secular spirituality, Spiritual Naturalists, operated on and off for several years. They resumed operations in the form of a bi-weekly meditation session and philosophy talk in March of 2015, only to disband four months later, claiming in an email to members that instead of this "official organization" the group should have focused on allowing a "grassroots community to emerge organically." The group now operates via newsletters and a mailing list, announcing events of interest in the Houston area and allowing members to connect on their own terms.

This lack of participation may be due to the personal meanings that respondents attached to the idea of spirituality. In fact, research has suggested that while people interpret religiosity as incorporating the institutional aspects of religion, they interpret spirituality as being more individualistic (Zinnbauer et al. 1997); secular spirituality may be interpreted similarly. Not all nonbelievers are comfortable using the term "spirituality," and it seems to be an idiosyncratic concept in that its meaning varies from individual to individual. Some nonbelievers associated spirituality with meditation, and chose to meditate on their own terms (alone, with a meditation group, or even at a Buddhist temple) as opposed to specifically meditating with other nonbelievers. When my interview respondents spoke of spirituality and I asked them to explain what they meant when they used the word, they tended to define it either in terms of mindfulness and awareness, such as a realization of being a part of "something bigger than ourselves" (usually defined in a literal, scientific way, i.e., "nature" or "the universe"), or a desire to strive

for continuous self-improvement. Zuckerman (2014) coined the term "awe-ism" to describe the feelings of wonder that several of my own respondents expressed.

DISCUSSION: INFERRING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY FROM EVENTS

While individual events are relatively easy to classify as social, educational, political, charitable, or spiritual, classifying entire organizations is more difficult. The relationship between events and the organizations that host them can be investigated further by analyzing the distribution of event types across organizations, shown in Table 3.2.[34]

TABLE 3.2: Distribution of Event Types among Houston's Nonreligious Organizations

	Social	Educational	Political	Charitable	Spiritual	N (%)*
HA	78 (84.8%)	2 (2.2%)	8 (8.7%)	3 (3.3%)	1 (1.1%)	92 (20.9%)
HOH	47 (35.9%)	51 (38.9%)	20 (15.3%)	8 (6.1%)	5 (3.8%)	131 (29.7%)
GHSS	15 (50.0%)	10 (33.3%)	2 (6.7%)	1 (3.3%)	2 (6.7%)	30 (6.8%)
Oasis	79 (56.8%)	41 (29.5%)	2 (1.4%)	16 (11.5%)	1 (0.7%)	139 (31.5%)
HBN	9 (45.0%)	11 (55.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (4.5%)
HCoF	8 (53.3%)	7 (46.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	15 (3.4%)
SN	0 (0%)	6 (50.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (50.0%)	12 (2.7%)
AU	0 (0%)	1 (50.0%)	1 (50.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.5%)
N (%)	236 (53.5%)	129 (29.3%)	33 (7.5%)	28 (6.3%)	15 (3.4%)	441 (100%)

*Percentages may not add perfectly due to rounding.

Several insights are gleaned from this table. The bottom row shows the distribution of events within each type. Just over half of nonreligious events in Houston are social, and just

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[34] The total N in table 3.2 (441) does not match the total number of events listed in the "Methods and Data" section (375) because some events did not clearly fit into one category and were therefore given two codes.

under one-third are educational. Fewer than 20 percent are political, charitable, or spiritual, with spiritual being the least common type of event. The last column shows the distribution of events within each organization. The Houston Oasis[35] and HOH offer the most events, followed by HA. Other groups are less active, offering two to three events per month. AU only hosted one event during the course of my fieldwork (coded as both educational and political): a talk given by Ellery Schempp, whose activism led to the 1963 Supreme Court decision in *Abington School District v. Schempp* that declared required Bible readings in public schools unconstitutional.

The rest of the contingency table shows the distribution of event types among each organization, and there are several takeaways. HA appears to be the most specialized organization: about 85 percent of events are social, the highest percentage in any one cell. HOH appears to be the most diverse: one-third of events are social, one-third are educational, and the remaining third are either political, charitable, or spiritual. GHSS, Oasis, HCoF, and HBN offer primarily social events, but also host a significant number of educational events. Oasis is further distinguished from other nonreligious organizations due to the higher proportion of events that are charitable in nature. SN offers events that are equally considered educational and spiritual, and AU offered an educational event that was also political in nature, aligned with its singular mission of separation of church and state.

Interpretation of this data is further aided by correspondence analysis: a technique used to visualize the relative associations between categorical variables in contingency tables (Clausen 1998). Figure 3.1 shows a map that plots these associations; the blue circles are the organizations (rows) and the red triangles are the event types (columns).

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[35] One reason Oasis appears to offer the most events (N = 139) is because each weekly Sunday meeting (N = 33) was given two codes: one for the main talk/service (educational), and one for the off-site lunch that followed (social). Attendance at the main talk did not oblige someone to also attend the lunch, or vice versa.

FIGURE 3.1: Correspondence Analysis of Organizations and Event Types
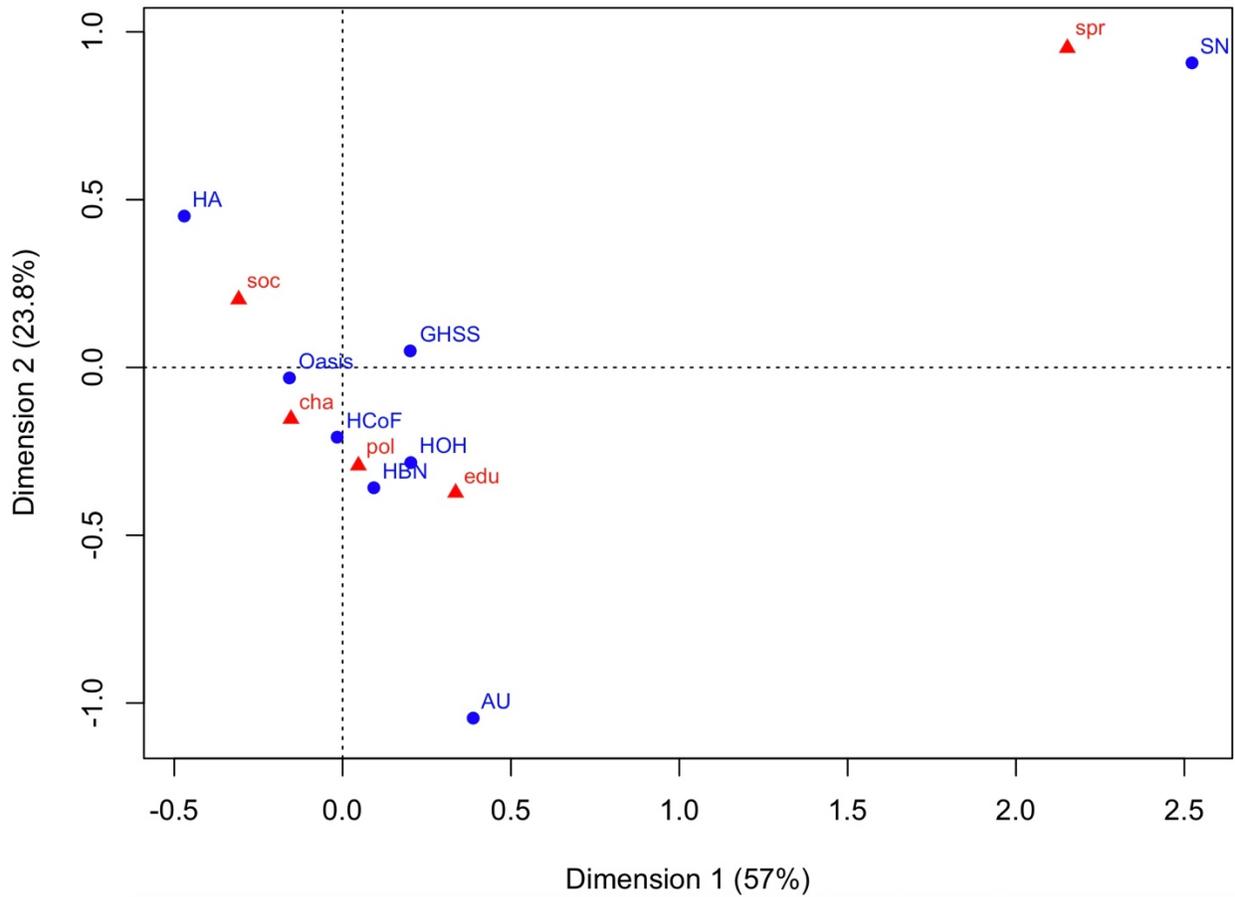
To interpret correspondence analysis, attention must be paid to the position of points vis-à-vis one another. If two row (or column) points are close together, the profiles of the points are similar; if the points are far apart, they are more dissimilar. If a point lies far from the origin, its profile is unlike those of its peers; on the other hand, if it lies near the origin of the axes, its profile is considered average, indistinct, and not unique. Interpreting the position of row points in relation to column points is more complicated. Generally, if a row and column point form an acute angle in relation to the origin of the axes (i.e., they are likely located in the same quadrant), they are closely associated; if they form an obtuse angle (i.e., located in an adjacent or opposite quadrant), they are likely unrelated, or even negatively associated.

While correspondence analysis (CA) confirms many of the conclusions drawn from the contingency table, their positions on the map relative to one another provide additional insights. Looking at Dimension 1,[36] events/red triangles appear to move from what could be described as group-oriented (interaction with other people and groups, as in social and charitable events) on the left to individual-oriented (intellectual stimulation and self-improvement, as in educational and spiritual events) on the right.[37] This arrangement of points on the CA map suggests that there may be different motivations for participating in one type of event (and, possible, one type of organization) over another, and can further tell us which organizations are more or less associated with each type—which may not be entirely clear, or may even be misleading, in the larger table.[38]

For example, I mentioned above that the contingency table appears to show HA as the most specialized organization, while HOH appears to be the most diverse. However, the CA map tells a different story. In correspondence analysis, points that are far from the origin are more specialized, while points that are close to the origin are less so. In other words, points close to the origin are non-unique and less differentiated from one another. According to the CA map, SN is the most specialized organization. "SN" and "spr" are far from the origin, indicating Spiritual Naturalists and spiritual events are distinct from other organizations and event types; when compared to one another they are connected to the origin by a very small angle, suggesting a close association between these row and column points.

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[36] The more dominant dimension, accounting for 57 percent of inertia (or variance).

[37] Dimension 2 appears to follow a qualitatively similar (though weaker) pattern, in which organizations/blue circles appear to move roughly from being externally focused (social justice and activism) at the bottom of the map, to internally focused (individual needs) at the top.

[38] Motivations for participating in specific events and organizations are explored further in Chapters 4 and 5.

How is this the case when all the events hosted by SN were coded as equally educational and spiritual? The main advantage of correspondence analysis is that all points (both the rows and columns) are plotted *relative* to one another. Spiritual events are not very popular in Houston, and SN is the only organization closely tied to this event type. Even though SN's events are equal parts educational and spiritual, SN holds a near total monopoly over spiritual events, and therefore could be classified a "spiritual organization."

AU[39] is also a specialized organization and appears farther from the origin than most other organizations, but it is not very close in proximity to any of the red, triangular "event type" points. AU could arguably be classified as a "political organization" based on its activity and stated mission, so why isn't the red triangle labeled "pol" closer to the blue circle labeled "AU," as is the case between "spr" and "SN"? The answer is because several other nonreligious organizations in Houston also host events that are political in nature; AU does not have a monopoly over political events in the same way that SN has one over spiritual events. Although an extremely acute angle is formed between the origin, AU, and "pol," suggesting the two are closely related, they are not near one another. AU is a specialized organization, but political events are not—HA, HOH, GHSS, and Oasis all host political events. In fact, HOH offers the largest number of events that were coded as political; although this accounts for only 15 percent of HOH's overall activity, HOH offers many more of these events overall: twenty compared to AU's one. This suggests that for nonbelievers in Houston who wish to be involved in local, grassroots political activism, HOH could be a better choice than AU—whose efforts are geared more toward the state and national levels—despite AU being the more "political" organization.

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[39] Although AU is an outlier because it hosted only one event (two codes) during the course of my fieldwork, removing it from the data produced virtually no change in the CA map.

I also suggested that HOH appears to be the most diverse organization because its events are most equally distributed across event types. However, the map places HOH near the origin, close to Oasis, GHSS, HCoF, and HBN. This suggests that these organizations are not actually significantly differentiated from one another; indeed, the majority of events fall predominantly in the social and educational categories. HA, AU, and SN are specialized in the sense that they focus more specifically on certain types of events: social, political, and spiritual, respectively. The CA map visually confirms qualitative interpretations of nonreligious organizations that may be lost or buried in the contingency table.

Analyzing the distribution of events across organizations can provide a basis for further investigations into nonreligious organizational identity. By taking a practice-based approach, Houston Atheists, Americans United, and Spiritual Naturalists can be clearly classified as social, political, and spiritual organizations. Other organizations are more difficult to categorize. The Houston Oasis and Humanists of Houston offer significantly more charitable and political events, respectively, relative to other organizations, but it seems a stretch to label them as charitable and political organizations when—much like Greater Houston Skeptic Society, Houston Church of Freethought, and Houston Black Non-Believers—they offer a diverse distribution of event types. Perhaps the distinction here is that—when it comes to activity—HA, AU, and SN are specialist organizations (closely associated with one category of events), while HOH, GHSS, Oasis, HCoF, and HBN are generalist organizations (associated with multiple categories). Future research should investigate whether this distinction between specialist and generalist organizational forms can shed light on how organizations compete for target

populations, or how they can be affected by market conditions like concentration (McPherson 1983; Carroll and Swaminathan 2000).[40]

Still, throughout my fieldwork, I did notice some central characteristics that set those organizations located near the origin of the CA map—the generalists—apart from the specialists. Groups that offer a wider or more evenly distributed array of activities tended to place greater emphasis on building community, making a difference, and living meaningful lives. I refer to these types of groups as "communal" organizations. Such organizations did not offer a separate type of "communal" event per se; rather, the variety of events offered, organizations' self-descriptions, and the ways people discussed these groups all indicated that the central character it wished to communicate (identity) was larger than the sum of its parts (activities). The primary purpose of a communal organization is to function as a consistent, dependable group, where members can ask for help if they need it and take advantage of learning a new skill when offered—much like a typical church does for its congregants. The Houston Oasis (the focus of the following chapter) is a prime example of such an organization that strives to be an enduring community that fosters a sense of belonging among nonbelievers. Someone looking for a close-knit secular community (perhaps filling a void left from leaving a church, though not necessarily) might be drawn to Oasis for this reason over a group like Houston Atheists, where participants meet over food or drink for conversation with other nonbelievers, which may or may not result in the same people gathering at the same place for subsequent gatherings.[41] Similarly, churches—particularly those catering to minority populations—often provide their congregations

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[40] For instance, how specialist organizations fare when a few large generalist organizations are able to meet consumers' needs. It is difficult to discern a pattern in the case of Houston's nonreligious organizations: SN was unsuccessful, while AU hosts few events but draws large crowds, and HA offers many events and boasts an active membership.

[41] Of course, this should not suggest that people involved exclusively in social organizations like HA cannot forge deep connections; indeed, some people I spoke to had developed close friendships or met their spouses at such events.

with basic resources beyond spiritual fulfillment (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Having the option of relying on other group members for everyday needs can help foster a sense of affinity among nonbelievers that churches (also considered generalist organizations) have successfully provided their congregations for generations.

CONCLUSION

Action is an important indicator of identity for nonreligious organizations, since nonbelievers emphasize behaviors over beliefs. Collective action in the context of an organization, then, is a key way that atheists as a group signal who they are and what is important to them. However, this is not the only way one could categorize nonreligious organizations, as there are other ways atheist groups signal their identities. I have taken a practice-based approach, but there are other ways to think about identity for nonreligious organizations.

The case of HBN illustrates one of a myriad of ways organizational identity could be conceptualized. According to both Table 3.2 and Figure 3.1, Houston Black Non-Believers would be considered one of the least differentiated, most generic organizations, as its distribution of events (all coded as social or educational) is not unique, and it falls near the origin of the CA map. However, this ignores the fact that HBN was the only nonreligious organization I observed in Houston that catered specifically to an entire historically disadvantaged and marginalized identity group that experiences nonbelief in significantly different ways then other racial and ethnic groups—making it, in a sense, one of the most unique.

Future research on nonreligious organizational identity should consider the types of people who are attracted to specific types of organizations, as well as the types of people that organizations themselves seek to attract. For example, groups like Oasis, GHSS, and AU claim

to not cater specifically to nonbelievers. Oasis avoids labeling itself an atheist group altogether (see next chapter). GHSS states on its Meetup page: "While many skeptics are indeed atheists, non-theists, agnostics, humanists, etc., and while religious claims, questions, and actions are often the concerns of good rationalists, this group is NOT solely geared for promoting atheism." And AU was founded by Baptists intent on keeping Catholicism out of government affairs. Claiming to be welcoming and accommodating of believers could be a significant facet of some organizations' identities. I rarely encountered such people in my fieldwork, although I was told that several Christians regularly attended Oasis, and I interviewed two believers (one Christian, one deist) who were involved in GHSS. Researchers should further investigate the discrepancies between what organizations say they are (e.g., "we welcome religious believers") and what they actually do (e.g., religious believers rarely attend and are perhaps made to feel unwelcome).

For those focused exclusively on nonbelievers, organizations could be categorized based on the identity of individuals who join them: an organization for atheists, an organization for humanists, an organization for skeptics, and so on. While the names of organizations often reflect such categorization, this may not produce the most informative typology of organizational identity. The terminology used to describe nontheistic labels and ideologies—both by laypeople and the academics who study them—is diverse and contested (Cragun and Hammer 2011; Lee 2012; Smith and Cragun 2019). These labels are undoubtedly important to nonbelievers, who often make subtle distinctions when discussing their nonreligious identities. However, if presented a laundry list of nonreligious labels, many nonbelievers would identify with multiple labels (Langston et al. 2017), so I am skeptical of the usefulness of such a typology at the organization level.

Organizations could also be categorized by their leadership structures or level of formality. They may have hierarchical leadership, with a president and board of directors who administrate all activity, or they may be structured horizontally with responsibilities diffused among many committed members. They can be run as dictatorships or democracies. They can be formalized with 501(c)(3) status, securing the same legal and monetary benefits granted to other non-profit organizations, or pursue no such ambitions. Meetings may have strict agendas or none at all. This is an avenue certainly worth exploring further; indeed, the groups I observed did display a variety of organizational structures, though as a typology it may not capture the variation that manifests via a group's diverse membership.

Finally, much like with individuals, organizational identity is not static. In fact, some organization theorists suggest that organizations need to be *more* flexible than individuals in how they define themselves because they must be able to adapt quickly in order to survive precarious social, political, or economic conditions (Gioia 1998; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000). In a span of only eight months, I saw these organizations grow and dissolve and change in response to such conditions.[42] As a result, they may display different identities at different times by offering different types of meetings and activities that serve different purposes. This is, of course, also true of individuals: we are capable of having multiple identities, but at any given moment one of our identities may be more salient than another (Stryker and Burke 2000).

Nonreligious organizations are very much like religious organizations in the functions they provide their members. Religious organizations have historically provided a space for their members to socialize, learn new things, engage in political discourse, volunteer, reflect and

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[42] Since concluding my fieldwork, big changes have occurred in Houston's secular community: HCoF and HBN are no longer in operation, and leaders of Oasis and HOH were excommunicated due to allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct (discussed further in Chapters 4 and 6).

meditate, and build enduring relationships. Of course, religious organizations are not the only way to meet these needs and goals (nor are *nonreligious* organizations the only alternative), but they have arguably been the most successful. Providing a space for nonbelievers to have these fundamental human experiences is vital, especially in a society that overwhelmingly values the religious ethos. Despite religion's declining influence as a social institution over other areas of social life, scholars recognize that it remains significant in American society. The following chapter will discuss in greater detail one specific organization that most closely resembles the typical American church: the Houston Oasis.

CHAPTER 4

"WE ARE NOT AN ATHEIST CHURCH!":

HOW NONBELIEVERS CONSTRUE COMMUNITY

Given the relational positions of religion and nonreligion (Lee 2012, 2015; Quack 2014), nonreligious organizations will be inevitably pressed to define themselves against religious organizations. However, as described in earlier chapters, much variation exists among nonreligious organizations when it comes to their structures, goals, and activities. Still, some nonreligious organizations look much more like a typical American church than others—often intentionally—and are frequently referred to as "atheist churches."[43] Members themselves even have difficulty talking about their groups without drawing such comparisons, as religious rhetoric is familiar and readily available, yet closely and uncomfortably associated with religious ideas of spirituality and the supernatural.

In this chapter, I ask several questions relating to the peculiar connection between religious and nonreligious organizations. First, what is an atheist church, and is this actually an accurate term for such organizations? Second, in what ways does a nonreligious organization mimic a religious congregation? How is their organization structured, what activities do they offer, and what are their members like? Finally, how do nonbelievers feel about an organization that in many ways closely resembles an institution they reject? To answer these questions, I will first explore just how "atheist" and how "churchy" such an organization is using a case study of the Houston Oasis.[44] Next, I will describe the components of Oasis, including its structure, activities, and members. Then, I will contextualize Oasis within Houston's nonreligious

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[43] I prefer the phrase "godless congregation" for reasons to be discussed throughout the chapter.

[44] Despite its tongue-in-cheek name, Houston *Church* of Freethought is less similar to Oasis than it is to other nonreligious organizations in Houston, as its events tend to focus less on community building and more on intellectual stimulation and socializing.

community by exploring what nonbelievers in general say about the group, including observations from those who have never or no longer attend Oasis. Finally, I will discuss some of the implications of this organizational form for religion and secularism in the United States.

BACKGROUND: WHAT ARE CONGREGATIONS, AND WHY MODEL ONE?

The claim that a nonreligious organization resembles a church is loaded with assumptions. Social theorists have often used the term "church" to mean an established religious body[45] with a formal, hierarchical structure and ritualized service, whose primary source of membership are those born and socialized rather than via conversion, in which all members of society are welcome, if not expected to be members (Weber 1930; Troeltsch 1931). However, when non-academics use the word church, they are most commonly referring to a community of people that gather regularly at an agreed upon time and place for worship and ritualized practice: a congregation.

Depending on the religion, places of worship can be referred to as churches, synagogues, temples, or mosques, with churches most commonly associated with Christian congregations. When a nonreligious organization is labeled an "atheist church," the implication is that it resembles a Christian (usually Protestant) congregation. In fact, the term "congregation" is nearly always associated with Protestant Christianity. Warner (2000) describes the "congregational form" as:

> (1) a voluntary membership association, whose identity is (2) defined more by the people who form it than by the territory they inhabit.… A congregation typically features (3) lay leadership (a board of elders, directors, deacons, etc.) and (4) systematic fund-raising and a system of trustees (who may overlap with the

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[45] An "established religious body" being the entirety of a religious tradition, e.g., all 1.3 billion members of "the Roman Catholic Church."

leadership board) with eventual incorporation for tax purposes as a non-profit

entity, which is often, though not always, independent of any larger

"denomination." Because of its lay leadership and voluntary funding, there is (5) a

tendency for clergy to be professionals hired as employees.… Because of its

voluntary, self-determined nature, the congregation also has (6) a tendency to

ethnic exclusiveness. Because the people who establish the congregation have

multiple needs, there is (7) a tendency for it to be multi-functional (featuring more

than religious "worship," including educational, cultural, social, political, and

social service activities). Because families tend to have the day off on Sunday,

there is (8) a tendency for these activities to be brought together under the roof of

the institution on Sunday, whatever the particular sacred day of that tradition

(277-78).

Warner defined the congregational form in support of his theory, de facto

congregationalism (1994): the idea that immigrant and non-Western religious traditions in the

United States will, over time, come to adopt the characteristics of an American Protestant

Christian congregation. In fact, in the United States, some Hindu, Buddhist, and Muslim

gatherings more closely resemble an American Protestant Christian congregation than they do

gatherings from their countries of origin (Yang and Ebaugh 2001). Some have argued that

Protestantism has become the model congregational form because it is the most ubiquitous in the

United States and reinforces the idea of American exceptionalism (Vasquez 2005; Cadge 2008).

Several recent trends affecting Protestantism since the turn of the century are likely to also affect

those organizations that adopt this congregational form, including the growth of

nondenominational churches,[46] greater use of technology, and increased informality (Brauer 2017; Chaves 2017). If nonreligious organizations in the United States are going to borrow from religion, then they are likely going to borrow from the same religious tradition as outsider congregations. Thus, when people claim that nonreligious organizations are "atheist churches," what they are suggesting is that the organization resembles a nondenominational Protestant Christian congregation.

This dissertation is primarily interested in the diversity among a group of organizations that have gained visibility and social relevance fairly recently. However, the similarities between some nonreligious organizations and religious congregations are too significant to be overlooked. If nonbelievers reject religion, it would seem counterproductive to embrace so many elements of Protestant congregations. Why would a nonreligious organization intentionally model itself after a religious organization? In other words, what is the mechanism driving some nonreligious organizations to model a religious congregation?

Institutional theorists suggest that over time, organizations that are involved in similar activities and face similar environmental conditions will begin to resemble one another, referring to this process as institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Specifically, mimetic isomorphism refers to when an organization mimics, imitates, or models itself after successful peer organizations.[47] This type of isomorphism is driven by uncertainty and ambiguity: If an organization's leadership is unsure of how to solve a problem or meet the needs of its members, they may choose to imitate a similar organization that they believe has been successful in

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[46] Examples of Protestant denominations include (but are not limited to) Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Episcopalian, and Presbyterian. Today, about one in four churches are nondenominational, meaning they are independent and do not affiliate with any formal denominations, though they often approximate Protestantism.
[47] DiMaggio and Powell also describe coercive and normative isomorphism as mechanisms that drive similarities within an organizational field.

accomplishing its goals. Model organizations may not know they are being imitated and may not want to be imitated, but other organizations mimic them because they see the strategies or behaviors of the successful organization as providing legitimacy. An organization that appears legitimate is more likely to survive because people are less likely to question courses of action, solely on the basis that the organization looks like one that should be successful (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Greenwood et al. 2017).

The concept of mimetic isomorphism is relevant to the case of the Houston Oasis because mimetic isomorphism is driven by uncertainty and ambiguity: There is no script for what a nonreligious organization is supposed to look like. In the absence of a script, a nonreligious organization might choose to mimic a religious congregation because religious congregations are often successful hubs of community, and if Oasis models itself after a successful organization it can gain legitimacy that contributes to its survival. But how could a church be a successful model for a nonreligious organization? Wouldn't an atheist perceive a church model to be the opposite of legitimate for a nonreligious organization?

As you will see in the results, some nonbelievers do indeed reject the Houston Oasis because of its similarities to a church. For others, however, this model communicates certain characteristics that, while associated with religious congregations, are still appealing to nonbelievers. Religion provides its members with a steadfast community held together by shared meaning and a shared morality. Churches are ubiquitous, familiar, and perceived as being very good at building community, a perception that transcends Christianity; even among nonbelievers and minority religion affiliates, the Protestant Christian Church is synonymous with "community." If an organization's goal is to build community, then a church might be perceived

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as an effective model and one worthy of emulating. That the structure of the Houston Oasis is so familiar can be an asset for the organization—and in some cases, a detriment.

METHODS AND DATA

This chapter will focus on a single prototypical case of a particular type of nonreligious organization—controversially referred to as an atheist church—and the people involved in it. I answer my research questions using data gathered primarily via participant observation at Houston Oasis events and in-depth interviews with nonbelievers involved (or formerly involved) with the organization. Of the 80 observations conducted among local nonreligious organizations in the Houston area, 18 occurred with the Houston Oasis: at their Sunday gatherings, restaurant meet-ups, or for potlucks and discussion groups at various members' homes. Of the 70 interviews analyzed for this dissertation, 12 respondents were active members at the time of the interview, meaning they had attended at least one Oasis meet-up and intended to visit again. An additional five respondents had previously attended but stopped, with no intention of returning. Additionally, I analyzed Oasis's website and "agendas" distributed at weekly Sunday gatherings for a sense of the organization's self-presentation.

The Houston Oasis could be conceptualized as boundary case. Boundary cases can be defined as those cases that belong in a category but are "so untypical that even the slightest further deviation from the norm would imply that they are no longer instances of the given category at all" (Smith and Mark 1998:255). It could also refer to a case that is not easily classified and hovers somewhere between two categories (Mol and Spaargaren 2006); it may in some ways "look like" it belongs to the category it borders, even if, upon further scrutiny, it does not (Schegloff 1997:502). Boundary cases are useful in that they can help make sense of distinctions between categories: They do not refute a theory, instance, or category, but rather

indicate its scope (Bloor 1992). All nonreligious organizations must grapple with comparisons to religious organizations, but none so much as the Houston Oasis. The absence of the supernatural prevents it from being categorized as religion, but its many similarities to a church can make potential members uncomfortable.

One could reasonably argue that Oasis's character cannot help but to be influenced by religion due to the fact that it was founded by a former minister—that the background and vocational experience of the group's leader, Mike, would necessarily lead it to resemble a Protestant congregation. And Mike's experience as a minister did profoundly shape the structure and management of Oasis. However, while the conditions of its founding may help explain Oasis's resemblance to a religious congregation, it does not explain its appeal to its "congregants." One might expect Oasis's membership to be composed of the formerly religious: those who at one time belonged to a religious congregation and hoped to replace it with a secular alternative. However, Oasis's participants were not all formerly religious: Only two-thirds of those who attended Oasis at the time of their interview were strongly religious at some point in their lives. Oasis's appeal extends beyond those who are intimately familiar with its organizational form, meaning its influence (and the influence of organizations like it) could potentially reach a wider swath of the population than initially presumed.

PROFILE OF AN ATHEIST CHURCH

The Houston Oasis was co-founded by a former Lutheran minister, Mike Aus. During his years as a minister, Mike became increasing skeptical of religion. He officially came out as an atheist in an interview aired on MSNBC during the Reason Rally[48] in 2012 about his experience

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[48] The Reason Rally was a daylong event held on the National Mall in Washington D.C., on March 24, 2012, hosted by several national atheist organizations and involving talks and performances given by prominent atheist writers and entertainers.

attending as a closeted minister. Though his identity was initially going to kept anonymous and his face blurred, the events at the rally inspired Mike to do the interview using his real name. His congregation dissolved upon his return to Houston. However, shortly after the church disbanded, several congregants approached him, revealing they too were nonbelievers and suggested they continue meeting on Sunday mornings, but with a secular agenda:

> [An ex-congregant and I] were having lunch…and we just started wondering, hey, would there be a way— 'cause there's so many parts of church life that we really like. Being a supportive, loving community, service projects, study groups, whatever, and we just started wondering together, would there be a way to keep doing this without all the baggage…. We formed a little launch team, kind of planned out what we're going to stand for, what are we going to do, where we're going to meet. The first Sunday we launched we had, like, 25 people there, and we were thrilled—we thought, wow, 25 people!

The resulting organization looks very similar to a religious congregation. Oasis is a 501(c)(3) educational non-profit organization. They are tax-exempt and donations to the organization are tax deductible, but they do not have legal church status. There are no formal membership requirements to join Oasis, but those who participate are expected to share the organization's five core values: 1) People are more important than beliefs;[49] 2) Reality is known through reason; 3) Meaning comes from making a difference; 4) Human hands solve human problems; 5) Be accepting and be accepted. Oasis hosts of number of recurring events for its members (they call themselves Oasians), including discussion groups, book clubs, game nights, happy hour, potlucks, and volunteer opportunities.

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[49] This particular value, held by nonbelievers at large, will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

Oasis's main recurring event is the Sunday morning gathering. Members meet at a community center on Sunday mornings, beginning at 10:00. Before the programming officially begins at 10:30, participants can socialize over coffee and snacks or read through printed flyers describing the morning's agenda and upcoming events. Supervised childcare is available in an adjacent room for small children whose parents wish to enjoy the gathering uninterrupted. The programming involves listening to live musical performances and two talks. The first talk is called a "Community Moment": a 10-minute talk given by a community member that can be about anything, but often details someone's "journey to freethought," or how they lost their faith and embraced non-theism—a sort of profession of *non*-faith (which may give the false impression that all members come from some sort of faith background). The second talk is a longer educational presentation, sometimes by community member but often delivered by a guest speaker. If no speaker is lined up, the main talk is given by Mike. As the musical guest performs a final song, hats are passed around the audience to collect donations. Those attending the service are invited to attend lunch afterwards.

While the Houston Oasis (and a healthy portion of its membership) does not refer to itself as an "atheist church," outsiders and the media do; it is one of the simplest ways to communicate to those unfamiliar with this type of organization what the group is like on a basic level. However, Oasis rejects both these labels. On their website, Oasis describes itself as "fundamentally different from a church." Members often do not like to be called an atheist church and can be dismissive when it is suggested that their group is similar to one, as seen in this brief exchange I had with an interview respondent shortly after giving a talk about my research at a Sunday morning gathering, in which I discussed such similarities.

Ayah: Oh yeah [*laughs*], they were not very happy when you [said they were like a church], it was so funny.

Amanda: They can say it all they want, but sociologically there are a lot of similarities.

Ayah: Yeah, exactly. I think there is this negative connotation with church amongst atheists… I think that's more of an emotional reaction…so that's why they're more resistant [to the comparison].

This comparison is prevalent, particularly in the media, where "atheist church" has become a buzzword in news reports and op-eds as more of these groups form, with the London-based Sunday Assembly being one of the more prominent examples of this organizational form (Frost 2017; Smith 2017; Bullock 2018). However, this phrase may not be the most accurate one when attempting to describe the Houston Oasis or other nonreligious organizations.

Is an Atheist Church "Atheist"?

Mike said he takes more issue with the word "atheist" than "church," largely because many nonbelievers reject the label for a number of reasons. The word atheist has negative connotations and is associated with untrustworthiness and immorality (see Chapter 2), so people who do not believe in God can be hesitant to use the word in front of others or openly associate with an organization that calls itself atheist. Nonbelievers may also more readily identify with other labels, such as agnostic, humanist, skeptic, or simply secular, seeing these terms as more accurate or preferable (Langston et al. 2017; also see Table A.2 in Appendix A).

The Houston Oasis also prides itself on inclusiveness, encapsulated in one of its five core values: "Be accepting and be accepted." In essence, not only should nonbelievers (who may or may not identify as atheists) feel welcome, but an "accepting," progressive believer should feel

equally comfortable at an Oasis event. Labeling the organization as an "atheist" group, Mike explained, might turn these people off. Some Oasis members expressed that they felt Oasis was living up to this mission. Jenny, for instance, said, "We have believers in Oasis, actually—people who come because they like the talks, they like the music, they like the way people treat each other, you know. They're sort of 'Christian light,' you might call them." Some members also hope that Oasis can be accommodating of interfaith couples. One member, Tobin, spoke about his new girlfriend, a Christian who was searching for a new church to attended. He told me during our interview that he had invited her to an upcoming Sunday gathering:

> I've invited her to come, so she's thinking about it. [I'd be] delighted if she does. That's one of the nicer things about Oasis, is that it's not offensive. Nobody— there's no dogma there. It's almost *anti*-dogma. So a lot of people have come to Oasis and stayed, even though they don't necessarily agree with the humanist approach, because they don't get offended. Nobody talks down to them. Nobody *rants* against religion. Once in a while [someone might rant], but not often. So I'm very comfortable, I've met a lot of friends there.

However, not all Oasians perceive the organization to be as inclusive and accommodating as Tobin. Ayah, who laughed at the group's aversion to being called a church, said, "Sometimes I noticed…it's like [people at Oasis] feel kind of like, I don't want to say conceited, but they consider themselves higher, or more intelligent. And then they are kind of proud to brag about it…. Like if [someone believes] this book is from God, it's like they're naïve." Ayah noticed that people at Oasis sometimes made fun of religious people (which Tobin admitted happens "once in a while"), and expressed surprise and disappointment. Such behavior, she suggested, might turn people away from Oasis more than the term "atheist."

Is an Atheist Church a "Church"?

Some nonbelievers look at groups like the Oasis and see an imitation of religious institutionalization. Drew, who was in seminary training to become a Unitarian Universalist minister, said, "The paradigm [of organizations like Oasis] just screams 'church' to me. And I know they don't want to be a church. They have a speaker, they collect an offering, they have coffee and donuts—you know, there's just all of these things that to me say…'You're a church for atheists.'"

Most nonbelievers at Oasis do acknowledge that the organization does resemble a church in some ways. Jon, a former Oasis participant, admitted, "Churches don't own that [*organizational structure*]. We don't have to *not* do certain things just because some churches do [those] things." Still, Oasians reject the term church because they associate it with dogma, or blindly accepting teachings because they are declared to be true by an authority. However, Oasians do not have a simple, agreed upon, alternative way to talk about Oasis. During interviews, respondents referred to Oasis's Sunday morning meet-ups as "gatherings," "meetings," "services," or "talks." Some even simply spoke about "going to Oasis" and avoided giving the Sunday morning meet-up a label at all.

While stigma prevented some respondents from using the word "atheist," they were sometimes confused about how to describe the organization to others without using the word "church." Some, like Andrea, used it for the sake of simplicity:

> The other day I was volunteering at a center and I said something about Oasis, but I called it church. I said, "Oh, I was at church on Sunday." And [another volunteer] said, "Oh, what church do you go to?" And I was like, "Oh, it's actually not—it's not *really* a church. It's for secular humanists." And you know,

I avoided the word "atheist" there. And she just kind of brushed it off, like, oh,

okay, cool. I don't even think she realized what I was saying. But in that moment

I said to myself, I'm not going to tell her I'm an atheist. She's not going to like

me.

Like Mike, Andrea rejected the term atheist to describe Oasis because she was hesitant to apply

the label to herself in front of others (preferring "secular humanist"), but was less certain about

how to replace the word church. However, Andrea—like my other respondents—did not use the

term "church" in an ideal-typical Weberian sense. They were not referring to the sociological

definition of a church according to the church-sect typology. Rather, when the people I

interviewed used the word church, they were actually talking about a congregation—specifically

of the Protestant Christian variety. People typically think of themselves not as belonging to "the

Christian Church" or another religion or denomination, but rather to a congregation. While

someone may identify with a particular religion, the experience they have with religion is

mediated by the local congregation they belong to. The congregation is the organizational center

for the "belonging" function of religion. Thus, I believe that a more accurate way to describe the

Houston Oasis, and other organizations like it, would be to call them "godless congregations,"

rather than atheist churches.[50] Oasis comes close to saying this in its written materials, calling

itself a "secular alternative to faith-based communities."

COMPONENTS OF A GODLESS CONGREGATION

Despite not wanting to be called a church, Oasians often invoke church language and use

the idea of a "church" (or congregation) to describe its structure and activities, and the reasons

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[50] This is a term used throughout the nonreligion literature, albeit inconsistently.

members give for participating in these groups echoes reasons people may give for joining religious organizations.

Structure

My interview with Mike provided a behind-the-scenes look at the structure of Oasis, which he helped launch using the skills developed as a minister. As Oasis grew larger than its initial 25-person meeting, teams were assembled to help run Oasis's daily operations, which are responsible for different aspects of its operations:

> We have a marketing and media team, which is like our communications team. We have a finance team. We have people that are on the sound and technology team [who record the weekly gatherings]. And each of these teams has a private Facebook group, so we're having conversations throughout the week.… We have a team of people that work on the children's programming, and we have a smaller team that's getting to work on planning stuff for teens.… Sometimes we'll create ad hoc teams, like if we're having a special event…like when we had our big fundraising night back in October [to raise money for a permanent location].

Mike further described his role in the organization and explained that his experience as a minister—"essentially in the community organizing business"—contributed to his ability to manage teams and raise money for Oasis. He also struggling with getting people to stop viewing him as the "pastor" of Oasis, a label he rejected, instead calling himself the "Executive Director of a growing non-profit community. That's it." However, later in the interview he said: "There are still times where people want to have, like, a secular equivalent of the pastor [and talk to me about] their struggles with coming out [as a nonbeliever]. So from time to time my role is to have lunch and coffee with Oasians because it's a life issue that they want to talk about."

Not only does Mike talk about filling the role of a typical pastor or doing the same kind of work he used to do when he was a minister, but he acknowledges that a significant number people in the community want someone to fill that role. In much the same way that people may seek out a religious leader to discuss their spiritual growth or the struggles that come along with being religious, people at Oasis want to talk to someone about the struggles that accompany being a nonbeliever—namely, coming out, or telling people that you don't believe, which can elicit negative reactions from others.

Mike also acknowledged the power of a charismatic leader and the importance of overcoming it for the group to continue growing. When I asked whether he believed Oasis had a critical mass of people who could take over and allow Oasis to continue to grow in the event that he retires or steps down, he said, "I believe we're heading in that direction rapidly.… I talk about it in board meetings and stuff too—I keep saying, hey, if I die tomorrow [*laughs*]. So yeah, it's something I actively try to prepare people for." In June of 2018, Mike resigned as Executive Director of Oasis following an allegation of sexual assault, approximately four years after a similar incident (described below) triggered a lasting rift in Houston's secular community. Oasis seems to have survived the transition; today, its event calendar still includes weekly gatherings, social activities, and volunteer opportunities.

Activities

The structure and activities of Oasis is described as similar to those of the religious congregation Mike used to lead. Jenny, who helped coordinate music at Mike's previous church (and who was actually an atheist at the time), continued working with Mike in the same capacity at Oasis. She claims the agenda and structure of their Sunday morning gatherings are very similar to the ones Mike used at his own nondenominational church:

Amanda: Did [Mike's church] kind of have the Oasis format?

Jenny: Very much, actually, very much…. And, then later on when I heard Mike had come out as a nonbeliever, I saw him for a beer and I said, dude, now I can tell you [I'm a nonbeliever]! He didn't know anything about my belief system… I said, are you still going to do a thing? And he said yeah, I'm going to put a group together. I said, are you still going to use live music? He said sure thing.

These gatherings begin with announcements and an introduction to the musical guest, and close after collecting donations. This process of collecting donations is also much like a religious congregation. While other non-profit nonreligious organizations also encourage donations, members are typically directed to a website or told to drop donations in a box placed at the back of a meeting room. Oasis, however, passes hats around the room as the day's guest musicians play a final song.

Intellectual discussions are the main event of each Sunday morning gathering. They cover a wide variety of topics, including religion and atheism, but also extending to discussions about philosophy, racism, history, law, and art, to name a few. Jenny remarked, "I can learn something completely new every week. It's kind of like going to all those college classes you never went to, all those lectures I missed [out] on… If you ever wanted to know something, somebody there has got an answer. And a good one, and a reasoned one. Something that comes from inquiry, and, you know, from examining facts and things like that."

These intellectual discussions are often given by guest speakers, sometimes prominent figures in the secular community (e.g., David McAfee, Margaret Downey, and Darrel Ray gave talks during my fieldwork), or an Oasis member who wants to speak on a topic longer than the ten minutes allotted to the community moment—I even gave a main talk about the sociology of

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(non)religion and my own research on nonbelievers in Tucson and Houston. When neither a guest speaker nor community member are slotted to speak, Mike will give the main talk.

The Oasis also provides opportunities to volunteer as members of secular group, possibly helping to dispel the perception that atheists are selfish, immoral, or don't care about helping others. When I asked Jenny about Oasis's activities beyond the weekly gathering, she described the many volunteer opportunities available for Oasians:

> We do give blood quarterly as a group, a massive group. We give anywhere from 20 to 50 pints of blood a quarter to the Gulf Coast Regional Blood Bank. We do Habitat for Humanity—people get together, because it is a very humanist thing to do, to want to put a roof over someone's head.… Other folks like to be the speaker of the week or do a community moment. That's how they contribute. Other people make the coffee, you know—that's a very churchy [thing to do], oh my god! Or they bring donuts [*gasps*]. I'll eat those unholy donuts.… Project Cure, which is coming up in a couple of weeks, where we're going to be packaging medical supplies to send overseas. There's the Houston Food Bank…some people are down there every week volunteering. People want to do something, you know, they just don't want to do it in a context of a religion, per se. They want to do it because it's the right thing to do.

While other nonreligious organizations in Houston do coordinate some volunteer opportunities, Oasis stands out as offering the most charitable events.[51]

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[51] Correspondence analysis from Chapter 3 confirms that Oasis is more closely associated with charitable events than other nonreligious organizations in Houston.

Members

Oasis is a diverse group, reflecting Houston as a whole. According to the Kinder Houston Area Survey, a longitudinal study conducted by researchers at Rice University, Houston has become one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse metro region in the United States (Kinder 2019). While discussing Oasis's success, Mike remarked:

> One of the interesting things that struck me at one of our last meetings was just the sheer diversity of [our] group in terms of the age diversity, ethnic background, you name it. I mean, we had people there from their early 20s up to their 70s. And I think that there are very few venues in life where people can have that sort of interaction across [groups]. I mean, it's really the kind of demographic a church would kill to have.

Respondents discussed why they are drawn to Houston Oasis, and their reasons for attending are similar to those that people might give for attending a religious congregation. (See Chapter 5 for further discussion of why individuals participate in nonreligious organizations.) For instance, some people, like Ayah, attend weekly Sunday meetings to make friends:

> It satisfies the need to meet new people and I think it has very little to do with being atheist. It's just an excuse to meet people, to talk to people, to be with people…. I think people who come here Sunday morning, they must feel very lonely [*laughs*]…. It might be stupid and not true, but I just have this feeling that, okay, the people who gather here on Sunday morning, they might be kind of lonely—and it applies to me too [*laughs*].

Such a reason for participation is not unique to Oasis; as discussed in the previous chapter, all nonreligious organizations in Houston offer social events that provide a space for

meeting new people and forging relationships. However, some members do view Oasis as a church replacement: It is a familiar organizational structure that some people find nostalgic and comforting.

> Honestly, the last thing that was holding me back from fully admitting that I didn't believe in God, was the concept of community.… I need church, I need a community that has my back… Because I'm part of their community, they're gonna step up and help me, or they're gonna be there for me and they're gonna create a sense of home for my children. Because it did that for me as a child. Church was a really fun place for me…. And I was really afraid of saying I'm not gonna be part of a church anymore…. Once I realized that I could have community without God, I was gone.

Some respondents also said that Oasis provides more meaning in their lives than the other nonreligious organizations in Houston could, largely because of Oasis's emphasis on charitable activities. Tobin, for example, said, "Oasis is doing a lot of good things. The other groups pretty much sit around and go to meetings." Jenny added:

> [The purpose of Oasis is to] make a material difference in the world we live in. To seriously do something that can be heard, seen, felt, or smelled [*laughs*].… Houston Atheists kind of just flails around, like they have all this membership, all this money, and they have all this potential, and they're not really doing anything with it. It's like, I don't see them building a house…I haven't seen them try to change an unjust law, or—well they will speak out against certain injustices, I think, but I just don't see anything material happening.

None of these are functions that can only be provided by godless congregations, nor are they functions that can only be provided by religious congregations; however, religious congregations have been historically successful at fulfilling those needs, so it is not necessarily surprising that nonbelievers would be drawn to this kind of organization.

NONBELIEVERS' REACTIONS TO A GODLESS CONGREGATION

Adopting a church model appears to have been successful for Oasis; regular members are not bothered by the parallels to religion, and some are even drawn to Oasis because of it. However, some nonbelievers do find the association off-putting. Renee, for example, said she supported the idea of nonreligious organizations and had attended HA and GHSS meet-ups, but could not imagine herself ever attending an Oasis event. She said, "I'm not looking for a substitute church [*laughs*]. I was never looking for a substitute church. I just wanted to be able to converse with people." Aimee, who also supported nonreligious organizations and attended HOH events, thought Oasis took the church model a bit too far:

> I did try out Oasis once, not my cup of tea. It felt too organized…a little too modeled after the church structure, it seemed. They have their meetings on Sundays, they sing songs, and they read from books, and have guest speakers on different subjects. Which really would be fine, but it's too much churchy structure.… It turned me off, big time. And I don't think it's because I am harboring a lot of negative feelings about my time in church, but I just—I want these experiences to be totally separate.

Although mimicking a successful organization may appear to be a way to more efficiently meet goals, this can produce mixed results. For example, one of Oasis's methods of collecting donations by passing hats around the room made some participants uncomfortable.

Mike says they do this because he knows, from his experience as a minister, that it works. Still, an activity that is entirely appropriate and effective in a church setting may not always be an efficient strategy for a godless congregation. One member told me they used to use wicker baskets, but they noticed that sometimes someone would get up and leave at this point during the meeting. The baskets acted as a trigger, bringing to mind religious services for some participants—but this has not been a noticeable issue since switching to hats. In other words, while emulating the church model can be perceived as legitimate in some instances, it can also be taken too far. Frost (2017), for example, also found that people disengaged from godless congregations if they were perceived as too "church-like."

Drew, on the other hand, felt Oasis didn't take the church model far enough, preferring to remain involved in the Unitarian Universalist Church, where he was studying to become a minister:

> The piece that is missing for me with Oasis…there might be some points at which people's hearts are touched in there, and there's a call to action for them to live out their humanist principles in the world, but I don't see where the personal development happens there…. Based on my experience with them, that's the missing piece, is helping people to grow as individuals now that they have found this safe refuge where they don't have to hide and they can be authentic. They do a lot of great stuff—they do stuff in the community, service to the community, they get together for lunches and potlucks, and all these kinds of things, so they build community together well…but I think the piece that I would want to add would just be that personal development piece, so that when people are there they

walk away more equipped and empowered to live with integrity to these

principles that they hold dear.

Although he did not use the word "spirituality" (considering it a very personal term

loaded with religious connotation), this is the word I would use to describe the "missing piece" at

Oasis. With the exception of Spiritual Naturalists, Houston's nonreligious communities did not

provide its members with many outlets for spiritual expression, though some respondents did

report meditating or otherwise engaging in spiritual endeavors on their own.[52]

The most intense, negative reactions to the Houston Oasis came from those who had been

active in the organization but cut off ties when it was revealed that its leader had been accused of

sexually assaulting another Oasis member at a party that was not sponsored by Oasis, but

attended by several members. After interviewing the victim, who came forward with the

allegation several months after it occurred, the Oasis board of directors decided to move forward

without disciplinary action, and Mike would continue in his role as Executive Director. Allison,

an active member of HA and HOH during my time in Houston, and an active Oasian prior to the

allegations against Mike, described the betrayal she felt as the incident unfolded:[53]

> What I enjoyed about [Oasis] was that it was something I could do weekly, and it
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> was a community, which—all of my life I've missed a community. I've had no
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> community. And so having a community…and I thought, oh my gosh, and I have
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> nothing to do on Sunday morning, and I get up early anyway so I might as well.
>
> So getting to be with like-minded people, and the music was a big draw—just

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[52] See Chapter 3 for a summary of spirituality in Houston's nonreligious organizations.

[53] Allison's description accurately corresponded with the accounts of others regarding the incident, as well as documents I obtained from a HOH leader, which included emails, notes taken during the interviews with Mike's accuser, and a letter regarding the incident written by Oasis's board of directors and annotated by HA/HOH members.

everything about it. A lot of people said, oh, it's too churchy…that part doesn't

bother me. I am bothered if I ever go to a Unitarian church and the first 30

minutes is like a church, I mean they sing hymns and they praise whoever and I'm

like, no. But this one, I really liked. And then I felt betrayed.

Allison described a mass exodus—about 30 people in her estimate—at Oasis following

the accusation being brought to the board of directors, which was never publicly announced to

the group at large. Allison noticed the lower attendance at the weekly gatherings, as well as the

absence of Oasis's vice president at the time—an active member in Houston's secular

community—who resigned from his responsibilities at Oasis after learning of the allegations.

Allison heard about the incident a month later, from someone at a Houston Atheists meeting. I

asked her what it was that prompted her to leave the organization for good:

> The way they treated the woman who came forward. *The way they treated her*.
>
> And the way they gave Mike just a hall pass! "Oh, we know you didn't do
>
> anything," [said the board]. What do you mean? Have you read all the articles in
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> the Houston Chronicle pertaining to his past experience with churches? If you
>
> know what he did before, then you should be able to understand that this could
>
> have happened.[54]

Allison was also frustrated with Oasians who sided with Mike and the board of directors rather

than his accuser:

> I still have friends who are male and my age [*seventies*], who would not stop
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> going because they said, "There's no evidence!" I said, I know there's no

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[54] Prior to starting the Houston Oasis, Mike was accused of having (consensual) affairs with married women in his congregation: https://www.houstonchronicle.com/life/houston-belief/article/After-crisis-Living-Word-church-finds-footing-4562492.php.

evidence—there's normally no evidence when you have that sort of a thing happen. But it happens. And they said, "And she didn't come out right away!" I said, "That's what happens! Don't you understand?" No, they don't. They want it in black and white and the wanted evidence. So, I didn't argue with them, I just say whatever, but it made me think less of them.

Allison then described the fallout further, corroborated by other members and leaders of Houston's secular community, both in scheduled interviews, informal chats during meetings, and other documents (see footnote 53). The Houston Oasis board of directors interviewed Mike, his accuser, and several others who were made aware of the situation. After the board's decision that no disciplinary action would be taken against Mike, a letter was sent to those present at the interviews (but not to the community at large) justifying their decision. Some HA and HOH members returned to Oasis before a Sunday morning meeting to distribute annotated copies of the board's letter, with "victim blaming language" highlighted. Those handing out letters claimed they were effectively excommunicated from Oasis, and Mike was banned from attending HA and HOH events. "I felt like it was almost like a divorce or something," Allison had said. "Losing a best friend, because I was there all the time. Doing things with them, and I thought it was something I could do for the rest of my life without having to think about it."

This conflict not only caused conflict at Oasis, but created a rift in Houston's larger secular community. How might we interpret such conflict? In one sense, we could frame this as a conflict about power: preserving power by protecting those who have it. This perspective is illustrated by a quote from Jon, who said, "I guess I chose a side.… I think [the assault] happened. There's no proof and they haven't been able to do anything about it. But I just decided that I don't want to go there anymore, and I don't like the way that [the board] handled it."

Conflict, then, can arise from disagreements in how people in power (in this case, the board of directors) make decisions that can affect the entire community.

Another way of framing this conflict is as one that occurs over values, as illustrated by Allison's account of betrayal. Allison, and others who left Oasis, saw sexual assault as a moral affront that should be handled a certain way. When the board of directors failed to properly address the accusation, conflict ensued. Edgell (1999) also describes conflicts experienced by congregations as "identity conflicts": conflicts that force a congregation to confront fundamental identity questions like "Who are we?" and "How do we do things?" Questions about identity have been shown to drive group conflict in other types of organizations as well (Pratt et al. 2016). Quotes from Tobin and Bert summarize opposing sides of Oasis's identity conflict:

> Some people left and they're not coming back. And I know several of them, and they told me that. [One friend of mine] left, for a while. And then I think he realized that the group is more important than what either did or didn't happen with Mike. And there's no evidence—he was never accused in court or anything like that.… We've done a pretty good job of picking up the pieces and going on, but yeah, we took a hit. Oasis took a hit…especially with women, as you can understand. And some women—and I talked to [another female member] about this, because I figured she'd have a strong feeling. She says, "It doesn't matter to me. I love Oasis and I like what it stands for and I'm going to continue to champion it." (Tobin)

> Listen, I attended Prairie Bible Institute.[55] I saw the way Prairie Bible Institute treated people that called out the rapists, sexual molesters. And it was *identical* to

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[55] A conservative Christian college in Canada.

the way Oasis reacted…and a lot of different churches have this, where there's

been sexual molestation, the church has done everything to bury it, anybody that

dares call the church out is trying to destroy the church, and "Why are you trying

to hurt this good work?" And the people who tried to point out that there was a

molestation issue at Oasis were called out for the exact same things. And then it

occurred to me, [*with disgust*] this is nothing but a church. Anybody that supports

this is supporting nothing but a church. Call it what it is and walk away. (Bert)

These quotes illustrate two opposing responses to the questions "Who are we?" and

"How do we do things?" Is Oasis the type of organization that perseveres through conflict,

making certain sacrifices for the preservation of the organization? Or is Oasis the type of

organization that takes progressive stances and empowers survivors of sexual assault, even in the

face of resistance from those in power? For Tobin, this controversy had the potential to destroy

Oasis, but he (and others, including women) felt that Oasis's mission was too important to

abandon. Bert, on the other hand, felt that the conflict exposed Oasis for what it truly was:

another corrupt congregation. Underlying Bert's commentary is the idea that although godless

congregations look like churches, should be held to a different, higher standard than churches.

When people thought Oasis fell short of that standard, they left.[56]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

An analysis of Houston's godless congregation raises several topics for discussion. First,

what can we learn about nonreligious organizations from a single case in Houston, Texas? The

Houston Oasis is far from the only godless congregation in existence today; it is a fast-growing

international organizational form. There are now Oasis groups in Kansas City, Wichita, and

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[56] For further discussion of why nonbelievers join and leave the organizations they do, see the following chapter.

Toronto. There are four locations in Utah, and a second Houston location near Galveston Bay.[57] The Sunday Assembly—another secular organization that emulates Protestant services—has also launched "franchises" all over the world with varying degrees of success.[58]

In addition to branching out and establishing franchises in other cities, there are also cases of godless congregations splitting. In New York City, members of the Sunday Assembly left to form their own group, the Godless Revival, after the former stopped referring to itself as an "atheist" group, in what has been referred to as a "denominational chasm."[59] (As of 2016, neither group is hosting events.) Fazzino and Cragun (2017) traced the tensions and divisions among some of the largest atheist organizations at the national level; documenting the many successes, failures, and chasms among godless congregations could provide deeper insights into the workings of local nonreligious communities. Other topics of future inquiry to expand analysis beyond Houston include investigating how similar or different godless congregations in different regions are to one another, and the conditions that make some groups succeed while others fail. Factors contributing to the success of the Houston Oasis where other groups have failed[60] might include: having a co-founder who was also a former minister with experience leading a congregation; national media attention; Texas being a particularly religious state, driving people to adopt a salient nonreligious identity; and the presence of a large, preexisting secular community ready to be mobilized.

Second, what might the appeal and success of such organizations, particularly those that so closely resemble religion, tell us about the state of secularization in the United States?

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[57] As is common among new and evolving organizational networks, new "franchises" are continually being opened as others close shop. See https://www.networkoasis.org/locations for an up-to-date list of current Oasis locations.
[58] See https://www.sundayassembly.com/assemblies for current locations.
[59] https://www.huffpost.com/entry/atheist-church-split_n_4550456
[60] Including the tongue-in-cheek Houston Church of Freethought, which held its final meeting in December 2016.

Secularization theory posits that as societies modernize, religion is being pushed out of public spaces. Though theorists do not agree whether religiosity in the United States is declining (this often depends on how it is measured), most agree that it is transforming (Wilson 1966; Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Chaves 1994; Stark and Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000; Gorski 2000, 2003; Bruce 2002; Sherkat 2014). For instance, young people today are more likely than any previous generation to "pick and mix" elements of different religious traditions that appeal to them, without affiliating with any one in particular (Woodhead 2019).

Yet atheism is not a result of secularization. Nonreligious organizations like the Houston Oasis are not necessarily evidence of secularization; rather, they suggest the power of religion in American culture is still pervasive, even if it is transforming. A purely secular society is not a society full of atheists, but rather a society in which religion (and by extension, nonreligion) is a nonentity; because of the relational and reactionary position of nonreligion to religion, nonreligious organizations only survive insofar as religious ones do (Campbell 1971). Secularization, then, is just as much a death sentence for organized atheism as it is for organized religion. The existence and success of nonreligious organizations should be considered alongside those of religious organizations in order to gain a full understanding of the state of secularization in the United States.

Finally, where do godless congregations fit alongside other similar organizations, both religious *and* nonreligious? If we consider godless congregations as boundary cases, their relationships with the religious community should be considered. For instance, do godless congregations compete with boundary religious groups like Unitarian Universalists, Reformed Jews, or progressive Christian denominations for members or other resources? Do godless congregations tend to compete with other nonreligious organizations for members and resources,

share them, or cater to entirely different types of nonbelievers? Oasis may be unique compared to other cases, due to the allegations of sexual assault against its executive director and the ensuing rift in the local community. It is noteworthy that many people did not leave Oasis because they disliked the concept of a godless congregation, but rather because Oasis did not live up to their standards of what a godless congregation should be. Nonbelievers spend much time ruminating on morality, perhaps because they are often stereotyped as lacking a moral code. A lapse in moral judgement from a nonreligious organization is thus treated with particular contempt.[61]

In Houston, nonbelievers have alternative options; many people who left Oasis did not disengage from the secular community completely, but rather chose to spend their time in one of the other nonreligious organizations Houston has to offer. Such movement between local nonreligious organizations should be explored in other cities in order to better understand the benefits members receive from different groups. In the following chapter, I will discuss such movement, including why nonbelievers join the nonreligious organizations they do, why they don't join, why they leave, and factors that affect their degrees of their involvement.

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[61] See Chapter 6 for discussions of morality, and the moral boundaries that nonbelievers construct between themselves and religious others.

CHAPTER 5

MOTIVATION, PARTICIPATION, AND DISENGAGEMENT:

PATHWAYS THROUGH ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Joining a nonreligious organization satisfies a desire for community for some nonbelievers; if nonbelievers are looking for social interaction, intellectual debate, or spiritual fulfillment, they can potentially find it via a nonreligious organization. However, while organizational affiliation could be a sufficient means of achieving these personal goals for some nonbelievers, it may not be for others, and social research has not adequately explored variation in the extent of this involvement. Nonbelievers can participate to varying degrees in nonreligious organizations, including: those who are currently active; who have been active in the past; who have been active, taken a break, and come back to the organizations; who organize; who attend regularly; who attend occasionally; who are members of the online communities but have never attended an event; and those who have no involvement in the communities, on- or offline.

This chapter examines individuals' journeys into organized nonreligion: Why do people become involved in organized nonreligion? What motivates them to stay involved? Conversely, why might people who self-identify as atheists *not* seek out such groups, or choose to leave them after joining? What is the difference between the joining and the non-joining atheist? Have they taken different pathways to nonbelief, which go on to influence their organizational preferences? Essentially, this chapter will explore why some people become (and remain) involved in nonreligious organizations while others do not.

Scholars who study organizations, social movements, and religion have explored variables that affect individuals' participation in voluntary collective action, like demographics (e.g., age, gender, SES, race), availability (e.g., time and energy), and cognitive factors (e.g.,

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motivation and emotions). Nonreligion scholars have also addressed participation in nonreligious organizations, including action within the context of nonreligious organizations, or characteristics of atheists who are involved in secular organizations (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Cimino and Smith 2007, 2011; LeDrew 2013a; Smith 2013). However, studies on active atheism have not fully addressed why people become involved in the groups that they do—when multiple options are available—or the degree of their involvement (one notable exception being Langston et al. 2017). In this chapter, I will describe my respondents' motivations for participating in nonreligious organizations, reasons they do not participate, and why they chose to disengage from the groups. To help explain these differences in organizational behavior, I focus on two variables that are less frequently explored in the nonreligion literature, related to respondents' former religiosity: the religious tradition they were raised in, and the level of devoutness to their previous religious identities.

THEORIES OF PARTICIPATION

Subareas of sociology such as organizations, social movements, and religion provide rich frameworks for understanding why people decide to partake in voluntary collective action. Participation in voluntary associations can vary along lines of education, income, gender, and age (Tomeh 1973; Van Ingen and Van der Meer 2011). Voluntary association membership rises with income and educational attainment, while recent declines in such memberships have occurred most rapidly among the working class (Smith 1994; Li, Savage, and Pickles 2003; Bekkers 2005). Traditional gender roles have often restricted women's ability to devote time to voluntary activities (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1999), though the positive correlation between maleness and voluntary association participation is less clear than it once was (Smith 1994). Other research argues women often control social capital in families and are more likely

to maintain membership in voluntary associations over time (Putnam 2000; Painter and Paxton 2014). Cohort and lifecycle changes also affect participation: Participation peaks in middle age and then decreases, and younger cohorts are participating in fewer formal organizations than previous generations (Rotolo 2000; Jennings and Stoker 2004; Rotolo and Wilson 2004; Van Ingen 2008; Painter and Paxton 2014). Deeper roots and a stronger connection to the local community can also increase volunteer activity (Smith 1994). The most active voluntary association participants may be motivated by purposive benefits, solidarity benefits, enjoyment of leadership and organizing, and ego gratification (Prestby et al. 1990).

In some studies, religious involvement is included alongside other types of voluntary activities, while other times it is treated separately due to the tendency of religious affiliation to be passed on involuntarily to children, who are socialized into their parents' tradition (Tomeh 1973).[62] Participation in religious organizations is also more closely linked to family life variables than other types of association memberships (Chaves 2017). Still, factors that correlate with participation in religious organizations are similar to factors that correlate with other types of collective action, including social ties, education, gender, race, geographic region, and presence and age of children (Wang and Handy 2013; Twenge et al. 2016; Schleifer and Chaves 2017). Childhood socialization remains one of the strongest predictors of religiosity later in life. People are socialized into a particular religious tradition; if they switch, they often don't move very far (Sherkat 2014).

Involvement in voluntary associations can mobilize people to become politically active (Tomeh 1973). Social movement theorists have also attempted to identify determinants of such mobilization and have focused on the roles played by grievances, resources, opportunities, and

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[62] See the section titled "Individual Autonomy" in chapter 6 for a discussion of how atheist parents attempt to handle the transmission of secular worldviews to their children.

identity (Gurr 1970; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tilly 1978; Melucci 1980). Social movement participation is a sequential process (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Oegema and Klandermans 1994; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006), in which both structural and cognitive factors are important in predicting participation in collective action. To be mobilized, people must sympathize with and have positive feelings toward a particular movement, be targeted by mobilization attempts (e.g., recruited via mass media, ties to organizations, friendship ties), be motivated to participate given cumulative costs and benefits, and overcome barriers to participation. As potential activists move through each of these four steps, the pool becomes smaller, resulting in fewer than one in twenty actually participating (Klandermans and Oegema 1987).

Other research confirms people are more likely to participate in social movements if benefits outweigh costs and there is strong identification with a social movement (Simon et al. 1998; Stürmer et al. 2003), and that people are more likely to participate if they have an interpersonal tie to someone involved in the movement (Snow et al. 1980; Diani 2004). Some (e.g., McAdam 1986; McAdam and Paulsen 1993) find that strong identification with a cause is a better predictor of activism than existing social ties. However, others suggest that identification and social ties work in tandem: Identifying with an aggrieved group makes protest participation more likely, and collective participation with aggrieved others strengthens identification and affects future activism (Kandermans 2002; Diani 2004). Some theorists have also addressed the role of emotions in social movements, claiming that emotions like anger, grief, shock, and love can be harnessed strategically to mobilize participants and garner support (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2004; Jasper 2011).

Generally, people who occupy dominant social positions are more likely to participate in voluntary activities due to more resources and stability (Smith 1983, 1994). That atheists as a

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group tend to also belong to other privileged categories (e.g., male, white, educated) may partially explain their willingness to engage in any sort of voluntary collective action. Lack of participation in voluntary association or social movement activity may occur because people are structurally unable due to fewer resources or biographical unavailability, or because sympathy for movement objectives fades (Oegema and Klandermans 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 1999; Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Van Ingen and Van der Meer 2011). In the cases of protest and some forms of political activism, participation is curbed in the form of repression from police and other state actors (Earl 2011).

Research by Putnam (1995, 2000) finds that voluntary association membership has been declining for decades, particularly among face-to-face endeavors. Instead, "checkbook" or passive memberships—in which individuals claim membership in a group yet do not attend meetings—are increasing, along with tertiary associations, which are more likely to require monetary contributions from their members than time. Painter and Paxton (2014) find that declines in civic and voluntary association memberships have continued into the 21st century. It is noteworthy, then, that (some) nonreligious organizations are growing beyond passive membership while other voluntary associations are experiencing declines—including churches. People cite a number of reasons for leaving their religion, including education, misfortune, and politics (Zuckerman 2012). While Putnam (1995, 2000) found decline among all types of social participation, Hout and Fischer (2002) show that the decline in religious affiliation specifically correlates closely with the rise of the Religious Right, suggesting that people began to disaffiliation from religion as it became more closely associated with conservative politics.

Some researchers have attempted to expand operational definitions of participation beyond members-versus-non-members and active-versus-passive members in order to account

for intensity of involvement—which falls on a spectrum (Wollebaek and Selle 2002)—such as taking into account former members (Hooghe 2003) and differentiating between members, participants, donors, and volunteers (Garcia-Mainar and Marcuello 2007). While most studies limit analysis to a single organization, Holmes and Slater (2012) explored patterns and intensity of individual involvement in voluntary associations across the organizations. They found that rather than allowing memberships to lapse, most people accumulated memberships across which they diffused varying levels of time and energy. They also found that members who were unable to commit time and energy to their associations often attempted to show support in other ways, such as contributing financially. Langston and colleagues (2017) show that this type of organizational behavior this is also true of nonbelievers. Their quantitative study distinguished four levels of involvement: secular nonaffiliates (those who were not members of any nonreligious organizations), former members, those who were members of one nonreligious organization, and those who were members of many such organizations. Most survey respondents were nonaffiliates, and more were members of multiple organizations than were members of only one. The authors explored the types of activities that each type of nonbeliever supported (though the authors did not analyze respondents' *participation* in the activities they claimed to support) and reasons for not joining the organizations. I will discuss similar patterns and motivations for involvement common among my own respondents, as well as discussions of disengagement, degrees of involvement, and the role of religious upbringing.

METHODS AND DATA

This chapter explores different *degrees* of active atheism. Research on nonreligion defines "active atheists" as those who have participated in at least one atheist meeting (LeDrew 2013a). While there are important distinctions in self-identification and identity salience among

those who have participated in an atheist meeting and those who have not, patterns of membership and participation are not dichotomous (Holmes and Slater 2012). Langston and colleagues (2017), for instance, further divide active nonbelievers into those who are members of one group, members of many groups, and former members—although they do not investigate motivations for disengagement. Nonreligion researchers have rightly stated that one cannot make assumptions about atheists in general if an entire sample consists of active atheists, suggesting that there could be something systematically different about atheists who are not active and do not participate in organized nonbelief. Most of my respondents were involved in nonreligious organizations to some extent, but I also interviewed people who have never attended any events sponsored by Houston's secular groups. Still, the degree of involvement varied substantially, and I classified respondents into one of seven categories that best reflected their involvement at the time of interviews: "organizers" (founders, leaders, and organizers), "members" (people who attend regularly), "attenders" (people who attend only occasionally or rarely), "rebounders" (people with prolonged gaps in involvement, significant shifts in participation, or notable departures from some nonreligious organizations in favor of others), "quitters" (people who used to attend but no longer attend), "virtual joiners" (people who belong to online communities only), and "non-joiners" (people who have not participated, on- or offline).

For this project, it was important to be in a city with many different types of nonreligious organizations; since I was interested in diversity among organizations and their members, it was imperative to be in a place that offered nonbelievers a variety of options. This chapter will address why individuals join nonreligious organizations, why they don't join, why they aren't more involved despite wishing to be, and why they leave. I find that an individual's commitment and attitudes toward the secular community can vary over time and across organizations.

Houston is home to several nonreligious organizations, and nonbelievers may come to favor one (or some) over others. These preferences are described using quotes from in-depth interviews.

I also suspect that certain characteristics might affect one's degree of involvement. I pay special attention to respondents' religious backgrounds and intensity of religious upbringing to search for any systematic similarities and differences between more and less active nonbelievers. Unlike many other trends discussed in this dissertation, the relationship between former religiosity and current nonreligious organizational involvement did not become clear during the course of interviews—no patterns were discernable until a thorough analysis of interview transcripts. Respondents gave their former religious identities and current (and past) nonreligious organizational affiliations. To aid in analysis, I coded respondents' devoutness to their religious upbringing as "very strong," "strong," "moderate," "weak," and "none." These characteristics (all listed by individual respondent in Appendix A) and their relationships are summarized in Tables 5.1 through 5.5. By exploring the connection between former religiosity and later nonreligious activity, we can gain a clearer picture of what drives participation in nonreligious organizations beyond direct self-reports.

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MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT

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Why They Participate: Organizers, Members, and Attenders

On the topic of participation in nonreligious organizations, most nonreligion scholars have addressed why nonbelievers participate in collective action (Guenther et al. 2013; LeDrew 2013a; Smith 2013, 2017; Zuckerman 2014; Frost 2017; Mastiaux 2017). When discussing their involvement, my respondents gave reasons similar to those found by other researchers. I also found that motivations for joining and participating in nonreligious organization echoed the

event types described in Chapter 3, since events—in an effort to remain appealing to members—reflect what is important to participants.

As introduced in Chapter 3, some organizations will prioritize certain types of events over others, and atheists who want different things or who have certain reasons for becoming involved might be drawn to one group over another. Some nonbelievers want to *socialize* with like-minded people without worrying about the topic of religion coming up or how people will respond to it. Some join in order to *volunteer* as a member of a secular community; not only can secular charities provide nonbelievers in need a place to go without religious strings attached, but by volunteering specifically as part of a nonreligious organization, atheists can also help dispel the common assumption that they are immoral or indifferent to helping others. People may want to join a group specifically to promote a *political* agenda, where they can participate in activities that show support for causes like the separation of church and state, LGBTQ+ and women's rights, or environmental awareness. Some are drawn to nonreligious organizations that offer *educational* events covering topics they find engaging, including religion, philosophy, history, or science. Derrick, whose first nonreligious event was my own talk given at Humanists of Houston's monthly city-wide meet-up, described why he preferred a group like Humanists of Houston over Houston Atheists:

> I saw from looking at [HOH's] schedule that they had more educational [events than HA], and I like to learn—I come from a family of teachers.… I felt like it wouldn't be as weird for me to go and listen to a presentation, which I would like because it's on religion and society, stuff like that. But it wouldn't be, like, let me go sit down with five people who I've never met before and talk about my religious beliefs. It's just a little less awkward [to go to a more formal meeting].

Finally, some nonbelievers still consider themselves to be *spiritual*, which is often described as a very individual concept. Derrick, who does not believe in God but described himself as a "spiritual seeker" since leaving his moderate upbringing in the Episcopal Church, described spirituality as "getting to know yourself and your inner mind…it focuses on what's inside, and it's all about improving yourself and how you live your life. There's not much dogma…it's more about what you can do to make yourself better and be compassionate toward other people." One way this manifests in the secular community, for example, is through meditation, and some groups do hold meditations sessions.

Nonbelievers in Houston have many options if they wish to join a nonreligious organization. Matthew, organizer of Spiritual Naturalists and former president of HOH, described some of the tactics the organization developed in order to draw more people:

> [I learned in my time as HOH president that] if you want certain people to come you have to call them out by name. We resisted having a Women's Club at first because one of the ideas of humanism is that all human beings are human beings, and it's very egalitarian, it's very open—why do you need different subgroups labeled like that?… There used to be almost no women involved at all…having it in the title [of the event] tells people, "This is what this is for," and it makes them feel welcome. And it worked.

Matthew also greeted the emergence of new nonreligious groups in Houston with enthusiasm. After hearing that several HOH members were forming the Houston Church of Freethought, he said, "I wished [the HCoF founder] luck and we talked about it, and I felt that the thing they were doing was different enough in format and focus that I didn't feel like it was competition. I really wanted to see a lot of diversity in the community."

Why They Don't Participate: Virtual Joiners and Non-Joiners

Nonbelief is a more salient identity for some, while for others it is not an important part of their self-concept. These respondents indicated that they were not interested in seeking interaction specifically with other nonbelievers, and often instead spoke of hobbies or interests that were more important to them. Oliver, who was raised nonreligious, said:

> I don't seek out other atheists because I'm at the point in my life where I don't need that as a way of self-identifying. Like, I don't *need to be* an atheist as a way of forming my own identity. I'm an engineer, I'm a husband, I'm a guy who does 3-D printing as a hobby, I do a lot of things. I don't *do* atheism…it's not an activity I need to seek out. It's really just the lack of something in my life…. I don't need to seek out that group as a way of forming my identity or finding other people like me. It's part of what I am but it's not a big enough part of what I am to feel like I need to find a community of people like that.

Others are anti-organization in general. Some nonbelievers, like Padma (a second-generation atheist), draw a comparison between organized nonreligion and organized religion:

> Organizations, I've never liked…I don't particularly like atheist groups any more than I like, say, the Catholic Church, you know? It's all the same to me. I think it's a built-in system of dogma and corruption, one way or the other. Especially if you look at the atheists, what was it, the American Atheists?… Madalyn Murray, yes. You know, she ended up being corrupt too.

Here, Padma is referencing allegations of abuse and fraud by American Atheists founder Madalyn Murray O'Hair. Where some nonbelievers are specifically drawn to secular organizations that mimic the structures and activities of a typical American church, others avoid

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such organizations for precisely this reason. Related to this comparison of atheist groups with religious groups is the fear of groupthink, or somehow losing intellectual autonomy when becoming invested in an organization. Like Padma, Alma feared that nonreligious organizations could be just as prone to dogmatic thinking as religious ones:

> Joining [and being a part of a group] is full of trepidation for me… Even among progressives and liberals and atheists there can be a fanatic element, people for whom that becomes their whole life, and that makes me nervous, and makes me want to shy away. And some of that's, you know, this fear of becoming wrapped up and losing my perspective.

One of the most common responses people gave for not becoming involved was for pragmatic reasons. Respondents often indicated that meetings were not held in convenient locations or they did not have the time. Respondents with young children also found it difficult to attend events, particularly those held late at night or in non-kid-friendly environments like a bar. Katrine said, "I haven't gone to [any atheist meetings] because their events aren't really conducive to people with small children…. Their central group is actually way up on the West side and then they meet at bars on Wednesday night…all of their get-togethers tend to be way on the Northwest side." Others pointed to a lack of resources preventing them from participating (Van Ingen and Van der Meer 2011). For example, Lucia said, "I get limited because I don't have a car. There's a lot more I'd be doing—a lot of networking, a lot of things like that I'd be able to do. I'd be able to go visit my friend in Beaumont [TX]. Or if I had money, I could go visit my family." Lucia's reasons for not participating are twofold: She does not have resources, but even if she did, other priorities would have to be met before she would consider participating in nonreligious organizations.

Some of the nonbelievers I interviewed cited their introversion as a reason for not becoming involved: They were not interested in congregating with a group of strangers, period, no matter the topic of conversation. Others indicated that they meet their desire for social connection with like-minded people through other means, such as work, school, or sports. Zach said:

> I haven't been compelled to find a nonbelieving group to form community with because I get enough intellectual stimulation from being in grad school and being around my colleagues…. I followed a couple [atheists] on Twitter, but that was sort of the extent of my interest. It was like, I'm happy enough to hear you all talk. I don't know that I need to talk with you [*laughs*].

Like Zach, other nonbelievers discussed the benefits they receive from simply knowing such organizations exist, even if they don't take full advantage of what they offer. Shannon, who has suffered from isolation most of her life due to her nonbelief, said, "[It's] been such a huge source of comfort to me, even though I haven't been participating. It makes me feel so much better…just to know that I'm not so completely alone."

Why They Leave: Quitters and Rebounders

Organizational involvement is not a dichotomous variable, as involvement is not always steady. Langston and colleagues (2017) included "former members" in their overview of nonbelievers' attitudes and suggested that future research should explore *why* secular affiliates become former affiliates. Some nonbelievers take breaks from an organization, stop attending one in favor of another, or quit altogether. Some reasons for leaving a nonreligious organization are similar to the reasons people give for not joining in the first place: busy schedules, lack of time and energy, or, as discussed in the previous chapter, similarities to organized religion. Vijay

explained: "I used to be very active but then, just not enough time…. I made some very good friends, too, don't get me wrong. But I just don't want to go back because of inconvenience, more than anything else. I just don't have time."

Aside from these reasons, I noticed that people who left nonreligious organizations often did so for political reasons. For example, left-leaning members sometimes found that the organizations are not always the progressive utopias they expected. Atheist organizations are susceptible to the same systematic and institutionalized inequalities as other organizations, like sexism, racism, or homophobia. Some respondents indicated becoming disillusioned if this was the case:

> I found that sexism occurs even if there are atheists. One time I was [at a meeting] and I paid very special attention to how much attention I got when I had ideas, and I thought that, throughout the meeting, every single time I had something to say, I was interrupted by a guy who himself had something to say, and then we went on and nobody stopped him. And [the facilitator]—bless his little heart, it's not easy to run a group—but he didn't do anything about it, so pretty much I stopped [going].

Along these same lines, several people I interviewed reported leaving the Houston Oasis following the controversy described in the previous chapter. Some nonbelievers, like Jaclyn, could not reconcile the appeal of Oasis with her distaste of where the organization was heading:

> The ritual, the community. I went to church every Sunday for 35 years. It was a comforting, supporting place to meet other like-minded people. And they had interesting speakers, and I met people there that I'm still friends with. It could still be a positive thing if they had a different leadership in place, but it would take an

overhaul of the organization in order for me to go back…. There are bad apples in every group, and I know there are misogynists galore in the atheist community and that's a problem. But to have it hit so close to home, it really hurt.

Likewise, Miriam said, "It is kind of heartbreaking, at a certain level. Not saying that if you leave religion you leave that kind of stuff [*misogyny, assault*] behind, but you know, you hear a lot about that kind of stuff with churches." About two-thirds of those who attended Oasis at some point during or before my fieldwork reported being strongly committed to their previous religious identities. This made the parallel between Oasis and the worst aspects of organized religion particularly disheartening.

The majority of nonbelievers tend to be left-leaning, evidenced by quantitative and qualitative data; likewise, the majority of my own sample were left-leaning or progressive. However, this is not always the case in all organizations—especially at the local level—and people may find that having atheism in common with others is not enough to keep them in the group. For example, Charlie described this experience at a Greater Houston Skeptic Society meet-up:

> I very much like the skeptical views, but nationwide…. I went to one of the [local] meetings, and like, one person that I talked to loved Ayn Rand. And I was like, *Ayn Rand*? No, no, no, I can't deal…. Another person was arguing that every war is justified because technological progress is made throughout all these wars and that's worth sacrificing human lives, and I'm like, *no*. Nothing is ever worth sacrificing human life. I am sorry, no. I'm done with those people, I don't want to talk to those people…. I don't really buy into libertarian stuff.

In Houston, the local skeptics organization tended to attract more libertarian-minded people than the other groups (several prominent skeptics do identify as libertarian, including Michael Shermer and Penn Jillette). Thus, Charlie did not find the local skeptics organization appealing. However, several months after giving this interview, I saw Charlie at an event co-sponsored by Houston Black Non-Believers and the Humanists of Houston; both are groups that align themselves with a more of a humanist, progressive expression of nonbelief. Diversity among nonreligious organizations means that although one group may not appeal to you, you may find another that aligns more closely with your own values and priorities.

PAST AND CURRENT AFFILIATION AND INVOLVEMENT

What explains these decisions—to join, not join, or leave? What variables affect how active someone is in nonreligious organizations? While previous research has investigated the relationship between certain demographic variables and nonreligious organizational activity, less has investigated how former religiosity shapes different types of organizational behavior. I am most interested in exploring the relationship between former religious identity and devoutness, and current degrees of involvement in nonreligious organizations, as I believe past experiences with religion can operate to encourage (or discourage) organizational involvement.

Tables 5.1 through 5.3 describe the variables under consideration: previous religious identification, level of devoutness to previous religious tradition, and degree of nonreligious organizational involvement.[63]

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[63] Unfortunately, tables summarizing the relationships between former religiosity and current nonreligious organizational affiliation (i.e., which groups people are likely to join based on past experiences) are not informative, given the great degree of variation in patterns of organizational affiliation across individuals.

TABLE 5.1: Previous Religious Tradition

Religious Tradition	# (%) of Respondents
Protestant	33 (47.1%)
Catholic	13 (18.6%)
Other Christian	6 (8.6%)
Non-Christian	7 (10.0%)
None/Atheist	11 (15.7%)
	N = 70

TABLE 5.2: Level of Devoutness to Previous Religious Tradition

Level of Devoutness	Description	# (%) of Respondents
Very Strong	Very strong religious identification, frequent attendance, religion emphasized in the home and structured everyday life	21 (30.0%)
Strong	Strong religious identification, steady attendance, religion less emphasized in the home	14 (20.0%)
Moderate	Religious identification, less frequent participation, encouraged but not emphasized in home	20 (28.6%)
Weak	Religious identification not emphasized; infrequent participation, minimal effect on everyday life	10 (14.3%)
None	Raised without religion	5 (7.1%)
		N = 70

As seen in Table 5.1, the majority of respondents were raised in some religious tradition, most commonly Christian traditions. Some were even raised without religion—one respondent indicated that she was raised as a second-generation atheist by atheist parents. The distribution of respondents' previous religious identities roughly corresponds with that of the larger population.

Just because someone is socialized into a religious tradition does not mean that that identification is strong, or that religion is emphasized in the home through activities like family prayers or regular reading of religious texts. Level of devoutness to previous religious tradition is shown in Table 5.2, with definitions for each level. Half of my respondents reported being raised with a strong religious identity, but over 20 percent indicated that religion was not emphasized in the home at all—most of these were people raised without religion, but some were weakly religiously affiliated. The vast majority of respondents who were raised with a religious affiliation were also at least moderately committed to that identity. (For clarity, the tables do not list devoutness according to previous religious tradition; for this information, please see Table A.2 in Appendix A.)

Finally, Table 5.3 lists the seven degrees of involvement and definitions, showing the distribution of nonbelievers in my sample across degrees of involvement. Just over half of respondents are categorized as organizers, members, or attenders, indicating some level of consistency in participation. About a quarter of respondents are not actively involved in nonreligious organizations: They are either not involved in any capacity, or they have only joined online communities but have not participated in any events. The remaining 20 percent have less straightforward trajectories: They have either been active in nonreligious organizations and then left, or otherwise altered their participation patterns in significant ways (e.g., quitting

and returning again, severely scaling back activity, or leaving one group to become more involved in another).

TABLE 5.3: Degree of Nonreligious Organizational Involvement

Level of Involvement	Description	# (%) of Respondents
Organizers	Founders, leaders, organizers, board of directors	14 (20.0%)
Members	Frequent attendance	12 (17.1%)
Attenders	Occasional attendance	13 (18.6%)
Rebounders	Severely altering participation patterns, leaving and returning, leaving one group in favor of another, etc.	6 (8.6%)
Quitters	Had attended in the past but no longer attend	8 (11.4%)
Virtual Joiners	Online members only; may or may not intend to eventually participate	10 (14.3%)
Non-Joiners	Never attended nonreligious events and do not belong to online communities	7 (10.0%)
		N = 70

Tables 5.4 and 5.5 show the relationships between these degrees of organizational involvement and, respectively, former religious identification and former devoutness. Most respondents are scattered across the table, but a few discernable patterns emerge. Table 5.4 shows that nearly one-third of former Protestants fill leadership roles in nonreligious organizations; additionally, most of the leaders and organizers who were interviewed (10 out of 14) were raised in Protestant traditions of Christianity. This is not surprising given that Protestants collectively make up the largest religious group in the United States. That Protestants are disproportionately represented in leadership roles demonstrates the dominance that this organizational form holds, and may explain why many nonreligious organizations (particularly those that more closely resemble religious congregations) continue to emulate Protestant

congregations. Also apparent in Table 5.4, those who were raised nonreligious were the least likely to become involved in nonreligious organizations later in life: Over two-thirds were either virtual joiners or non-joiners. This suggests that previous religious identification—regardless of tradition—is an indicator of future involvement in nonreligious organizations, while nonaffiliation predicts noninvolvement. Previously affiliated nonbelievers, then, use their former religiosity as a resource that informs future organizational preferences.

TABLE 5.4: Current Organizational Involvement and Previous Religious Tradition

	Organizer	Member	Attender	Rebounder	Quitter	Virtual Joiner	Non-Joiner	
Protestant	10 (30.3%)	5 (15.2%)	5 (15.2%)	2 (6.1%)	5 (15.2%)	5 (15.2%)	1 (3.0%)	33 (47.1%)
Catholic	1 (7.7%)	4 (30.8%)	2 (15.4%)	2 (15.4%)	2 (15.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (15.4%)	13 (18.6%)
Other Christian	0 (0.0%)	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (8.6%)
Non-Christian	2 (28.6%)	1 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (14.3%)	1 (14.3%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (10.0%)
None/ Atheist	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (18.2%)	1 (9.1%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (27.3%)	4 (36.4%)	11 (15.7%)
	14 (20.0%)	12 (17.1%)	13 (18.6%)	6 (8.6%)	8 (11.4%)	10 (14.3%)	7 (10.0%)	70 (100.0%)

TABLE 5.5: Current Organizational Involvement and Previous Level of Devoutness

	Organizer	Member	Attender	Rebounder	Quitter	Virtual Joiner	Non-Joiner	
Very/ Strong	9 (25.7%)	6 (17.1%)	8 (22.9%)	4 (11.4%)	5 (14.3%)	2 (5.7%)	1 (2.9%)	35 (50.0%)
Moderate	3 (15.0%)	4 (20.0%)	3 (15.0%)	1 (5.0%)	3 (15.0%)	4 (20.0%)	2 (10.0%)	20 (28.6%)
Weak/ None	2 (13.3%)	2 (13.3%)	2 (13.3%)	1 (6.7%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (26.7%)	4 (26.7%)	15 (21.4%)
	14 (20.0%)	12 (17.1%)	13 (18.6%)	6 (8.6%)	8 (11.4%)	10 (14.3%)	7 (10.0%)	70 (100.0%)

Table 5.5 shows that the relationship between current organizational involvement and past devoutness holds as expected. Respondents who were most involved (as organizers or

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members) tended to have higher levels of past devoutness, although the entirely of those who were the most devoted when they were religious is scattered across the scale of involvement. For instance, among those who were the most devoted to their religious identities, just as many (if not more) were only occasionally or inconsistently involved in nonreligious organizations. Those who were least involved were also the least devout: To those for whom religion was not important earlier in life, nonreligion is also unimportant today. It also appears that while there is a positive relationship between former devoutness and current involvement, it is not as strong as the relationship between former nonaffiliation and current nonparticipation.

CONCLUSION

The evidence gathered suggests that organized, active atheism is a dynamic process. Involvement can be viewed as a fuzzy variable rather than a dichotomous one; nonbelievers can be actively or casually involved in organizations, and can leave or take breaks from involvement. There are many variables that can influence nonbelievers' attitudes toward organized nonreligion, and how willing they are to participate in such groups; this chapter considered the influence of previous religiosity on current organizational preferences.

These data suggest that a strong previous religious identification does not necessarily predict active involvement in nonreligious organizations, though it often helps. Those who previously identified as religious and were devout appear nearly equally likely to be involved or not involved in nonreligious activity. However, a weak previous religious identity—those who only nominally identified with a religious tradition or were raised unaffiliated, and those who were less devout—appears more strongly associated with non-involvement. Without some level of religious socialization, nonbelievers are less likely engage in nonreligious activity later in life.

Still, some of my respondents who were raised without religion were actively involved in nonreligious organizations. For example, Walt—an organizer for HOH and perhaps the single most active nonbeliever in Houston—was not raised religious: "My parents never even talked about religion at all. It was a non-issue…I never even had any conversations with them about religion until, really, just a few years ago." Future research should examine more variables that could impact the degree to which nonbelievers participate in organizations. For example, the role of social ties should be more closely investigated. Unlike in the case of social movements, social networks (i.e., ties to someone already involved in a collective activity) do not appear to be a significant predictor of involvement in nonreligious organizations for most nonbelievers in my data. In fact, sometimes it is the loss of an entire social network that motivates a recent (de)convert to join a nonreligious organization, despite no ties to such groups. The exception to this appears to be among those who were raised the least religious. For people like Walt—who were raised nonreligious or were weakly devoted to their religion, yet still became involved in nonreligious organizations—social ties to a nonreligious organization may be very important. In other words, those who are raised with religion are familiar with the structure, and may seek out secular alternatives to church on their own later in life; however, for people raised without religion, social ties matter more. Indeed, those respondents who were active in nonreligious organizations despite not having a religious background were often introduced to the organizations by someone who did.

CHAPTER 6

THEISTS AS "OTHER"? MORAL BOUNDARIES BASED ON SECULAR VALUES

As more people disaffiliate from religion and claim nonreligious identities, divisions between the religious and nonreligious are more pronounced than ever. Some sociologists have discussed the role boundary-work plays in developing nonbelievers' collective identity (Smith 2011, 2013; Guenther et al. 2013; Guenther 2014). These boundaries have been conceptualized as dividing religious people and atheists into discrete categories, with the fundamental difference between the two groups being belief versus nonbelief. However, researchers have not fully interrogated whether these symbolic boundaries constructed by atheists are based on anything beyond unbelief in God.

In 2006, Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann published an article in the *American Sociological Review* titled "Atheist as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," focusing on the symbolic boundaries that Americans at large place between themselves and atheists. Here, I ask the inverse: How do nonbelievers construct symbolic boundaries between themselves and believers? While belief in God is an important distinction, nonbelievers may draw boundaries in other ways. Do atheists "other" believers unanimously and unconditionally? Edgell and colleagues find that the boundaries Americans place between themselves and atheists are not based on religious belief; likewise, I find that the boundaries nonbelievers place between themselves and the religious may not be based on *nonbelief*, but on secular values: moral stances that are common among atheists, agnostics, humanists, and skeptics, which compose a nonreligious worldview. These boundaries are not based on the *absence* of belief in God, but rather on the *presence* of values that form a moral code that nonbelievers perceive as superior to that of believers.

Americans draw on stereotypes to construct a collective image of the "immoral atheist" (Edgell et al. 2006; Gervais et al. 2011; Cook et al. 2014; Gervais 2014; Edgell et al. 2016). I find that atheists and other nonbelievers are actually deeply concerned with morality; all are aware of the negative attitudes leveled at them, and their narratives show numerous efforts to refute this. I asked nonbelievers about their attitudes toward religious believers and organizations, which revealed several common values that inform the moral boundaries constructed between themselves and outsiders: equality and diversity, the authority of science, individual autonomy, the separation of church and state, and the importance of behavior over beliefs.

ATHEISTS AS "OTHER"

Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) explored the negative attitudes toward atheists in the United States, and the nature of the symbolic boundaries that separate nonbelievers from society at large and mark them as outsiders. The authors suggest that the boundary Americans place between themselves and atheists is not about religious belief per se, but rather religion's place in American civic culture and the values that make a "good American"—values which are largely perceived as being instilled by religion. Thus, a rejection of religion equals a rejection of core American values.

The shifting religious landscape in the United States has kept this relationship between the religious and nonreligious relevant. In the early 2000s, about 14 percent of American adults identified as nonreligious, meaning they did not identify with a particular religious tradition; they may still believe in God or a higher power or identify as spiritual, but do not affiliate (Hout and Fischer 2002). About three percent indicated on surveys that they did not believe in God, but only one percent self-identified as atheist or agnostic. More recent data from Pew and the 2014

wave of the American Mosaic Project place the number of nonreligious Americans between 23

and 35 percent (the range varies depending on the survey and how terms are defined and

measured). The percentage of people who say they do not believe in God jumped to 13 percent,

and self-identified atheists and agnostics composed 7 to 8 percent, with 3 to 4 percent being

atheist (Stewart 2016). This data show that the number of nonbelievers has grown significantly

in a short period of time; in fact, "no affiliation" is the fast-growing religious affiliation in the

United States.

On top of these demographic shifts, much has changed for nonbelievers since 2006. It

was in this year that Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens

(among others) began publishing best-selling books that were not simply "about" atheism, but

were scathing critiques of religion, both as a system of beliefs and as an institution. These books

are credited with launching "New Atheism," a position that not only denies the existence of God

and the supernatural, but views religion as inane at best and deadly at worst (Cimino and Smith

2011; Eller 2010). Since 2006, atheism has become increasingly visible and emerged as a

legitimate social identity, thanks in large part to new technology and social media (Cimino and

Smith 2012). However, this visibility has not eased the negative perceptions of atheists.

Although the boundaries *between* religions are weakening (with religious groups becoming

increasingly tolerant of religious diversity), "the boundary between believers and nonbelievers in

America remains strong" (211). Researchers at the University of Minnesota conducted a second

wave of data collection for the American Mosaic Project in 2014, and the results show that

negative attitudes toward atheists have remained consistent (Edgell et al. 2016), and have

perhaps been further ingrained by the abrasiveness of New Atheism.[64]

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[64] Although attitudes toward Muslims have dropped significantly since 2006 and now fall just below atheists (Edgell et al. 2016).

THEISTS, ATHEISTS, AND MORAL BOUNDARIES

Like other social groups, nonbelievers engage in boundary-work, which refers to how groups construct, transform, and breach social and symbolic barriers in ways that protect their interests and distinguish them from outsiders (Gieryn 1983; Lamont 2000; Dickinson 2012). The result is a "rhetorical boundary" that separates people into groups based on specific characteristics, allowing people to discern the similarities within and differences between the in-group and out-group (Gieryn 1999:5).

Boundary-work can produce both social and symbolic boundaries. Social boundaries are characterized by an outsider group's unequal access to resources and opportunities (Lamont and Molnar 2002). They are often a manifestation of symbolic boundaries, or the "conceptual distinctions" we make when we categorize others, generating "feelings of similarity and groups membership" among insiders (Lamont 2000; Epstein 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002:168). Symbolic boundaries can be flexible and ambiguous; the characteristics or values that insiders are expected to possess can change, and individuals can move from insider to outsider status and vice versa. For example, the symbolic boundary separating atheists from theists is permeable: Atheists may abandon their identity for religious or spiritual fulfillment, or believers can lose their faith and cross over to nonbelief (Guenther 2014; Guenther et al. 2013).

Moral boundaries are symbolic boundaries based on the perceived superior moral character of insiders compared to outsiders (Lamont et al. 1996). In the United States, morality is strongly associated with Christian principles (Pichon, Boccato, and Saroglou 2007; Bader and Finke 2010; Galen et al. 2011), and Americans place a strong moral boundary between themselves and atheists, perceiving them as embracing morally questionable characteristics like criminality, materialism, and self-interest, while seeing themselves as possessing values that

"form the basis of the good society" like trustworthiness, responsibility, public engagement, and patriotism (Edgell et al. 2006:230; Edgell et al. 2016). The differentiation produced by boundary-work leads to an in-group evaluating itself more positively than the out-group, creating feelings of similarity, attachment, and superiority among those who belong (Tajfel and Turner 1985; Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002). Like other instances of boundary-work, atheists attempt to refute this perception and create a favorable public image of themselves by describing values that depict their own morality as equal, or even superior, to that of religious believers (Gieryn 1983; Guenther 2014).

Nonbelievers, like other groups, can construct symbolic boundaries based on cultural habits or socioeconomic status, but moral divisions tend to be more salient than other types of divisions (Lamont 1992; Lamont et al. 1996). This is particularly true for atheists, who do boundary-work both offensively and defensively. Gieryn (1983) discusses some of the goals of science's boundary-work, including the "expansion of authority or expertise into domains claimed by other professions or occupations" and "protection of autonomy over professional activities" (791-92), which Dickinson (2012) respectively interprets as offensive and defensive boundary-work. Nonbelievers' boundary-work could be interpreted similarly: They are expanding their terrain by encroaching on the space claimed by Christians, who have claimed a monopoly on morality (i.e., nonbelievers can also be moral), while simultaneously protecting their own values from attacks by those who perceive them as wrong and immoral (i.e., "secular values" are different from and superior to "Christian values"). Nonbelievers in my sample discussed morality in both ways, but often focused more on the latter.

In order for atheists to claim the moral high ground, they must challenge the boundaries that establish traditional Christian values as the apex of virtue, resulting in a boundary dispute

over which values actually constitute the moral high ground. Like the symbolic boundaries that exist around the field of science, moral boundaries can be "ambiguous, flexible, historically changing, contextually variable, internally inconsistent, and sometimes disputed" (Gieryn 1983:792). Research by Lamont and colleagues (1996) illustrates the ambiguous, disputed, and evolving nature of moral boundary construction. The authors found those who participate in religious lifestyles were more likely than the nonaffiliated to "support moral boundaries." These moral boundaries were measured using variables such as attitudes toward premarital sex and homosexuality and the importance of marriage, children, and God. Today, some of these boundaries may have shifted, as General Social Surveys beginning in 1972 have shown steady increases in tolerance of premarital and same-gender sex, with substantial increases since the 1990s, even among Evangelicals (Pew 2013; Twenge, Sherman, and Wells 2015). Thus, where the majority of people may have previously interpreted certain sex acts as sinful, this may no longer be true; if moral standards are based on consensus, attitudes toward sex may no longer be a good measure of moral boundaries. This illustrates the relative and ambiguous nature of morality.

More importantly, the nonreligious *do* in fact "support moral boundaries," and strongly; however, the priorities and values of the nonreligious may differ from the religious, affecting how those moral boundaries are constructed and the attitudes and behaviors that are considered more moral (Galen et al. 2011). These different values are clear in the case of attitudes toward homosexuality. While a Christian may declare *same-gender sex* immoral and grounds for denying equal rights, the nonbelievers in my sample not only perceived same-gender sex as a nonissue, but overwhelmingly saw the *denial of equal rights* as immoral. By utilizing attitudes toward homosexuality as a measure of the strength of moral boundaries, these two groups are

being judged according to the same criteria. Determining that an answer in one direction is "more moral" and an answer in the opposite direction is "less moral" would imply that Christians have stronger moral boundaries, while boundaries constructed by the unaffiliated are weaker. However, these groups do not agree on which answer to this question is "more moral": each is immoral in the eyes of the other. Sexual preference is not a moral concern for atheists, but discrimination of sexual minorities is. Focusing on traditional standards of morality (e.g., disapproval of homosexuality) obscures the strong moral boundaries that atheists *do* construct (i.e., it is not immoral to be gay, but it *is* immoral to discriminate against someone who is).

Guenther (2014) writes that "atheists challenge morality as defining the boundary between atheists and believers" (2). Additionally, "morality" as perceived by the broader public is often limited to *how believers perceive it*, and atheists' conceptions of morality can differ significantly from their religious counterparts. Atheists do in fact draw strong moral boundaries, which I find prevalent in their conversations about their religious histories and narratives.

While some research has investigated how moral boundaries are constructed by nonbelievers (e.g., Sumerau and Cragun 2016), this chapter will explore the values upon which those boundaries rest. Atheists insist that religion is not necessary to be a moral person and that religious belief has little to do with morality (Guenther 2014; Zuckerman 2014; Sumerau and Cragun 2016). In fact, research confirms that religious beliefs are seldom invoked when people make moral decisions: Vaisey (2009) found that his respondents did not "engage much in deliberative moral reasoning," nor do their "values or beliefs serve as clear, unambiguous motives for action" (1698). Instead, people tend to justify their behavior by claiming to use intuitive decision-making processes, or with consideration of others. If atheists believe religion has little influence on morality, then their moral boundaries should not be based on differences in

belief in God, but rather on values regarding the treatment of others, authority of science, and role of government in religious affairs. Since some religious people may also hold similar values, atheists can develop feelings of similarity and attachment usually reserved for the in-group, thereby expanding their boundaries to include believers in certain scenarios.

METHODS AND DATA

The findings discussed in this article rely primarily on interview data collected during eight months of fieldwork in Houston, Texas, with 70 nonbelievers, most of whom were self-identified atheists. During interviews, I did not ask respondents explicitly what qualities or ideas they valued, or whether they perceived themselves to be as moral as (or morally superior to) religious believers. However, while coding transcripts, it became clear that nonbelievers were quick to represent themselves as moral individuals.

Although respondents might have discussed topics concerning morality at any point during the interviews, two questionnaire items in particular tended to steer conversations in this direction. About halfway through the questionnaire, typically after discussing respondents' religious upbringings, transitions to nonbelief, and coming out experiences, I described for them the social scientific findings regarding attitudes toward nonbelievers: "Several studies have shown that atheists are the least trusted minority group in the country. Out of a long list of minority groups, Americans are generally less willing to accept their own children marrying atheists, vote for an atheist, and they imagine that atheists are less likely to share their vision of American society." I then asked respondents for their reactions to these findings. No one was surprised, and many were familiar with the studies. They often took the opportunity here to defend the idea that nonbelievers can in fact be moral people.

One other question (usually asked shortly after the question described above, depending on the flow of the conversation) tended also to prompt discussions of morality: What are your feelings toward religious believers or religious organizations?[65] In answering this question, respondents often engaged in "defensive" boundary-work: vigorously defending their own morality while condemning their condemners as the group with lower moral standards. Because of the way these questions were asked, and the inductive nature of this project (i.e., allowing discourse on morality to emerge should it be salient, rather than asking about it directly), much of the conversation about morality focused on how nonbelievers' values diverged from believers—with emphasis on the ways in which believers' moral stances were actually inferior, or even immoral.

RESULTS: BOUNDARIES BASED ON SECULAR VALUES

When the people interviewed for the first wave of the American Mosaic Project spoke about atheists, they described people who were arrogant, elitist, confrontational, hostile toward believers, and inherently untrustworthy. Gervais and colleagues (2011; 2014) suggested that these feelings are driven by the uncertainty that surrounds what atheists actually believe: Americans see nonbelief primarily as a rejection of religion (i.e., a rejection of Christianity), and therefore a rejection of the positive values that are associated with it. In other words, we distrust atheists because we assume they do not follow our agreed-upon societal norms that are largely perceived as being instilled in us by religion.

Nonbelievers are aware that they are largely perceived as lacking a moral compass. As a result, their narratives are often interwoven with discussions of morality, and they are sometimes

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[65] An admittedly broad, open-ended question. Prior to conducting pilot interviews for this project, I was unsure whether to keep this question in the interview guide (found in Appendix B), thinking it might be too vague to elicit any useful information from respondents. However, I found responses too rich and engaging to justify cutting the question.

defensive. Instead of focusing on their lack of belief in God, nonbelievers are usually more interested in conveying to outsiders the myriad of things they *do* believe. Amara, for example, explained:

> I had a professor tell me once, "You're gonna get more in life talking about what you're for than what you're against." And that really sparked something with me. And I realized I'm *for* separation of church and state, and I'm *for* the betterment of all humans…just with saying "a" in front of anything—literally, in our English language, "a" meaning "not," right? Then, let me just say what I'm for.

Based on in-depth interviews, I have identified five themes that were common in respondents' explanations of "what they are for": promoting equal rights and celebrating diversity; relying on reason and evidence to make sense of the world; individual autonomy and freedom of religion; the separation of church and state; and prioritizing behavior over beliefs when judging someone's character.

1) Equality and Diversity

Nonbelievers value equality and diversity, which they often communicated through involvement in nonreligious organizations. For instance, Jorge expressed that he was drawn to nonreligious organizations like the Houston Oasis because they "champion human rights," and the Oasis, along with Houston's other nonreligious organizations, often hosted talks or participated in events highlighting social justice issues. For example, during my fieldwork, the Houston Oasis invited Darrel Ray to discuss his book *Sex & God: How Religion Distorts Sexuality* at one of their Sunday gatherings; the Humanists of Houston participated in a 5K hosted by the Houston Area Women's Center, and a protest in support of Raif Badawi,[66]

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[66] https://www.amnestyusa.org/cases/flogged-for-blogging/

organized by Amnesty International and held outside Houston's Saudi Arabia consulate; and Houston Black Non-Believers held a panel discussion led by four black LGBTQ+ individuals during their recurring event, Empower Hour, focusing on social issues of particular interest to black atheists.

Since moral boundaries are ambiguous, nonbelievers would often use defensive boundary-work when discussing issues involving equality, attempting to take over moral terrain from believers and positioning themselves as the ones who are actually morally inferior. To differentiate themselves from religious believers, nonbelievers sometimes associated religion with intolerance, particularly homophobia and sexism. When nonbelievers discussed equality, they correlated their nonbelief most directly with social justice causes like LGBTQ+ and reproductive rights, more so than other groups affected by inequality, like racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, or the working class—likely because some religious groups are more vocal in their opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion than they are regarding other social issues, as a result of religious beliefs. For example, Kristin said, "I think that there are definitely a lot of social issues that [exist] because of religion that I completely disagree with…I would never vote against gay marriage, you know, I would never vote against women's rights or things like that."

The perceived intolerance of conservative religious communities is a major point of distinction for nonbelievers, and they generally recognize the negative effects such intolerance can have on those who do not conform to standard religious expectations. Alma, a bisexual respondent who has been in a same-sex relationship for over 20 years, said, "God forbid I'd had homosexual feelings that I'd recognized that I couldn't tame down [when I was a Mormon]. Because I'm bisexual, and I liked dating boys, I was fine. But if I had recognized [bisexual

feelings], it would have been devastating, because there's such intolerance." Tracy felt that religious organizations provided a cover for bigotry, saying, "I feel like people hide behind religion and use it as a tool of hate…. If they are against equal rights for anybody then they hide behind religion rather than saying, you know, I don't want equal rights for gay marriage. They say *God* doesn't want this."

Gender equality was also a common social issue discussed by nonbelievers. Katrine said, "My husband is Norwegian and I'm also fascinated by Vikings, because Vikings had full gender equality until the Christians found them. Christianized them. And then all that gender equality went right down the drain." Regardless of this statement's historical accuracy,[67] it shows that Katrine sees Christianity as a regressive force, synonymous with sexism and patriarchy. Wendy even described the Catholic Church's stance against birth control as "evil." She continued, "I say that as someone who has a child. The idea that women are expected to go through that, however many times it happens, with no say about it is a horrific crime against humanity."

Formerly religious individuals also spoke about a connection between religion and inequality, sometimes claiming that leaving religion left them more open-minded. Mandisa and Rafi, both ex-Muslims, described how their religion acted as a lens through which they judged others as inferior. Both also described how their loss of faith allowed them to see non-Muslims as equals. Mandisa said, "I found that when I was part of that organized religion [*Islam*], I just unconsciously judged people. I never acted upon my feelings or my judgment, but I did judge people, which I really did not like. But after I completely abandoned religion, I was very happy because I could see people as they are. Not through my belief system." Similarly, Rafi said:

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[67] On which I cannot confidently comment, although some research does suggest that many Viking Age Scandinavian women did enjoy more power and freedom than women of other societies at the time (Gräslund 2001), and which may have been diminished in the wake of Christianization (Wicker 2012).

Since I started [questioning religion]…one thing that I realized religion does is it teaches you how to differentiate between people. It's like, "I tolerate you as a Muslim—we are peaceful people, you know—and you're just as good, we don't want to tell you it's wrong. But by the way, my God made you, just remember that [*laughs*]. Your God is not true; my God is true." And in some ways that will also make me think that I'm better than you—you're just lost. So I'm superior to you.

According to social theorists, differentiation like this leads to an in-group evaluating itself more positively than the out-group, ultimately creating feelings of superiority among insiders (Gieryn 1983; Tajfel and Turner 1985; Lamont 1996; Lamont and Molnár 2002). And according to Rafi, religion is one of the first institutions to teach people how to differentiate, often at a young age. He even went as far as to suggest that religion trains its adherents to differentiate along other lines as well, such as race:

Now, this is just my opinion, I'm not an expert—but I think that's where racism comes in as well…whenever you see [race], the first thing you do is you kind of use that same [thought process] to differentiate. "Oh yeah, he [doesn't look like me], I think there is something wrong," right? So equality is not there, because you've been trained to differentiate. After I came out of religion, this is the one thing I noticed—that I wasn't differentiating anymore. Everybody was equal. Everybody was even.

Without religion, Rafi felt he could better appreciate diversity and see outsiders as equals. Other nonbelievers also expressed that diversity was something they valued, and some commented that the nonreligious organizations they participated in have exposed them to more

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diversity than they would experience elsewhere—including in religious congregations, which tend to be homogenous (Emerson 2008). Mike, the Executive Director of Houston Oasis at the time, observed:

> One of the interesting things that struck me at one of our last meetings was just the sheer diversity of that group in terms of the age diversity, ethnic background, you name it…. And I think that there are very few venues in life where people can have that sort of interaction. I mean really, it's the kind of demographic a church would kill to have. So I hope that is something else we will be able to provide [for our members]—a kind of really rich diversity.

Likewise, Karl, who regularly attends meetings for the Skeptic Society, expressed deep appreciation for such diversity, and the positive interactions he has had with people who are different from him: "I have encountered members here that I doubt I would encounter anywhere else. This includes transgender people and stuff like that. I just don't see that type of person in my [blue-collar] workforce, and then I come to find out that they are real people just like anybody else."

While nonbelievers were quick to point out how believers could be intolerant of diversity and opposed to equal rights, they would often acknowledge that not all believers fall into this category. For example, Drew—who was training to be a Unitarian Universalist minister at the time of our interview—described his perception of how Houston's religious community was responding to Houston's Equal Rights Ordinance (HERO), which would increase anti-discrimination protections for sexual minorities:[68] "[HERO is] a big problem for a lot of religious people in Houston, and people asked questions like, 'How can you be for this when it approves

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[68] HERO was rejected by Houston voters in November 2015 by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent.

of sinful behavior?'… But I know Christians who were in favor of equal treatment for all people under the law." Drew emphasized that it was "only a certain sector of religious people" who opposed HERO, but that they were the most vocal.

2) Scientific Authority

Nonbelievers stress evaluating all types of beliefs using logic and evidence (Guenther et al. 2013), and many of my respondents expressed that they personally believed science and religion to be incompatible. In the absence of supernatural explanations, nonbelievers view the scientific method as the standard through which all knowledge and information should be processed. Some, like Mina, attributed their transitions away from religion to science: "I read a book that was just completely a science book, it was on genetics…*The Selfish Gene*[69] it was called, [about] how we came about and how genes work. And I was just kind of like, well that clears up a lot of questions that I had about the 'why' and 'what's the point' and 'why are we here' and those kind of things." For some nonbelievers, science introduces a new way of perceiving the world—one that all nonbelievers believe is superior to a supernatural worldview. Jon, an active member of the Greater Houston Skeptic Society, said, "What [the GHSS wants] to do is to get people thinking logically. We don't want things based on a superstition, guesswork or common knowledge. You want the truth—*how* is this working, *is* it working…. We just want life to make sense, and we want truth and facts. I want evidence, not pseudoscience."

Of course, nonbelievers are not the only group to hold this view, as most Americans recognize the legitimacy of scientific authority. Gieryn, one of the first sociologists to articulate the concept of boundary-work, wrote that science "often stands metonymically for credibility, for legitimate knowledge, for reliable and useful predictions, for a trustable reality: it commands

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[69] Written by Richard Dawkins, a respected evolutionary biologist long before being christened one of the "Four Horsemen of New Atheism."

assent in public debate. If 'science' says so, we are more often than not inclined to believe it or act on it—and to prefer it over claims lacking this epistemic seal of approval" (Gieryn 1999:1). Even theologically conservative Christians, who may reject scientific consensus on theories like evolution or the Big Bang, recognize the authority that science commands and sometimes employ scientific rhetoric in creative ways (Trollinger and Trollinger 2016).[70] Still, my respondents often discussed their acceptance of scientific consensus—evolution being the example that was overwhelmingly discussed by my respondents, though some also referenced the Big Bang and climate change—as a point of significant distinction between themselves and the religious; any failure of believers to do the same was often framed as a sort of moral shortcoming.

Constructing a moral hierarchy based on differences in values, thereby establishing "superiority over an out-group," is an inevitable consequence of boundary-work (Tajfel and Turner 1985:16-17). In her book *Money, Morals, and Manners*, Lamont (1992) described how her upper-middle class respondents differentiated between themselves and those of lower social strata: "They describe the types of people they are interested in as people who 'have a certain intellectual level'…and who 'think well, or try to think well, rigorously, logically, with continuity. They are superior to those who think in a discontinuous way or who refuse to think'" (91). The nonbelievers in my sample (who also tend to be more highly educated than the general American public) expressed similar sentiments toward believers, particularly regarding those who "refuse to think." However, during interviews, they were hesitant to claim that religious believers as a collective had a "certain intellectual level" that was below their own—perhaps out

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[70] Also see https://creationmuseum.org/creation-science/ for examples of how biblical literalists use scientific authority to legitimate their claims.

of awareness that such an attitude would play into atheist stereotypes, making them appear smug or elitist.

Yet, nonbelievers still seemed prone to differentiating themselves from believers on the basis of attitudes surrounding science, reason, and evidence. Thus, instead of describing believers as unintelligent, they were instead described as simply having failed to thoughtfully examine their religious beliefs. Encapsulating this, Jon said, "I think about them as just caught in a mass delusion. I don't think there's anything wrong with their intelligence or anything because of that. I know that smart people can also be religious. They just haven't used critical thinking when it comes to religions." Indeed, some research has suggested that attitudes toward evolution and creationism are more contingent on religious identity (and their corresponding social networks) than on educational attainment (Baker 2013; Hill 2014). Jon, like other respondents, observed that believers' commitment to their religious worldview seemed to preclude them from engaging in other types of thinking (i.e., evidence-based) that could lead them to question their faith. Renata likewise stated, "I wish that [religious people] had the same sort of access to information that I've had accessible to me, that made me realize that I just don't believe in a God…. If people were presented with these arguments for, you know, how there's so little evidence, or there *is no* evidence that God exists, I think, maybe, they would change their minds to what they're so blindly believing." She described religious belief as a kind of "inertia" set in motion by childhood religious socialization: "All my friends are a good example—these are really educated, intelligent people, but their parents are members of a church or a particular religion, so they just keep doing it because they've always done it, and just haven't taken the time to kind of question and think about the reasons why they're doing it."

Many of my respondents were formerly religious, and this is one reason they hesitated to categorize all believers as less intelligent. Gabe, an ex-Mormon, said, "I try not to think of religious people as being stupid, because I was, at least outwardly, a religious person for so long, and I don't consider myself to have been stupid…. They've got their life experiences that's led them to some conclusions that I feel are silly conclusions, but I don't hold it against anyone." Jaclyn also drew conclusions similar to Gabe, Renata, and Jon:

> I draw the line at saying that they're less intelligent, but I think a lot of people are like I was, and went to church and believed in God because that was what they were brought up with and it's comforting, and life is too busy to question. And they just go along and get along without even thinking about it. It's leading an unexamined life, I would say. If you're a religious person, you basically haven't given that much thought to what it means.

Formerly religious respondents were also likely to have close family or friends who remain religious, and were therefore reluctant to describe believers as either unintelligent or unreflective. For example, Andrea described her mother's reaction when she disclosed her nonbelief and called herself a freethinker: "I saw my mom's face kind of scrunch up. And I was like, I don't want to say that, 'Because I'm a freethinker, my mom is trapped in faith,' or anything. I don't want to say the opposite of non-freethinkers, right? That they can't think freely. So I don't like the term freethinker."[71]

Although they avoid outright offending religious believers by calling them unintelligent, my respondents use words and phrases that are not particularly flattering, suggesting believers take a substandard approach to interpreting the world: "superstition," "pseudoscience," "mass

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[71] While I will use the term "freethinker" if the quoted literature or an interview respondent does so, I generally avoid the term for similar reasons.

delusion," "blindly believing," "silly conclusions," and "leading an unexamined life."
Nonbelievers, on the other hand, draw a strong connection between science, reason, evidence, and morality. In his book *Living the Secular Life*,[72] an amalgamation of in-depth interviews from several research projects, Zuckerman (2014) describes a nonreligious worldview as "legitimate, humane, and honorable":

> Global warming increasing inequality, terrorism, despotism, extremism, international disputes, hunger, wanton violence—these problems will best be solved by the very things that secularity is intrinsically predicated upon and ultimately grounded in: a this-worldly, *empirically* driven, *rational* frame of reference…all of these are problems of this world, and their only solutions will come from this world as well, namely: human willpower, *rational inquiry*, *critical thinking*, *scientific* discovery, *data-based* decision making, *evidence-based* policy making, and frequent dashes of hope, empathy, optimism, and creativity (221-22, emphasis mine).

However, my respondents did often acknowledge that not all religious believers reject scientific consensus or follow religion without examining why.[73] Charlie specified, "I have a bad problem with [religious people] if they believe something that has no basis in reality…you know, evolution, age of the earth [*i.e., established scientific theories*]. If you don't agree with the

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[72] Written for a popular audience with a goal of "disabus[ing] Americans of their dislike or distrust of the secular" (10), though in my opinion the book is more likely to resonate with nonbelievers looking to feel empowered and to validate their own views and experiences with those of other nonbelievers.

[73] I interviewed a man in Tucson in 2012 for another project (the questionnaire was very similar to the one I used for this project, minus questions about organizational involvement), who articulated this latter sentiment beautifully: "When I ask religious friends, 'What is it that you get out of what you do? Why would you believe in the bible? What does that do for you? What do you take away from that?' I get clichés. I don't get anything real…. My wife is religious…. I asked her the same questions that I would ask anyone, about what they believe in and why they believe in it and what they get out of it and the whole nine yards. She had answers. There weren't any right or wrong answers, but she had considered it, at least, and had answers as to what she got out of it. And mostly, it was more than she put into it."

consensus on that, then I have problems with that." Research by Baker (2012) finds that only a small proportion of Americans believe religion and science to be incompatible. Likewise, Ecklund and Scheitle (2018) find that while the relationship between religion and science can be fraught, religious people are not as overwhelmingly opposed to science as many atheists assume.

3) Individual Autonomy

Nonbelievers—particularly self-identified atheists, who tend to be more outspoken—are often stereotyped as hostile toward religion. This attitude has likely been exacerbated by the antitheism espoused by the New Atheists who suggest the world would be a better place without religion, which is described as inherently violent and undeserving of automatic respect (Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006; Silver et al. 2014). In the subtitle of his 2007 book *God Is Not Great* Hitchens proclaims, "Religion poisons everything." However, despite often feeling belief in God was illogical, irrational, or ignorant, nonbelievers firmly expressed that all individuals should be able to freely choose which religion to follow, if any at all. Padma, for instance, was indifferent toward the idea of people holding supernatural beliefs: "My attitude [towards religion] is a little more laidback…I'm more 'It is what it is, just let them believe.' People can believe all sorts of crap, let them believe! It's got nothing to do with me. It's not gonna hurt me any."

There was one caveat to this position: One's religious beliefs should not impede on the personal autonomy of others. The nonbelievers in my sample describe religion as something people should keep to themselves, and something people should feel free to practice (or not practice) as they choose. Gabe said, "I try not to take a superior attitude toward religious people, as long as they're not being pushy and overtly religious." His wife, Carrie, added that such pressure and "overt religiousness" might compel someone to stay involved in church, even if they wish not to:

If religious people are truly happy and they find meaning and peace in what they're doing then I'm happy for them, but if they're feeling guilt-ridden and unhappy and stuck and forced to live a role that they don't enjoy or they feel is not for them—for example being a stay-at-home-mom when they really don't want to do that, having six kids when they really only want one or none—that makes me sad, that they're stuck in a role that they feel they have to submit to whole-heartedly and do something that they don't want to do.

While Carrie recognizes a coercive tendency in religion, she also clarifies that being religious and following religious doctrine should be a choice.

Respondents were also opposed proselytizing, from believers and nonbelievers alike. Aimee said:

Evangelism bothers me. I don't like anybody telling anybody else what to do, or what to believe in. Obviously that's not exclusive to religious organizations, because sometimes it's even just regular activism, for anything. Like, even though I may agree with a certain cause or organization, I feel very uncomfortable getting out there trying to tell people that they should support it or they should believe it or get behind it, or the opposite.

Again, as long as someone is not imposing their beliefs on others, and those beliefs and practices are not harming others, nonbelievers remain overwhelmingly neutral toward religious individuals. Aimee added that she would take little notice of religious organizations if they "just existed as churches," rather than focusing on recruiting converts and "being involved in every aspect of society" in ways that adversely affects groups of people already marginalized by wider society. An example of this is individuals in hospice care, who are often cared for by nurses who

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are religious. Jenny, who was in the midst of making a career change to become a hospice nurse, described some of the issues she saw in the profession:

> I always sort of resent it when religious people go and pray on people who are dying and try to get them to convert, change, promise, pray, repent—blah, blah, blah. And I think that's the last thing they need, you know. I'm there to carry out whatever their wishes are on the piece of paper, regardless of what it is. I'm there to facilitate something, not influence. And I really think that the hospice profession could use a lot less religious influence. I don't have to win anybody over to my side to make their passing more comfortable.

Other nonbelievers expressed disdain for religious extremism that could interfere with the everyday lives of those outside the religion. Andrea shared an opinion which she also held when she was a practicing Catholic: "Faith is healthy, it helps people understand things that they can't control and can't understand. It's different for everyone, but it's not good when taken to the extreme. Westboro Baptists—you know, they need to go to hell." In much the same way that the most "extreme" atheists are disliked by the general public, so too are the most extreme Christians.

Nonreligious parents often talk about personal religious freedom when it comes to their children. Most of the nonreligious parents I interviewed were nonbelievers when they raised their children, and some had young children at the time of the interview. Previous research has found atheist parents are often not hostile toward religion, but rather uninterested (Altemeyer 2010). Similarly, I have found that while nonreligious parents do raise their children to be secular, many claim they are not raising atheists, and stress that the decision is up to their children as they age.

Some parents, however, found that religious family members would impede on this freedom. Kristin discussed the struggles of raising secular children with religious grandparents:

> My mom at some point even told [my daughter] that—insinuated that I don't care about her because I don't pray for her. So that was this big like, you know, what the hell! How dare you say that thing. So there's always been this back and forth with them trying to kind of push the limit and cross the line, and try to sneak in and teach her certain things, and then me pushing back and being direct with them and saying, don't do that again [*laughs*].

And although they were not raising their children to be atheists, Tracy acknowledged that her children would likely follow the example set by her and her ex-husband, saying, "We're just open with them. They're obviously exposed to Christianity all the time, and we just taught them that, you know, we don't believe in God…. We haven't told them, 'You can't believe in God,' but of course they're going to follow what we don't believe in, I guess. So we'll see. I don't see them suddenly deciding to believe in a god, but we'll see."

Gabe and Carrie provided one of the most compelling narratives articulating the stress and ambivalence that often accompanies raising secular children while simultaneously encouraging them to develop an independent worldview (see Manning 2015). Gabe and Carrie were raised Mormon and began questioning their faith (Gabe first, and Carrie followed) when their children were young. Both were involved in their church's children's ministry, but eventually Carrie felt hypocritical teaching the children lessons that she didn't believe:

> So we went and saw the bishop and we're like, "You know, thank you for calling us to work with the kids, but we feel like we can't do it anymore because we've been learning some things and we don't believe it to be true." And you know, of

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course he's completely surprised because we're, like, this perfect Mormon couple. He's very nice at first, asking us questions and whatever, and we were just completely honest. And then he starts telling us that the devil is influencing us and, you know, just being ridiculous. Like, really? *The devil is influencing us?* No, that's not what's going on. So then we get defensive, and we're like…"We just wanted to let you know, we weren't just going to stop going without any explanation. We wanted you to know that we don't believe it and we don't feel comfortable teaching, but we might come back and bring the kids." Because still, you're so brainwashed. You're like, well, how are the kids going to learn how to be good people? And you know, how are they going to have that socialization or whatever, ethics and all that. Because we're still brainwashed to think that you get that from church.

Instead of taking their children to church every week, Gabe and Carrie turned Sundays into a family outing day: "Mormons don't play on Sunday," Carrie explained. "They don't go out to eat, they don't go to concerts…you don't spend money or do anything. It's the Lord's day. And so then we started going bike riding and having day outings, and the kids didn't even miss [church]."

However, Gabe and Carrie began to worry about their standing with the Church as their oldest daughter approached her seventh birthday. Mormon children are typically baptized by the age of eight, considered the "age of accountability" at which point children are able to express their faith and take responsibility for their sins. According to Gabe, most Mormon children are baptized at seven. "When you turn eight," he explained, "then it's the youth—the children's group—it's their responsibility to make sure you get baptized. When you turn nine, now you've

got an unbaptized child, and the missionaries—it's their job to get you baptized." Gabe, who had

baptized children as a missionary, understood exactly what would happen if his and Carrie's

children remained unbaptized:

> Gabe: When I was a missionary in Tahiti, most of my converts were nine-year-
> olds…I baptized the hell out of Tahiti's nine-year-olds. Man, those nine-year-olds
> were so—
>
> Carrie: They were prime!
>
> Gabe: Right, just add water, really! [*Sarcastically*] The Holy Ghost was so strong
> with those nine-year-olds, it was amazing.
>
> Carrie: It's horrible!
>
> Gabe: And that was *not* going to be our eight- and nine-year-old. We did not—
>
> Carrie: We didn't want anybody proselytizing to them, telling them that God
> would be sad if they didn't do what he had told some old man in Salt Lake City
> that they had to do.

Though Gabe and Carrie had stopped attending church with their children, they were still

members. They remained friendly with the local Mormon leadership, including missionaries,

who would frequently stop by their home for visits. These meetings, however, became

increasingly concerning for the couple:

> Gabe: I told the missionaries one time when they were here, it's like, we can chat
> all you want. We can talk about any topic you want, including religion. But if you
> start preaching to my kids, then the cats will eat your soft bits and we'll grind up
> your bones to filter the pool [*laughs*]. So no topic is off limits, but you don't—
> you're not gonna—

Carrie: Preach to our children!

Gabe: —try to convert our kids…we only had a year left before our daughter [turned eight and] became a brainwashing target. We decided it was time to cut the umbilical cord. So we sent in our resignation letter to Salt Lake City—

Carrie: Which is a huge deal! Like, just deciding not to go to church anymore, you can say you're inactive. But if you want to go back, they'll welcome you back with open arms, whatever, all is forgiven. But if you get your name taken off the roll in the Church…that makes us basically as if we were never Mormon… We just felt so strongly about our children not being a target, and that we were so brainwashed [from our time in the church] that we wanted them to be able to make their own decisions. If someday they decide when they're old enough and they've researched it and they've decided rationally that they want to follow some organization, that's their choice. But they won't be brainwashed as kids. So. We are officially no longer Mormon…there's been no contact since then.

Since officially leaving the Mormon Church, Gabe and Carrie have become involved in several nonreligious organizations around Houston and often plan family-friendly activities like camping, beach events, and museum visits. Their children also spend a week every summer at Camp Quest,[74] a secular summer camp with locations across the United States. Even though Gabe and Carrie had taken drastic steps to remove their children from the influence of the Mormon Church, and the family's extracurricular activities normally revolve around the local nonreligious community, Carrie hoped her children would still be exposed to a variety of worldviews:

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[74] https://www.campquest.org

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I don't expect that my opinions and my education is enough for my kids. I want them to be exposed to a wide variety of ideas and ways of dealing with the world and overcoming things, and so I want them to hear lots of idea. Even when we weren't religious anymore, I still kept sending them to Methodist preschool because I *want* them to know what's out there. I want them to know the bible stories and I want them to understand, you know, what the religious views are of the community at large. And it's important…to be able to relate to people and understand their position, and not just think, oh, that's ridiculous.

To summarize, most of my respondents were indifferent toward the idea of individuals practicing their faith in the context of their own lives, contrary to what the general public might suspect based on negative stereotypes of atheists. Some conceded that overt religiousness was not necessarily a feature of religion as a whole. Katrine, originally from Massachusetts, said, "New Englanders are very practical people and you don't—when I was growing up at least, you don't spout off about your religion. It's what you do with your family. It's kind of private, not for public consumption." In Texas, however, many nonbelievers expressed concerns that individual evangelism could transform into legalized discrimination.

4) Separation of Church and State

Modern understandings of the constitutionally guaranteed separation of church and state date back to the 1947 Supreme Court decision *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing,*[75] whose majority decision evoked Thomas Jefferson's phrase "a wall of separation between church and state" (Blankholm 2014). However, religion and politics have not always remained clearly separated. Beginning in the 1970s, the Religious Right rose to prominence

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[75] The case argued that families should not be eligible for a program that offered tax-funded reimbursement if children took public transportation to private (i.e., religious) schools.

largely as a response to what some perceived as the moral breakdown of American culture in the 1960s, which included open sexuality, drug use, removal of prayer from public schools, and the movement toward legalizing abortion (Putnam and Campbell 2010). If Christian traditionalists wished to restore or maintain traditional American culture, they would have to become politically active—not just in their local communities, but at the federal level as well. As a result, any integration of religion and government primarily benefits Christian citizens, which is contrary to nonbelievers' stance that all people be treated equal under the law.

With persistent political influence from evangelical Christians, symbolic boundaries between believers and nonbelievers have the potential to become social boundaries, characterized by an outsider group's unequal access to resources and opportunities (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007). Though social exclusion and systematic discrimination have not plagued atheists like other minority groups, nonbelievers are still more susceptible to institutionalized discrimination than their Christian counterparts (Zuckerman 2014). Katrine also pointed out that nonbelievers were not the only group to be marginalized by Christian lawmakers: "[Houston is] the most diverse city in the country, so they're not just shoving their Christianity down my throat, they're doing it to Hindus and Muslims and Buddhists and Jews and making everybody live by their theological way of thinking, and it's maddening to me."

Overtly Christian influence in policy-making violates nonbelievers' principle that religion should not impede on the lives of others. One respondent, Anthony, who was generally lax in his attitudes regarding religion, said, "I do get militant about things like freedom and discrimination against atheists, or requirements that, you know, people being required to swear on a bible when they're in court, or things like that. Boy Scout discrimination, things like that I

don't think are right. Not if they're going to be exempt from taxation." Anthony also believed

that religious organizations should not be exempt from paying taxes, a view held by other

nonbelievers as well.[76] One study published in the secular humanist journal *Free Inquiry*

estimated that religious tax exemptions cost US taxpayers up to $71 billion every year (Cragun,

Yeager, and Vegan 2012).

Public education was another area in which nonbelievers perceived religious influencers

as overstepping their bounds. Dean, an organizer for GHSS, said:

> Generally [I have negative attitudes toward religious] organizations that try to
>
> promote things like creationism in the classroom. I don't believe that is
>
> appropriate. But I do believe those people themselves are entitled to their own
>
> beliefs, I just don't think it should be taught in public school systems. In [Texas],
>
> it's a huge story when the majority, openly creationist State Board of Education
>
> tries to get religious ideas put into the classroom, both in science classes and in
>
> history, social studies classes. And that to me is trying to force your religious
>
> beliefs on other people. And then I stand up and I say something about that.

At the time I performed my fieldwork, Texas' State Board of Education was reviewing history

textbooks for adoption; at least one textbook under review cited Moses as an honorary founding

father.[77]

Several of my respondents believed the issue of religion in public life was more

conspicuous in Texas than in other regions of the country. Kara, who grew up in Minnesota, said,

"Everyone kind of had this sense…like, 'Well I might be religious, but my religious beliefs

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[76] For a summary of tax benefits given to religious organizations (from a secularist's perspective), see Step 5 in
Ryan Cragun's *How to Defeat Religion in 10 Easy Steps: A Toolkit for Secular Activists*, "Stop Subsidizing Religion
and Deregulate It" (2015).
[77] It was approved.

should not dictate law, and that should not affect anyone else other than me'…. Especially after moving to Texas, I feel that that's definitely the case, where people actually believe that religion should be actively part of government, and the idea that this is a Christian Nation." Wayne, who moved to Houston from Vermont, said he never knew anyone who went to church growing up, and was shocked by the pervasiveness of religion upon moving to Texas: "I'm on a daily basis exposed—for some reason it's an overwhelming influence here in this state. I mean, the idea of the legislature imposing religious dogma, making laws from them, is an astounding thing. But that's certainly what's going on, and I expect it to get much worse in this state."

However, Wayne also acknowledged that not all religious groups are interested in integrating religion and government; progressive believers also aim to dispel religious influence from public education and politics. In fact, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State—an organization several of my respondents were involved in—was founded by "a broad coalition of religious, educational and civic leaders"[78] and was originally a Protestant movement motivated by anti-Catholicism (Blankholm 2014). As an active member of the AU Houston chapter, Wayne said:

> There are not enough secularists in the country to effect the change that you would want to see, but there are many people who have similar viewpoints [on church/state issues] that aren't secularists, that are religious. The Unitarians, so many of the Methodists—there are even strings of Baptist organizations that are the same way. They are very much for the separation of Church and State. "Keep government out of our religion" kind of stuff, and so that's great. Make your friends where you can.

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[78] https://au.org/about/our-history

Wayne makes the point here that in order to bring about social change, members from powerful groups must also take up the cause. Whether intentional or not, Wayne's remarks draw parallels to other social justice movements, such as women's suffrage and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, which some social movement scholars claim have benefited from majority group support in the fight to secure equal rights (Morris 1981, 1984; Jenkins and Eckert 1986).

5) "People Are More Important than Beliefs"

The Houston Oasis has five core values (discussed in Chapter 4), the first of which is: "People are more important than beliefs." This statement summarizes (more clearly than Oasis's other core values) a unanimous sentiment articulated by, essentially, my entire sample of nonbelievers: It doesn't matter what you believe; what matters is how you treat others. Bert summarized this sentiment while discussing some of his closest friendships, which included people he had met through Houston Atheists as well as a religious work colleague: "Doesn't matter what [my friends] believe. They're good people, have the kinds of ethics that I [think are important]. I like them all equally, and I don't care what they believe." For Bert, and other nonbelievers I interviewed, a shared moral code was the most significant indicator of compatibility.

Jorge, a former Catholic, also emphasized the importance of behavior over beliefs: "Actions are more important than beliefs. Imposing [beliefs on others] is bad, but most religious people—churches—are just trying to help." Even religious organizations—of which nonbelievers are generally more critical, compared to religious individuals (Guenther 2014)—are recognized as powerful sources of public good. Kara said, "Most [churches] I think tend to do a lot of good in the world, especially in local communities, helping the poor…they take them in,

feed them, and shelter them. There are a lot of good things that churches and religious

organizations can do."

When discussing the different nonreligious organizations around Houston during our

interview, Jorge made a distinction between the Houston Atheists and Houston Oasis. Though he

had never been to a HA meeting, he imagined that their social gatherings at bars and coffee

shops would consist of a group of atheists sitting around a table discussing "how religion is not

good."[79] He said he does not like being told what to think (i.e., in his hypothetical HA meeting,

being told what to think about religion), and would rather get out and "do things" rather than sit

around and talk. Members of HA, I am sure, would object; although the organization focuses on

providing its members with opportunities to socialize, many of them do volunteer—either via

other nonreligious organizations, with secular (i.e., religiously neutral) charities, or alongside

believers with religious organizations or religiously-affiliated programs. In fact, about one-third

of my sample reported volunteering at least occasionally.

Volunteering was a way to combat the stereotype that nonbelievers, without the promise

of an afterlife, would have no interest in helping others. Jenny, a regular at the Houston Oasis

who ran the music programming, described some of the volunteer opportunities that Oasis

organized for members of the community,[80] and added:

> People want to do something, you know. They just don't want to do it in a context
>
> of a religion, per se. They want to do it because it's the right thing to do, you
>
> know?... You do it because you don't care who's watching, all right? Some people
>
> only do good deeds because they think [someone's watching], you know

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[79] This is not entirely accurate; while there is a lot of talking at HA meetings, a great deal of it revolves around topics other than religion. See Chapter 3.
[80] Again, see Chapter 3 for a description of the types of volunteer activities that nonbelievers in my sample would engage in.

[*laughs*]? Or they might not do it, right? And they think that atheists, because we

don't believe there's anybody up there, they think that we don't ever do anything

charitable. They think we're somehow immoral, because we don't have a moral

code that's telling us. I'm like, no, no, we're born with a compass!

According to nonbelievers, belief in God is not a moral position, and belonging to any particular

religion was not a good indication of one's morality. Jenny continued:

If somebody tells me that they're Christian or Muslim or Buddhist or whatever, it

says absolutely nothing about who they are [*laughs*]. What are you going to *do*,

you know? If religion is a big part of who you are, how do you exhibit the traits of

your religion in your job? Or how do you choose to treat other people? You know,

what does your religion say about gays and lesbians? What does your religion say

about non-theists? What does it say about—anything else? Tell me that, and I'll

know something about you. But telling me the name of your religion or waving

your book around isn't going to tell me a thing!

As with other values discussed in this chapter, nonbelievers stressed that treating people

well regardless of your (or their) religious belief was not a position exclusive to nonbelievers.

According to my respondents, religious believers were not only capable of setting beliefs aside

(even if those beliefs were "silly" or "delusional") and treating everyone with respect, but often

live their lives according to this principle. Sara described her mother as a person who embodies

the type of morality that Christianity should strive for:

My mother [is] the perfect example of how I think a person who claims to be

Christian should behave. She shows love for everyone, regardless of who you are,

how you believe, what's your lifestyle—she just loves everyone. She'll still

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remind you that you're wrong according to the bible [*laughs*], which is annoying,

but she still loves everyone. And then there's the person who is more like my

uncle, who doesn't want anything to do with anyone who he believes is not

following the bible.

My respondents acknowledged not only that religious believers could be either good or bad

people, but so, too, could other nonbelievers. As summarized by Karl: "Humans are humans.

Doesn't matter if you're religious or not. You can still be an a-hole to somebody you know. Or

you can be a good person. It really doesn't matter what religious affiliation you are."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As seen in these narratives, when nonbelievers speak of their own moral code, they often

juxtapose their own values to those promoted by religion—specifically, Christianity—which has

historically claimed a monopoly on morality in the United States. Nonbelievers use these values

to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and religious believers. At their most

reductive, the moral stances (summarized in Table 6.1) taken up by nonbelievers position them

as superior to the in-fact morally lacking religious believer.

The nonbelievers in my sample argued that behaving morally out of fear of punishment

and anticipation of reward in the afterlife was morally inferior to doing good for the sake of

doing good. Renee said:

I just don't understand how—if the only reason you're good is because you're

afraid that you'll be punished if you're bad…it's like, if the only reason you don't

kill people is because there's a law against killing people, you have some serious

issues! If the only reason you are nice, and believe in being kind, and "the Golden

Rule," is because you want the payoff in the afterlife?… There's just too much

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horror coming from the tribalism of religion. It's just another tribalism, it's

another way to segregate yourself into the in-group or the out-group.

TABLE 6.1: The Moral Code of Nonbelievers

Value	Morally Superior Position	Morally Inferior Position
Diversity and Equal Rights	Valuing human diversity; advocating equal rights for all	Discriminating based on religious teachings (e.g., against women and sexual minorities)
Reason and Evidence	Valuing logic and science; seeking out empirical evidence in order to make sense of the world	Relying on unexamined supernatural beliefs to make sense of the world; ignoring scientific explanations because they contradict religious teachings
Individual Autonomy	Encouraging individual autonomy and the freedom to believe or not believe religious teachings	Proselytizing and attempting to force beliefs on others (particularly children)
Separation of Church and State	Keeping church and state separate; considering it unconstitutional for the government to show preferential treatment toward Christianity	Wrongly considering the United States a Christian nation and attempting to pass legislation that unfairly benefits Christians over people of other faiths
"People Are More Important Than Beliefs"	How you treat others is more important than your religious beliefs	Belief in God is more important than treating others with kindness and respect, especially if their beliefs contradict religious teachings

However, the reality of boundary-work is complicated. I would like to further discuss

five major points brought up through an analysis of nonreligious values: 1) Nonbelievers do not

other all religious believers, but rather *fundamentalist, evangelical* believers that they perceive as

holding the morally inferior positions described in the above table, therefore suggesting that 2)

cultural and political values divide Americans more so than religious beliefs; 3) the boundary-

work performed by nonbelievers is asymmetrical to that of believers; 4) nonbelievers themselves do not always live up to the values they described; and 5) a general agreement on these values among nonbelievers as a collective should not preclude investigations into other ways nonbelievers draw boundaries—particularly among themselves.

First, the values discussed in this article are not specific to nonbelievers. Christianity can preach tolerance and acceptance, reformed Jews might also profess that people are more important than beliefs, and many religious groups (particularly religious minorities) oppose religion in government and government-supported institutions. Some research has found that progressive Christians are more likely to dislike conservative Christians and have greater affinity for atheists (Yancey 2017). Nonbelievers can and do have religious allies (Shook 2017), and they express acceptance of individuals who also embrace similar values, regardless of their belief or disbelief in the supernatural. Some nonbelievers even view progressive believers as being more sympathetic toward "atheist" causes than toward conservative ones, including stances on church-state relations, marriage equality, women's rights, and environmental issues. In most cases, it is *conservative* or *fundamentalist* believers who are othered by nonbelievers—not religious believers at large. Vic, the president of Humanists of Houston at the time, emphasized the similarities between atheism and progressive religion:

> As I've learned more and more about the religious spectrum I realize that there are a lot of Christian denominations—Presbyterians, Episcopalians, even to some extent Methodists—that are very aligned with us in so many ways. We have far more in common with them, certainly, than we have differences in terms of things that we value and our positions on various issues. And of course Unitarians…[who] virtually are just like atheists in every way. And some of them

are atheists, but even the theistic Unitarians, in my experience, tend to be pretty much just like us in all the ways that matter.

Second, much like Edgell and colleagues concluded in their 2006 article, I find that the boundaries constructed by nonbelievers between themselves and the religious are not based belief per se, but rather on a shared understanding of morality. For nonbelievers, secular values may be a more significant demarcation than (non)religious belief. Though all nonbelievers share the attribute of disbelief in God, the identity of "nonbeliever" or "atheist" may serve as an indicator of having other, more important beliefs and values in common, making disbelief less important than other characteristics. If nonbelievers truly perceive religion as an unnecessary and insufficient basis for morality, then it logically follows that their moral boundaries would be constructed in a way that allows some believers to enter their in-group. Religion only serves as an initial indication of moral standing, not a final conclusion, just as a nonreligious identity could indicate similarities in broader values. However, it should be stressed that disbelief in God is not an insignificant boundary marker. Upon learning someone's religious affiliation, that person may be suspect in the eyes of atheists, particularly if affiliated with Evangelical or other conservative religious traditions, which are common in Texas.

Third, religious believers and nonbelievers also activate these boundaries in different ways. Edgell and colleagues (2006) note that although people have generally negative opinions about atheists, their judgment is not directed at any specific atheist they know personally, but rather at atheists as a symbolic category. Nonbelievers, however, *do* know people who are religious, often have family or friends who are religious, or in some cases were religious themselves (Guenther et al. 2013). As a result, they construct more permeable boundaries that may permit believers' inclusion, if they possess similar values. This asymmetry in boundaries—

the othering of atheists as a whole, versus the othering of religious fundamentalists—leads to a disproportionate amount of prejudice aimed at atheists.

Fourth, it should not be assumed that all nonbelievers will always follow the moral code expressed by the collective. Cultural sociologists warn of the complicated relationship between values and behavior, and that self-reported values are not necessarily an accurate indication of subsequent behavior (Vaisey 2009; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). For example, some nonbelievers were critical of the idea that black nonbelievers would form their own humanist community, while others considered this thinking borderline discriminatory and dismissive of the unique experiences of black atheists. Other nonbelievers, like Bert, commented on the Islamophobia he sees in atheist communities—particularly those who more closely align themselves with New Atheism. Also, in the time since I left Houston, two prominent male leaders in Houston's secular community were banned from their respective organizations (and in one case, other nonreligious organizations in Houston as well) due to allegations of sexual assault and abuse of power.

Finally, this article examines the values that make up a generic nonreligious moral code that produces symbolic boundaries between themselves and theists, but does not attempt to tease apart the multiple ideologies that may exist *within* the atheist community. Though the values discussed here are widespread throughout my sample, certain types of nonbelievers may prioritize some over others. Progressive atheists, for instance, may prioritize acceptance of diversity and social justice, whereas conservative or libertarian atheists may prioritize personal autonomy and the separation of church and state. Dividing atheists into subcategories (e.g., New Atheists, humanists, skeptics) may shed light on the diversity and divisions in worldviews that exist among nonbelievers (see LeDrew 2014, 2015; Baker and Smith 2015). Future research should look more closely at the boundaries nonbelievers construct among themselves.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Why do people join nonreligious organizations? The obvious answer to this question is that people join these (or any) groups because they are looking to interact with people who share their interests and values. The harder question to answer is: Why do nonbelievers join *these* groups, when there are so many other alternative voluntary communities (e.g., clubs, hobbies, sports leagues, Meetup.com) available that are also not associated with religion?[81]

The three recurring themes discussed at the beginning of this dissertation that emerged over the course my fieldwork—identity, organizational familiarity, and stigma—distinguish nonreligious organizations from other voluntary organizations and associations, and help to shape much of the action and sense-making that takes place within them. These themes were interwoven throughout this dissertation:

1. I find that both nonreligious individuals and organizations constantly engage in identity work: activities that "create, present, and sustain" their identities (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348). To embrace a nonreligious (and especially, an atheist) identity is to accept association with a group that is considered elitist, judgmental, cynical, and hedonistic. I find that these negative stereotypes can be managed via a number of strategies, one of which is to join a nonreligious organization. These organizations also communicate identities of their own. One way they can do this is through the events the sponsor: What an organization *does* can communicate to potential members the type of organization it *is*. I find that some nonreligious organizations are specialists, focusing on action that may be social, political, or spiritual in nature.

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[81] For example: https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2017/06/the-church-of-crossfit/531501/

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Other organizations are generalists, sponsoring a wide range of activities that might—

most clearly in the case of godless congregations—imply a communal identity that

prioritizes community building and fostering a sense of belonging among

nonbelievers. I also find that a former salient religious identity can positively affect

current organizational affiliation and degree of involvement. Finally, nonreligious

identities are strongly informed by a moral code built on a common set of secular

values. My respondents often claimed that a reason they joined nonreligious

organizations was to meet "like-minded" others, and that a mutual atheist identity can

serve as an indicator that two people may have corresponding values. While there is

no guarantee that nonreligious organizations will be a surefire way for nonbelievers to

meet others who share their values (recall Charlie's experience in with libertarians at

a GHSS meet-up in Chapter 5), it is a context in which such interactions *could occur*,

and may be *more likely to occur* than in other settings.

2. The role of organizational familiarity was demonstrated primarily in Chapters 3 and

4, which described the profiles and activities of nonreligious organizations. One

reason that such organizations may be appealing to nonbelievers is that they fill a role

similar to that which would normally be filled by religious congregations—a

ubiquitous organizational form in the United States. Nonbelievers report participating

in nonreligious organizations to meet like-minded people, learn new things, promote

social justice causes, volunteer, find spiritual fulfillment, and join a dependable,

close-knit community—benefits similar to those offered by religious congregations.

Additionally, in Chapter 5, I found that while a strong previous religious identity

sometimes predicted nonreligious organizational behavior, a weak religious identity

(or no affiliation) was more closely correlated with noninvolvement. This suggests that—although some respondents who were raised nonreligious were actively involved in nonreligious organizations[82]—nonreligious organizations are still most appealing to those who were raised with some degree of meaningful religious socialization. A more intimate familiarity with religion, then, corresponded to a greater likelihood that one would be involved in a nonreligious organization later in life.

3. The substantive chapters of this dissertation were bookended with discussions of stigma. I examined how organizational involvement can operate as a strategy for stigma management through interaction with sympathetic others, and found that membership in nonreligious organizations can normalize atheism at the micro level by creating spaces where stigmatized individuals can engage with one another. Nonbelievers are also deeply concerned with morality—something that people generally believe atheists to be lacking—and can utilize their membership in nonreligious organizations as a form of impression management: By joining an organization that volunteers, promotes social justice and equality, or prioritizes intellectual endeavors, they are communicating to others that these values are important to them.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Nonreligion and Religion

This dissertation constitutes an in-depth study of a nonreligious community at the local level, whereas the majority of nonreligion research has conceptualized organized nonreligion as

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[82] Which I suspect could be an effect of social networks, i.e., having a tie to someone already involved in an organization.

an amalgamation of several organizations, focused on a single organization (or organizational form) rather than a community of organizations, or concentrated on the national level. I have also teased out some of the variation that exists among both nonreligious organizations and the people who join them, especially regarding organizational behavior.

However, there is still plenty of terrain left to explore. First, Houston is a unique city in a number of ways (see Chapter 1). Future research should address the variation that exists in other cities and regions of the country, especially in terms of organizational activities and structures. Secondly, there are many variables and characteristics of individual nonbelievers that are less common and have not been fully addressed here, which would be especially interesting to explore in the context of organizations. For example, greater attention could be paid to those nonbelievers who are more conservative or less educated than average, as the majority of nonbelievers tend to be left-leaning and highly educated. Although a minority, there was a notable number of republican, conservative, and libertarian nonbelievers in my sample. The membership of the Greater Houston Skeptic Society, for example, appeared to have a stronger libertarian bent than other organizations. This might be expected in Texas given its political climate, but was also reflective of national skeptic group leadership (e.g., Michael Shermer and Penn Jillette are prominent skeptics and outspoken libertarians). Also, I interviewed more people with PhDs for this project than with only high school diplomas, which is neither representative of the general population or nonbelievers.

Another phenomenon that future researchers could consider are what I call religious "interlopers," or religious believers who participate in nonreligious groups. I interviewed two such individuals, both of whom were members of the GHSS.[83] This organization, along with

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[83] Technically, only 123 of my 125 respondents were self-identified nonbelievers.

Oasis and Americans United, claimed to be welcoming of religious believers who supported the values of the organization. However, I encountered very few religious believers during the course of my fieldwork. Future research could more rigorously and intentionally investigate the presence of such people in nonreligious organizations.

Some of my findings also contribute to the sociology of religion more broadly. Of particular interest is the relationship between the "believing" and "belonging" functions typically associated with religion (Sherkat 2014). If we conceptualize these categories in a two-by-two table—seen in Table 7.1—it is easy to predict who would belong in three of these four cells. It is less intuitive to predict who might belong in the cell containing those who belong but do not believe. According to Sherkat, people in this cell are those who believe in many or some of the tenets of their faith, but do not believe in others, as well as cultural religious adherents, like Reformed Jews. I would add that closeted nonbelievers also fall into this category, as well as many of the nonbelievers I interviewed for this project.

TABLE 7.1: Combinations of Believing and Belonging

	Believe	Do Not Believe
Belong	Typical religious adherents	Pickers and choosers Cultural adherents Closeted nonbelievers Organized nonbelievers
Do Not Belong	Typical nones	Typical atheists and agnostics

I also suggest that organized nonreligion could have implications for secularization theory, as some nonreligious organizations thrive despite a general movement away from voluntary associations and organizations, including religious congregations (Putnam 2000;

Painter and Paxton 2014). Religion is transforming in such a way that its social influence in everyday life is waning (Chaves 1994); that people still want to belong to an organization that *looks like* religion and *exists in relation to* religion is noteworthy.

Culture, Movements, and Organizations

Nonreligion as a cultural phenomenon constitutes a case of contested categorization: are nonreligious organizations more like churches, voluntary associations, or social movement organizations (SMOs)? After eight months spent observing Houston's nonreligious organizations and nearly 200 hours of interviews—and innumerable hours analyzing this data—my answer to this question is somewhat frustrating: It depends on the organization. Some—like the Houston Oasis, and other godless congregations like the Sunday Assembly—are more clearly church-like in ways that go beyond the structure and content of a "Sunday service." These organizations embed themselves into local communities, provide volunteer opportunities, establish children and youth programing, and host weddings and memorial services. Because nonreligion is a relational term, its characteristics and impact should be considered alongside that of religion. Cimino and Smith (2007) point out that atheists often use religious metaphors and practice secular rituals. This might not be surprising, as some have argued religious terminology is the best (albeit still undesirable) language we currently have to describe nonreligious beliefs, practices, and ideologies (Cragun and Hammer 2011). Academics are not the only ones who struggle with delineating nonreligion from religion. In her study of the Sunday Assembly, Frost (2017) asked respondents what they liked about the idea of emulating a religious congregation, to which they commonly replied, "We don't know how else to do it" (186). However, nonreligious organizations occupy a spectrum rather than fall into discrete categories, with some landing closer to "church-like" and others closer to "secular voluntary associations" that have

fewer religious-esque qualities. They are not quite religion, yet are distinct from other types of voluntary associations in significant ways.

It is also unclear whether nonreligious organizations constitute a social movement. Snow, Soule, and Kriesi (2004) offer a definition of social movements as "collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part" (11). While not all atheist organizations will fall under the umbrella of this definition, it's reasonable to believe that at least some do. Like religious organizations, nonreligious organizations have embodied many of the same characteristics associated with "traditional" social movements, like aiming to alleviate grievances, mobilizing resources, taking advantage of political opportunities, and developing a shared identity. For instance, numerous researchers have shed light on the prejudice and discrimination that atheists can face (see Chapter 2), demonstrating that they have the motivation to form groups based on a common grievance. Also, established venues like Unitarian Universalist and humanist communities have previously provided material resources to aid in the mobilization of secular activists (Manning 2010). More recently, the popularity of New Atheism—in conjunction with new media and technology—has armed atheists with intangible resources, like visibility and legitimacy, while carving out opportunities for nonbelievers to locate one another, assemble, and openly challenge the cultural and political power held by religious institutions (Cimino and Smith 2011). And finally, several researchers (LeDrew 2013a; Smith 2013; Mastiaux 2017) have commented on the role organizations play in fostering a sense of collective identity among atheists, a key feature of the New Social Movements paradigm (Melucci 1980).

Even less clear is whether *local* nonreligious organizations should be classified as social movement organizations (SMOs). With the exception of Americans United, I am hesitant to classify the nonreligious organizations I observed as such. While atheists as a group of individuals may see themselves as collectively belonging to a larger movement, and some local organizations do advocate social change, the groups I observed were more concerned with socializing, educational programing, and community building than "challenging extant authority." Future research should further investigate how nonreligious organizations can be categorized in a local setting.

One original contribution of this dissertation is the extension of "organizational identity" to nonreligious organizations. Within the field of organization theory, there is little research on how organizational identity is operationalized and measured (Foreman and Whetten 2016). Future research should consider other ways organizational identify can be operationalized and measured in the context of nonreligious organizations.

Finally, nonreligious organizations could be a fruitful area of study for those interested in organizational change. Social change is usually slow, but the religious landscape is changing rapidly, and organizations reflect this. Researchers should pay attention to trends in religious affiliation and belief (*How long will nonaffiliation and nonbelief continue to rise until they level off? Will we inevitably see a resurgence of institutionalized religion?*) to see how the goals and priorities evolve. Some secular researchers (e.g., Kosmin 2016) have suggested that in order to survive an increasingly secular society, nonreligious organizations will need "something else" to accompany its nonreligious identity, as nonbelief becomes more normative and people feel less of a need to organize in response to religion. For example, as nonbelief becomes less stigmatized, the focus of nonreligious organizations may shift to concerns like charity, social

justice, or intellectual pursuits. (This may also be an added benefit of thinking about organizations as having "charitable," "political," "educational" functions.) Future research should consider how shifts in the cultural and religious landscapes might affect shifts in organization identity.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

At a talk hosted by Rice University during the course of my fieldwork—and promoted by several of Houston's nonreligious organizations—Penny Edgell suggested that public attitudes toward nonbelievers will be difficult to sway until the full range of diversity in the nonreligious community is exposed. Americans make broad, negative assumptions about nonbelievers (which have not greatly improved since the first wave of the American Mosaic Project in 2003), viewing them as immoral and un-American. These perceptions persist, despite the fact that people who claim them do not report personally knowing anyone who does not believe in God (Edgell et al. 2006); thus, their opinions about nonbelievers often go unchallenged. People may assume that nonreligious organizations exist solely for the purpose of criticizing religion—in fact, I spoke to several nonbelievers who also made these assumptions about nonreligious groups before attending themselves. Although these organizations do provide nonbelievers an outlet for venting frustrations about the prevalence of religion in everyday life (more prominent in Houston than other major metropolitan areas), I witnessed relatively little outright hostility toward religious individuals. Many respondents reported harboring no ill feelings toward believers, some acknowledged the good that religious communities can do, and a few even empathized with those who do believe in God. Research that exposes the diversity of beliefs, behaviors, and values among the nonreligious has the potential to change negative perceptions held by the general American public. Nonreligious organizations like those described in this dissertation will

likely continue to grow unless (or until) religion becomes such a trivial part of everyday public

life that nonreligious organizations—that are nonreligious *by design*—no longer *need* to exist.

APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC AND BEHAVIORAL CHARACTERISTICS

OF INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS

TABLE A.1: Demographic Characteristics of Interview Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Political Orientation
Adam	49	M	White	High school	Libertarian
Aimee	26	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Allison	73	F	White	Master's	Progressive/Socialist
Alma	56	F	Hispanic	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Amara	29	F	Black	Master's	Progressive/Socialist
Andrea	26	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Anthony	71	M	White	PhD	Liberal/Democrat
Ayah	30	F	White*	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Bert	47	M	White	High school	Liberal/Democrat
Carrie	35	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Charlie	34	M	White	Bachelor's	Progressive/Socialist
Dean	47	M	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Derrick	28	M	Bi/multiracial	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Diego	27	M	Hispanic	Bachelor's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Drew	42	M	White	PhD	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Gabe	36	M	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Ginny	56	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Hannah	29	F	White	Master's	Libertarian
Haru	43	M	Asian	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Hattie	28	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Hugo	51	M	Hispanic	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Jack	64	M	White	Bachelor's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Jaclyn	50	F	White	Master's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Jenny	53	F	White	Some college	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Jon	39	M	White	Associate's**	Libertarian
Jorge	26	M	Hispanic	Master's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Kara	25	F	White	Master's**	Liberal/Democrat
Karl	52	M	White	High school	Liberal/Democrat
Katrine	42	F	White	Bachelor's	Progressive/Socialist
Kevin	41	M	White	Some college	Conservative/Republican
Kitty	77	F	White	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Kristin	29	F	White	Some college	Liberal/Democrat
Leigh	34	F	White	Some college	Liberal/Democrat
Leroy	29	M	Bi/multiracial	Associate's	Progressive/Socialist
Lucia	61	F	Hispanic	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Luis	24	M	Hispanic/White	Bachelor's	Progressive/Socialist
Mandisa	41	F	Arab	Master's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Political Orientation
Mandy	25	F	White	Bachelor's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Margot	43	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Matthew	43	M	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Mina	37	F	White	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Miriam	27	F	Arab	Associate's	Liberal/Democrat
Moira	54	F	Black	Some college	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Norman	51	M	White	Master's	Progressive/Socialist
Oliver	28	M	White	Bachelor's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Padma	51	F	Asian	Master's	Progressive/Socialist
Pat	25	M	White	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Pauline	80	F	White	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Rafi	44	M	Asian*	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Reg	76	M	White	PhD	Liberal/Democrat
Renata	30	F	Hispanic/White	Master's	Conservative/Republican
Renee	56	F	White	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Robert	27	M	White	Bachelor's	Libertarian
Ron	72	M	White	Associate's	Libertarian
Sara	35	F	Hispanic	Associate's**	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Seth	38	M	White	Some college	Liberal/Democrat
Shannon	53	F	White	Bachelor's**	Progressive/Socialist
Sunder	41	M	Asian	MD	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Terrence	62	M	Black	Bachelor's	Progressive/Socialist
Tim	57	M	Black	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Tobin	72	M	White	Associate's	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Tracy	36	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Travis	43	M	White	Master's	Conservative/Republican
Victor	58	M	White	Bachelor's	Libertarian
Vijay	41	M	Asian	Master's	Liberal/Democrat
Wallace	54	M	White	Some college	Moderate/Mixed/Unaffiliated
Walt	36	M	Asian	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Wayne	57	M	White	Master's	Progressive/Socialist
Wendy	37	F	White	Bachelor's	Liberal/Democrat
Zach	27	M	Black	Master's**	Progressive/Socialist

* Middle Eastern
** Enrolled in higher degree program at time of interview

TABLE A.2: Previous Religious and Current Nonreligious Characteristics

Pseudonym	Childhood Religion	Devoutness	Self-Identity	Nonreligious Org. Affiliation(s)	Degree of Involvement
Adam	Jehovah's Witness	Weak	Atheist, Humanist	GHSS, HOH	Virtual Joiner
Aimee	Episcopalian	Moderate	Atheist	HOH, HA	Attender
Allison	Baptist	Moderate	Atheist, Humanist, Secular Humanist	HOH, HA, Oasis	Rebounder
Alma	Mormon	Very Strong	Atheist, Skeptic	Texas Secular Convention	Rebounder
Amara	Baptist	Very Strong	Secular Humanist	HBN, HA	Rebounder
Andrea	Catholic	Very Strong	Atheist, Secular, "I don't believe in anything"	Oasis	Attender
Anthony	Catholic	Strong	Atheist	GHSS, Oasis	Member
Ayah	Muslim	Moderate	Atheist, "I don't go to church"	Oasis	Attender
Bert	Baptist	Very Strong	Atheist	HA	Quitter
Carrie	Mormon	Very Strong	Atheist, Skeptic, Ex-Mormon, Apostate	HA, Oasis, GHSS	Organizer
Charlie	Catholic	Strong	Atheist, None	GHSS, HOH	Rebounder
Dean	Lutheran	Moderate	No Religion	GHSS	Organizer
Derrick	Episcopalian	Moderate	Atheist, Spiritual, Seeker, None	HOH, HA	Attender
Diego	Catholic	Very Strong	Atheist	HA, HOH, GHSS	Quitter
Drew	Baptist/Methodist	Very Strong	Humanist, Atheist	HOH, Oasis	Virtual Joiner
Gabe	Mormon	Very Strong	Atheist, Humanist, Freethinker, Ex-Mormon, Apostate	HA, Oasis, GHSS	Organizer
Ginny	Lutheran	Very Strong	Atheist	HCoF	Quitter
Hannah	None	Weak	Agnostic	N/A	Non-Joiner
Haru	None	Weak	Atheist	HOH	Attender
Hattie	Protestant	Very Strong	Atheist, Agnostic	HA, HOH, GHSS, Oasis	Attender
Hugo	Catholic	Very Strong	None, Spiritual	GHSS	Attender

Pseudonym	Childhood Religion	Devoutness	Self-Identity	Nonreligious Org. Affiliation(s)	Degree of Involvement
Jack	Church of England	Weak	Atheist	HCoF, Oasis	Member
Jaclyn	Catholic/Lutheran	Strong	Atheist	GHSS, HA, HOH, Oasis	Member
Jenny	Presbyterian	Moderate	Secular Humanist, Atheist	Oasis	Member
Jon	Lutheran	Strong	Atheist, Agnostic	GHSS, HA, Oasis	Organizer
Jorge	Catholic	Very Strong	Nonbeliever, "I don't believe in organized religion"	GHSS	Rebounder
Kara	Lutheran	Strong	Atheist, Agnostic	HOH	Virtual Joiner
Karl	Lutheran	Very Strong	Atheist	GHSS	Member
Katrine	None	None	Atheist	HOH	Virtual joiner
Kevin	None	None	Atheist, Agnostic	GHSS	Virtual Joiner
Kitty	Protestant	Weak	Atheist, Secular Humanist	HOH	Organizer
Kristin	Catholic	Moderate	Atheist, "I don't believe in God"	N/A	Non-joiner
Leigh	None	None	Atheist, Secular, Humanist, Nonreligious	HOH, HA	Organizer
Leroy	Non-Denominational Christian	Moderate	Atheist, Agnostic	HA	Virtual Joiner
Lucia	Catholic	Strong	Agnostic	N/A	Non-Joiner
Luis	Lutheran	Moderate	Atheist	HA	Virtual Joiner
Mandisa	Muslim	Moderate	None	GHSS	Member
Mandy	None	Weak	Nonbeliever, No Label, "I don't believe in organized religion"	N/A	Non-Joiner
Margot	Protestant	Moderate	Buddhist, Stoic	HOH, HCoF, SN	Member
Matthew	Protestant	Strong	Spiritual Naturalist, Buddhist, Stoic, Humanist	SN, HOH, HCoF	Organizer
Mina	Anglican	Moderate	Atheist, "I don't go to church"	GHSS	Virtual Joiner
Miriam	Muslim	Very Strong	Humanist, Atheist	HOH, HA, Oasis	Attender

Pseudonym	Childhood Religion	Devoutness	Self-Identity	Nonreligious Org. Affiliation(s)	Degree of Involvement
Moira	Lutheran	Moderate	Atheist	HBN, HA, HOH	Member
Norman	Lutheran	Very Strong	Non-Theist; Secular; "Militant Agnostic"	Oasis	Organizer
Oliver	None	Weak	Atheist	N/A	Non-Joiner
Padma	Atheist	None	Atheist	N/A	Non-Joiner
Pat	None	None	Atheist	HA	Attender
Pauline	Catholic	Very Strong	Atheist	HCoF	Member
Rafi	Muslim	Very Strong	Atheist, Infidel	Oasis, Ex-Muslims of North America	Member
Reg	Protestant	Strong	Atheist, Humanist	HOH	Organizer
Renata	Catholic	Moderate	Atheist, Agnostic	GHSS	Quitter
Renee	Christian	Moderate	Atheist	GHSS, HA	Quitter
Robert	Protestant	Very Strong	Atheist, Humanist	Oasis, HA, GHSS	Attender
Ron	Methodist	Strong	Atheist	HCoF	Organizer
Sara	Jehovah's Witness	Strong	Atheist, Secular Humanist, Skeptic, Nonbeliever	GHSS, HA	Attender
Seth	Non-Denominational Christian	Very Strong	Atheist	GHSS, HOH, Kingwood Atheists	Attender
Shannon	Episcopalian	Moderate	Atheist, None	HOH, Kingwood Atheists	Quitter
Sunder	Hindu	Moderate	Agnostic, Seeker	GHSS	Virtual Joiner
Terrence	Baptist	Very Strong	Atheist, Humanist	HA, HBN	Organizer
Tim	Methodist	Strong	Atheist	HA, HBN	Organizer
Tobin	Jewish	Weak	Atheist, Jewish	HCoF, Oasis	Member
Tracy	Methodist	Moderate	Atheist	HA, Atheists Helping the Homeless	Organizer
Travis	Non-Denominational Christian	Moderate	Atheist	N/A	Non-Joiner
Victor	Catholic	Strong	Atheist	HA, Oasis, HOH, GHSS	Member

Pseudonym	Childhood Religion	Devoutness	Self-Identity	Nonreligious Org. Affiliation(s)	Degree of Involvement
Vijay	Muslim	Very Strong	Atheist	HOH, HA	Quitter
Wallace	None	Weak	Atheist	HA	Virtual Joiner
Walt	None	Weak	Atheist, Agnostic, Freethinker, Skeptic, Humanist, "Virtually all of them"	HOH, HA, GHSS, HBN, Oasis	Rebounder
Wayne	Catholic	Moderate	Atheist, Humanist	AU, HOH, HA	Organizer
Wendy	New Age/Fringe Christianity/Catholic/ Methodist	Strong	Atheist, Humanist	Oasis	Attender
Zach	Pentecostal	Strong	Atheist	HBN	Quitter

INTERVIEW GUIDE

RESPONDENT:

DATE:

TIME BEGUN:
TIME FINISHED:

Do you mind if I record our conversation? I'll be transcribing the audio so I can more easily compare the things you say during this interview with things other people say, so I can look for trends and patterns in these experiences. The recording will be deleted once I'm finished transcribing.

The purpose of this interview is to collect information for my dissertation. I don't want to delve too deeply into my specific research question because I don't want to bias any of your responses to these questions, but, as a sociologist I'm basically interested in learning about how people come to identify as nonbelievers, and how it impacts your everyday life.

General Questions

☐ Was there ever a time in your life that you believed in God? What was your "religious upbringing" like?
    ☐ What religion/denomination were you apart of? (Explain the denomination.)
    ☐ How often did you/your family attend church or church-related activities?
    ☐ How much of it was brought into your home/stressed in family life (e.g. praying regularly, adherence to religious holidays)

☐ How would you describe your current religious/spiritual belief/nonbelief?
    ☐ What do you call yourself (which nonreligious labels do you identify with)?
    ☐ What labels have you identified with in the past?

☐ How long have you been a nonbeliever?
    ☐ How old were you, and how long ago was that?
    ☐ Could you describe something specific that happened in your life that prompted you to question the validity of theism?
    ☐ How much time did you spend thinking about religion vs. atheism before coming to a conclusion?

☐ Are you open about being a nonbeliever?
    ☐ Do you have friends who are nonbelievers?
    ☐ Do people close to you know you're a nonbeliever? Have you told:
        ☐ Family?
        ☐ Friends?
        ☐ Co-workers?
    ☐ If you haven't told one or more of these groups, what has stopped you?

☐ Several studies have shown that atheists are the least trusted minority group in the country. Out of a long list of minority groups, Americans are generally less willing to accept their own children marrying atheists, vote for an atheist, and they imagine that atheists are less likely to share their vision of American society. What do you think of that?
    ☐ Do you ever feel that people don't trust you/dislike you when you say you're a nonbeliever?

☐ Could you tell me about the last time you had a conversation about religion/nonbelief?
    ☐ Do these types of conversations occur very often? How often do you find yourself thinking or talking about atheism/religion?

☐ What are your feelings toward believers or religious organizations?

Specific to Joiners

☐ Which nonreligious organizations are you involved in?
    ☐ How did you hear about the group(s)?
    ☐ Why did you join?
    ☐ How often do you attend meetings?

☐ What kinds of meetings do you attend?
    ☐ Describe a typical meeting for me.
    ☐ Are there any types of meetings that you don't care to attend?

☐ Do you attend with anyone else (friend, partner, kids, etc.)?
    ☐ Have you make any friends/formed any relationships as a result of attending these meetings?

☐ Do you have any organizational/leadership responsibilities?
    ☐ If you were in a leadership role, is there anything about the organization/meetings that you'd like to change?

☐ Are you involved in any online communities?

☐ Do you belong to any other voluntary associations?

Specific to Leaders/Organizers

☐ Do you know the history of the organization or how it started?
    ☐ How has the organization changed since you've been involved?
    ☐ What role do you play in the organization? What are your responsibilities?

☐ What are the goals of this organization?
    ☐ Have you achieved them, or do you feel that you're on the path to achieving them?
    ☐ Does the organization have any trouble recruiting or maintaining members?

☐ From your own perspective, what do other people think of the organization?
    ☐ Do you have any idea what other atheists/nonbelievers think of the organization?
    ☐ Have you gotten any response from the religious community?
    ☐ Has there been any conflict with these groups of people?

Specific to Non-joiners

☐ Are you familiar with any nonreligious organizations?

☐ Are you involved in any online communities?

☐ Have you ever considered joining a nonreligious organization?
    ☐ Is anything keeping you from joining one of these groups?
    ☐ Would you ever consider joining one of these groups?

☐ Do you belong to any other voluntary associations?

Demographics

☐ Gender?
☐ Age?
☐ Sexual orientation?
☐ Married?
☐ Children?
    ☐ Are you raising your children to be secular?
☐ Education? Career?
☐ Political orientation?
    ☐ Do you see your political views as being related to your views on religion?

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