Triangle Atheists: Stigma, Identity, and Community Among

Atheists in North Carolina's Triangle Region

by

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Graduate Program in Religion
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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

While there has been much speculation among sociologists on what the rise of religious disaffiliation means in the long-term for American religiosity, and if it can be considered a valid measure of broader secularization, the issue of if and how explicitly atheist communities are normalizing irreligion in the United States has received little attention. Adopting an inductive approach and drawing on one year of exploratory ethnographic research within one atheist community in North Carolina's Triangle Region, including extensive participant-observation as well as nineteen in-depth interviews, I examine in what ways individuals within this community have experienced and interpreted stigma because of their atheistic views, how they have conceptualized and constructed their atheist identity, and how both of these things influence their motivations for seeking and affiliating with atheist organizations and communities. On all these measures I found great diversity among my interlocutors along with a popular desire to shift the focus of atheist organizations, within their own community and in the public sphere, in a positive and value-affirming direction. I consider how these findings might reflect broader trends in how atheism is conceived of and enacted in the contemporary United States and where organized atheism might be heading in the years to come.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to all of the Triangle atheists that invited me into their community, lives, and homes. You not only made this project possible, but you made me feel welcome in the Triangle as I adjusted to grad school and the new environment I found myself in. I hope the following pages, in some small way, do justice to your stories and the community you have worked so hard to build.

Contents

<u>Introduction</u>

When I set out to conduct an ethnography of atheist culture in North Carolina's Triangle region, I knew that I would be navigating academic territory that has been left largely unexplored. While I will provide a general background of existing scholarship of the three themes in this paper (stigma, identity and community) in their corresponding sections, it is appropriate to explain my general approach at the outset in order to clarify how my study differs from the extant body of literature on the subject of lived American atheism and how I hope to contribute to it.

In the following pages, I piece together a snapshot of how atheists in one area of the southern United States conceptualize their own atheist identities and their affiliation with atheist organizations. Both these aspects of the atheist experience are profoundly informed by the experience of 'otherness' and marginalization, especially in the American south, such that the concept of stigma cannot be extricated from their analyses without depriving them of their central force. Stigma, identity, and community, then, compose a useful framework with which to explore aspects of individual atheist experience and a developmental progression toward the formation of atheist social structures and organizations. The implementation of these themes is also a practical decision, allowing for the most efficient application possible of the small body of academic literature on this subject.

The paucity of scholarship in this field, along with the marginalized social status of many of my interlocutors, informed my decision to adopt not only an inductive exploratory approach, but also an extensive and immersive method of participant-observation that would allow me to engage as fully as possible with the community and

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the social and organizational dynamics that gave it form. I conducted nineteen in-depth interviews that often entailed the revelation of deeply personal and painful narratives or, while perhaps less dramatic, accounts that amounted to detailed reflections of upbringing, personal growth, and the meaningful relationships that have shaped their lives. These interviews, along with the variety of social events and sponsored lectures I attended outside of them, made the development of personal relationships and the injection of my own views, opinions, and experiences into dialogues impossible to avoid. In that spirit, it is appropriate to offer a note on my own background.

My academic interest in atheism is derived mainly from my own intellectual and social experiences as an atheist. My grandfather and one uncle on my mother's side were both Lutheran pastors and I attended church every Sunday as a child at a liberal Episcopal church outside of Boston, Massachusetts. My upbringing was theologically and intellectually liberal but religiously committed and devout in practice. I was always encouraged to ask questions and not take scripture literally but carried the cross down the aisle for every Sunday service, sang in the church choir, and volunteered and participated in countless church functions. In retrospect, I believe I was ideally primed to become an atheist upon reaching adulthood. I took religious questions seriously and thought about them constantly, was raised in arguably one of the most liberal and secular regions of the United States in Massachusetts, and I had stopped going to church when I entered college, which many young adults tend to do (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007).

I began to identify as an atheist when I was living just outside of Boston after graduating from college. The details of my deconversion aside, and in the spirit of remaining consistent with the three primary themes of this paper, it's important to

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emphasize the utter lack of stigma I experienced as an atheist in Boston and the stark absence of institutional forms that injected theism or any kind of normative religiosity into my daily life. So, for example, when I told my family I was an atheist, the primary reaction was one of sincere interest and many productive conversations about religion. Unlike many of my interlocutors, I have never experienced the teaching of creationism in schools or have even heard anyone espouse that worldview other than in the media. I have never had a coworker or a stranger I have just met ask where I go to church. These experiences (or lack thereof) profoundly inform the kind of atheist I am and how I have developed my own atheist identity.

It was, therefore, difficult for me to relate to some of the negative experiences I heard from my interlocutors, which I will explain in the chapter on stigma, and helps to illuminate how I conceptualize my atheism as opposed to someone who grew in a more conservative and religiously normative environment, as I will discuss in the chapter on identity. Finally, both of these dimensions of atheist experience determine motivations for affiliation with atheist organizations, which I will cover in the chapter on community. To be clear, though, the divergences in atheist experience that I found between myself and my interlocutors should not be reduced to instances of a "northern American atheist" meeting some "southern American atheists," although, as this paper argues, location is important to atheist experience. Instead, just as religiosity is generally appreciated to exhibit countless and idiosyncratic forms, so should atheism. I found the variety of atheisms I encountered to be necessarily as varied and particular as my interlocutors themselves. I should note here that I employ the term "atheist" in this paper to denote the shared belief among all of my interlocutors that God does not exist. As I will describe

below, though, some of them had both social and philosophical reservations about applying the term to themselves.

In the face of such a multiplicity of experiences and identities, my methodology in interviews was to conduct relaxed, semi-structured, and open-ended conversations where my interlocutors could discuss whatever they felt was most relevant to my line of questioning. This allowed them to enact as much agency as possible in guiding our discussions in order to explore the particularities of their experiences as fully as possible. Tempering this variability, though, was my focus on the Triangle and its role in my interlocutors' experiences as atheists. This commonality of place served to contextualize and accentuate the differences that emerged in my interlocutors' accounts of atheist stigma, identity and community.

The Triangle

The idea for this study was initially conceived as the topic of a term paper my first semester in the Masters of Religion program at Duke University. Accordingly, I chose the only area I could, the area in which I found myself at that time, as the setting for my primary goal of researching contemporary atheist community. I soon found, though, that the Triangle is perhaps one of the most ideal locations in the United States to conduct this kind of research. It has only come to be known as "The Triangle" in the latter half of the twentieth century, being roughly bordered by the three largest research universities in North Carolina and the towns in which they reside: Duke University in Durham, North Carolina State University in Raleigh, and the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. It solidified itself as a singular metropolitan area when in the 1950's and 60's, Research

Triangle Park was built in the center, between these universities, attracting businesses and technology companies that quickly developed symbiotic relationships with the three schools, affectively uniting three separate metro poles into one (Rohe, 2011).

The social effect of this process seems to have been the development of a concentration of educated, liberal, politically progressive citizens within the Triangle. A recent example is found in the passage of a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage in North Carolina in 2012. Soon after, a New York Times article brought the issue of technological innovation and progressive attitudes to the fore. The excerpt here begins and ends with the voice of urban studies expert Richard Florida with the reporter's voice in-between:

> '…places that are open-minded and diverse attract people who are original thinkers, and these communities percolate with entrepreneurial and creative ideas.' Typical of such areas is Raleigh-Durham, site of North Carolina's vaunted Research Triangle, and located in one of the few counties that voted against the ban on same-sex marriage. 'The Triangle is tolerant and has a long legacy as a home to colleges and universities where gays and lesbians are welcome,' Professor Florida said (Stewart, 2012).

In talking with atheists in the Triangle, I found that those that had lived in the region for an extended period of time had always felt fairly comfortable in regard to their atheist identity and obviously, as I will show, have been able to find a community of like-minded people.

But how does this make the Triangle an ideal place for a study of this kind? Because, it is a small progressive geographic area situated within a larger and more socially and politically conservative environment. It is a safe space for atheists to come out, socialize and organize *as atheists* while the state government and the social environment around them continually reinforce their marginalized identity and provoke

them to action. As has been observed in the past, atheism or irreligion in general has often been political and reactionary in nature, fueled by religiously repressive governments and social atmospheres (Campbell, 1971/2013). In fact, while conducting my research, North Carolina legislators introduced a resolution, which later failed, stating their right to declare an official state religion which one can assume would have been Christianity (Cohen, 2013). Rallying cries for organized atheists in the Triangle are not difficult to come by.

For my purposes, I focused primarily on two organizations from which I drew most of my interviewees. One I will call the Triangle Political Atheists and the other I will call the Triangle Social Atheists (TPA and TSA respectively hereafter)[1]. I focus on these two groups for a few reasons. First, they're arguably the largest atheist groups in the Triangle and maintain the most frequent and regular meeting schedules. Second, TPA is a political action group and TSA is strictly a social group, encapsulating two of the main motivations for affiliation with atheist organizations: the desire to affect political change and the drive to seek out and socialize with like-minded people.

Forging a New Field

The limited attention that organized atheism in the United States has received in the sociology of religion and other fields is worth addressing. In 2013, Colin Campbell's *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (1971/2013) was republished with a new introduction by Lois Lee, where she observes the importance of this seminal book to the now growing

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[1] I have changed the names of these organizations to assist in protecting the privacy of my interlocutors

field of the sociology of irreligion. In doing so, she writes that the book, "can claim the distinction of having provided the revived social scientific study of irreligion with its first cliché…'In 1971', the rhetorical device runs, 'Colin Campbell published *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*; it is only 35 years later that call has been heeded'" (p. XVII). I include this passage because I am certainly guilty of employing this cliché in the past and recognize its utility in drawing attention to the fact that, while this field has been previously proposed and even superficially engaged, the follow-through has been, up until only a few years ago, essentially non-existent.

This is all to emphasize an important aspect of this paper. This is an exploratory study that has the primary goal of describing atheist community in one geographic area and relating, as accurately as possible, the experiences and motivations of the people that compose it. While my review of relevant literature at the beginning of every section will point to theories and hypotheses that have been previously employed to describe and understand various dimensions of American atheist experience, I aim simply to share the data I believe is most applicable to the subject at hand in order to communicate what I found atheist experience in the Triangle is like as described by my interlocutors. At the end of each chapter, I offer observations and ideas as to how my research fits in with previous studies and propose questions prompted by the subsequent contradictions and commonalities.

This academic agenda, though, is incomplete without recognizing that the testimony of my interlocutors, which was universally given if not with little reservation then with great enthusiasm, was often an incredibly personal and emotional act. Several of them were not "out" to their families or co-workers as atheist and many more have

experienced significant discrimination in various forms due to their non-belief. I was caught off-guard more than once when an interviewee would share something personal and painful to me in the process of describing their journey to and through atheism. To this day I remain grateful for their honesty and insecure in my ability to engage their stories with the attention and care they deserve. So, while this project is indeed meant as a contribution to the kind of sociological understanding of atheism described above, it also reflects a harmful prejudice in American culture, especially in the south, toward non-believers and aims to portray, through their own testimonies of discrimination, personal growth, and social fulfillment, the humanity and legitimacy of this community and the values they hold dear.

Chapter 1: Stigma

1.1 Background

Of the three organizing themes utilized in this paper, stigma toward atheists has received the most academic attention among social scientists and also has the longest and best-documented history. An investigation into the etymology of the word "atheist" itself reveals that its earliest uses in antiquity were exclusively pejorative despite the fact that atheism as we know it, that is as an explicit rejection of god and religious belief that is sometimes organized and political, was non-existent and probably unimaginable. As Jan M. Bremmer (2007) describes it,

> …atheism never developed into a popular ideology with a recognizable following. All we have in antiquity is the exceptional individuals who dared to voice his disbelief or bold philosophers who proposed intellectual theories about the coming into existence of the gods, without, normally, putting their theories into practice or rejecting religious practice altogether. If we find atheism at all, it is usually a 'soft' atheism or the imputation of atheism to others as a means to discredit them (p. 11).

So although atheism was something of a different animal in antiquity, its invocation in debate or discussion was, as is still often the case today, nearly always in the form of an insult or accusation.

No better example of this exists than the famous trial and execution of Socrates where the charges leveled against him were summarized as follows: "Socrates does wrong by not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledges, and introducing other, new powers. He also does wrong by corrupting the young" (Bremmer, 2007: p. 19). This early example of prejudice toward religious skepticism is remarkable for both its similarity to existing forms of anti-atheist stigma that were expressed by my interlocutors and the almost poetic brevity with which it encapsulates such a dynamic and complex

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phenomenon. First, it chastises Socrates for "not acknowledging the gods the city acknowledges." What a peculiar qualification. Why not rebuke him simply for not believing in the gods in general? The answer lies in the civic implications of his unbelief. It is a subtle but clear recognition that his behavior undermines the established order and is an early example of institutionalized discrimination aiming to cultivate a sense of cultural compliance in the populace. The other charges of, "introducing other, new powers," and doing, "wrong by corrupting the young," also deal directly with disrupting social harmony. Socrates's crime then, wasn't atheism (at least in regard to the city's gods) as such. Rather, it was the active promulgation of a deviant outlook and lifestyle that threatened established power structures and societal norms.

If we fast-forward to our own time, we can see that very little has changed in this regard. By far, the most cited and popular study on atheist stigma in the 21st Century emphasizes what anti-atheist prejudice says about the social boundaries constructed by normative mainstream religious culture. In *Atheists as "Other": Moral Boundaries and cultural membership in American society* (2006), Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann argue that "attitudes toward atheists tell us more about American society and culture than about atheists themselves," and that their "analysis sheds light on broader issues regarding the historic place of religion in underpinning moral order in the United States" (p. 230). This study, as well as much of the academic literature on this topic that followed, which I will describe in the following pages, is as much about atheists as it is about the dynamic public discourses that shape and reinforce notions of cultural legitimacy.

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Predating Edgell at al.'s study was Robert Heiner's article, *evangelical heathens: the deviant status of freethinkers in southland* (1992). Although not the first ethnography of organized atheism in the United States to be conducted[1] it does function as an intriguing snapshot of freethought activity during a time when it, and its study, was arguably less vibrant than ever. I mention it here, though, because Heiner emphasizes the centrality of the deviant status of atheists and freethinkers and the profound implications it has for atheist identity and organized activity. As he bluntly puts is, "Atheism has often been associated with immorality, anarchy, and during the Cold War, communism; some fundamentalists are taught that atheists are in league with the Devil" (p. 6).

In his analysis, Heiner goes on to explain how this deviant status informs the construction and maintenance of their atheist identity, as I intend to do, and the symbiotic relationship it fosters between their organizational existence and the normative Christian culture around them. "These unbelievers are ever-conscious of their deviant, status flaunting and defending it. Their group would be of no significance, would not even exist, if it were not for the Christians 'all around them'" (p. 17). Again, as with the work of Edgell et al., we see the boundary-creating, identity-constructing effect of stigma against atheists, except here, interpreted as reinforcing organized nonbelief rather than normative American religious culture.

The nature of discrimination toward the non-religious has been taken up explicitly in more recent studies. Of particular interest here would be two studies that touch on the sociological and psychological aspects of this question. Concerning the former, a study carried out by Ryan Cragun and colleagues (Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer, &

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[1] See, for example, Demerath (1969) and Demerath & Theissen (1966)

Nielsen, 2012) found that "The strongest predictor of such discrimination was not theological atheism or agnosticism but self-identifying as an atheist or agnostic when asked what one's religion is" (p. 105). We find the echo here of the accusation against Socrates that his crime was not his beliefs as such, but how they influenced the cultural dynamics of the city and its youth. Cragun et al. (2012) also find that "Non-religious people are substantially more likely to report experiencing discrimination in family settings and socially than they are in the workplace, school, the military or voluntary organizations" (p. 118). This finding was reflected in my own research, as I will discuss shortly.

As for psychological theories of discrimination toward atheists, no study has received more public attention than the one carried out by Will Gervais and colleagues (Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011), which framed anti-atheist prejudice as an issue of trust. The provocative methodology, which atheists often cite as evidence of their marginalized status, involved posing hypothetical scenarios to participants in order to measure levels of trust exhibited toward various social groups using rapists, a universally distrusted group, as a control. Their findings, in turn, reflected that atheists and rapists were trusted to about the same degree with several other marginalized groups (i.e. gays and Muslims) garnering significantly more trust among the participants. While the ostensible severity of acquainting atheists to rapists seems extreme, the general frame of distrust seems consistent with the sociological findings we've discussed: that anti-atheist prejudice is a result of the construction of cultural boundaries that attempt to define in-groups and out-groups, solidifying cultural ties and reinforcing in-group trust at the expense of the social legitimacy of the marginalized out-group.

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The extant literature on anti-atheist stigma, as opposed to other social aspects of irreligion in the United States, is developing into a substantial body of scholarship and certainly goes beyond what I have been able to cover here. Arguably the most significant finding that this field of inquiry has produced, though, is that the activation of anti-atheist stigma is prompted primarily by the act of identification on the part of the atheist or with a declarative statement that expresses the equivalent: "I don't believe in God." This prompts us to consider the historical definition of the word "stigma" more seriously as "a mark made upon the skin by burning with a hot iron, as a token of infamy or subjection" ("stigma," 2013). This somatic definition has its most famous example in the stigmata of Jesus Christ and the wounds left in his hands as permanent reminders of his role as both criminal and savior. We see an interesting inversion of this instance in the embodied, vocal pronouncement of atheism; a moment that marks one, depending on who you ask, as either deviant or liberated.

Doubting the veracity of one's particular religion, more vague theological statements such as "I don't think God exists," or general a-religiosity do not have nearly the same stigma-generating effect (Swan & Heesacker, 2012). This also makes the findings of Cragun et al. (2012), that self-reported instances of discrimination are most often perpetrated by family and social groups as opposed to at work or in the public sphere, that much more understandable. For it is in these more intimate settings that atheists are more likely to voice their irreligion in the manner described above.

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1.2 Stigma Among Triangle Atheists

Discussing instances of discrimination with the participants in my study was, for obvious reasons, often the hardest part of the interview process. More often than not, as reflected in Cragun et al.'s article (2012), the conversation was about family. Because of this, I will focus mainly on this aspect of anti-atheist stigma in order to do justice to the findings of my research. I will, though, report other instances and kinds of discrimination in proportion to their prevalence in my interviews to the best of my ability. These include instances of institutionalized stigma (i.e. from the government) and social discrimination in the workplace.

Before going any further, though, a salient aspect of my findings with regard to anti-atheist stigma in the Triangle must be understood: my interlocutors widely reported that the Triangle has been quite hospitable to them as atheists. Now, this may very well be a glaring example of selection bias. I have, after all, focused on a group of atheists that have affiliated with atheist political and social groups and who have successfully integrated themselves into communities of other like-minded individuals. Atheists, though, usually aren't shy about pointing out discrimination and, for the reasons stated in the introduction, the Triangle has all the hallmarks of a geographic area that is generally welcoming of a wide range of beliefs and lifestyles.

One participant in this study, Megan,[2] recently ran a table for a local atheist organization that advertised the organization's mission and events at a local farmer's market. Megan told me that she experienced barely any conflict or criticism as visitors passed by her table. As she explained her experience,

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[2] I use pseudonyms throughout the paper to protect the identity of my interlocutors

It was actually pretty stressful for me, like, what do I do, what do I say to these people, what if one of these people comes up and starts attacking me, how am I going to handle it...it was actually fine, nobody did anything, not that anybody would assault us but somebody might try and argue with us and I'm not a very good arguer, but now that I've done it, I think it was easy.

She also told me she grew up in a more conservative rural area about twenty minutes outside the Triangle. I asked her if she thought she would have a similar experience in the farmer's market there. She immediately shook her head, "No…they would definitely not be a receptive audience." In fact one interaction she had at her table at the farmer's market encapsulates quite well the paradox of living in the Triangle; that is, living in a tolerant community in the largely intolerant south. She mentioned one man, nervous to be seen at the table, stopped briefly and said, "Great for you guys but I can never go to a meeting because I'm a teacher." The specter of stigma, then, is ever-present even in an otherwise accepting and pluralistic environment.

It's easy to see, though, how one could get along just fine as an atheist in such a place. After all, one can be an atheist and still go through the motions of religious observance if completely necessary. It is also much more acceptable to describe oneself as non-religious or doubting than to identify as an atheist. Embracing the former kind of identity is another way some atheists might navigate the stigma associated with the complete rejection of religion and theism. It is due to these nuances, though, that the stories I heard in my interviews that dealt with discrimination or prejudice were primarily in the context of their relationships with close family and friends; the people that knew my interlocutors best and became familiar with the full measure of their non-belief.

The phenomena of atheist stigma and atheist identity are profoundly intertwined and it would be impossible, not to mention analytically preposterous, to attempt to

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untangle them. The central act of atheist identity, "coming out" as atheist, for example, was, for many of my interlocutors, the most significant moment in terms of both their experience with anti-atheist stigma and in the formation of their atheist identity. Inversely, remaining "in the closet," becomes a perpetual reminder of their marginalized status and the arrested development of their social identity. Expressing or not expressing one's atheist identity, then, often determines the nature of stigma one is likely to suffer.

Jason, for example, a young man that lives near but outside the Triangle, didn't "come out" voluntarily. As he described it, one day his girlfriend called him and said that they needed to talk.

> *..so she drove over and said, 'I've noticed a couple things lately: when I mention praying, you turn the other way or don't say anything or sigh or do something like that,' and I told her, 'no I don't believe in any of that' and I started explaining why and then she started crying like immediately and she was seriously about to break up with me…and she was crying most of time and I was feeling guilty in a way and she didn't know what to do.*

This was one of the first times Jason had to reconcile his newly adopted identity with its marginalized status in the surrounding culture. This incident was exacerbated a few weeks later when Jason's mother was speaking to his girlfriend about his non-belief and she referred to him as an "atheist." Interpreting Jason's adoption of the atheist label as new information and indicative of a more radical stance on his part, Jason's girlfriend became upset all over again. While Jason and his girlfriend have weathered this revelation and remain together, he told me that the issue is sure to become a bigger problem should they begin to discuss marriage and children. He also expressed something I heard from many of my interlocutors: feeling guilty for causing pain for

those close to him. So, feelings of marginalization are compounded by notions of self-blame and culpability.

When I talked to him, Jason also shared an instance of feeling marginalized by family members that had occurred only a few days before:

> *I got a telescope recently and I set it outside the night before last and I had it pointed at Saturn. And my little brothers were all crowded around it, looking in and saying, 'ah, that is so awesome.' And then my little ten year old brother, just completely unprovoked said, 'Oh, don't ruin this with all that evolution crap.'*

When I asked Jason whether that got under his skin, he said, "It does. It bothers me," and I could see he him become visibly upset. He said he didn't take it personally, however, but that what bothered him most was the closed-mindedness; that his brother, "was being influenced from seeing things as they are." The obvious implication here is that Jason's little brother was also being influenced to dismiss a significant aspect of Jason's identity as well. As someone with two close siblings myself, I did not blame Jason for becoming upset. If my own family had dismissed me in such a way, especially when I was navigating a newly adopted identity and needed to discuss it with those close to me, it would have been beyond frustrating and painful.

Tanya's experience with anti-atheist stigma was more insidious and intentional. Having identified as an atheist for a certain period of time, she was shocked when a cyber-stalker began emailing her friends and family, leveraging her atheism to damage her private life:

> *This person outed me to my mom through an email. He pretended to be another (member of an atheist organization), created an account and emailed my mother and told her I was an atheist…I didn't want to come out. I don't think I would've told her…there are just some people in your life that you…you want them to die not knowing so that they never have to deal with the idea of you going to hell. My mom has struggled for years with the idea that her only daughter will burn in hell.*

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This is a clear instance of someone leveraging anti-atheist stigma and American hostility toward religious "out-groups" to purposefully harm someone in that out-group. So in this small excerpt we see not only the prejudice of the stalker, but the stalker taking advantage of the prejudice of Tanya's mother in order to disrupt Tanya's personal relationships. On top of all of this, we see again the sense of guilt many atheists experience as a result of causing their loved ones emotional and psychological distress.

Tanya also experienced marginalization on account of her atheism in the workplace. After she revealed that she didn't believe in God to a coworker, she told me

> *I knew it was going to get around. My boss stopped talking to me after that. It was a few weeks before she would even look me in the eye again. A few weeks later, another coworker pulls me in her office and…she said, 'So you don't believe in God?' I said, 'Nope, I don't. I don't believe in anything superstitious. I don't believe in God, fairies, unicorns, I don't believe in any of that.' So she was like, 'So that means you worship the devil?'*

Heiner's (1992) observation that atheism is often associated with devil worship is on display here as well as Cragun et al's (2012) finding that the workplace is one of the most common sites of anti-atheist discrimination.

Prejudice against atheists, though, is not only manifested in personal relationships or face-to-face encounters. It has also been institutionalized in various ways including in state and federal government. As I mentioned earlier, the North Carolina state government recently made a failed attempt to establish a state religion. More widely discussed and debated in atheist circles is the prevalence of theism in things like the national motto of the United States, "In God We Trust," its presence on our currency and in government buildings, and the general expectation that our politicians declare their, if not Christian, then religious convictions (Niose, 2012). The presence of religious

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sentiment in government processes, though, can run much deeper than these public signifiers.

Dan made this clear to me when he described how his atheism was largely forged from an experience he had with on state government. He told me, "When I pretty much wrote off religion and started calling myself an atheist, was after the death of my son." The conversation up to this point had been about Dan's growing doubts during his college years and I was taken aback by this suddenly personal turn, unsure how to respond. Dan explained that he and his wife lost their baby when it was born extremely premature due to complications during the pregnancy. It was the institutional response from both the hospital and the government of the state they were living in at the time that entrenched Dan more in his atheism.

> *Having (hospital staff) come in to want to pray for us and how it was God's will and…just people constantly coming through and you're grieving and of course they think they're being helpful and it's like, 'You know what? This has got nothing to do with a God' and it got me thinking…why would there be a God that lets innocents suffer and that has been one of my major reasons for being an atheist…and then I had to go through a funeral service for him due to (state) law. If you lose a baby after 20 weeks, you have to have a funeral of the fetus….That's all religious stuff, just placating to religion to do that…I had to fill out a death certificate, had to name him, and had to cremate him or bury him…I'd have flashbacks for years when I passed by that funeral home and remember the time I had to pull into that funeral home and make arrangements when I shouldn't have had to.*

Of course, individual hospital staff offering condolences in a religious frame isn't a clear-cut instance of the institutional promotion of normative religious culture. It is clear, though, by the prevalence of the religious sentiment described by Dan, that this culture was dominant and apparently unchallenged at any level. At the same time, the state's definition of personhood after 20 weeks and the requirement that Dan and his wife

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ritualize the death of their son in a certain way, portray quite clearly how atheists and other non-religious people can be coerced to conform to religious and cultural norms at especially sensitive periods. This institutional blindness to Dan's own philosophy and circumstance is a systematic example of the "othering" that perpetuates the stigmatization of atheists and simultaneously strengthens cultural continuity among American theists by enshrining religious practice in government law (Edgell et al., 2006).

1.3 Conclusion

As I mentioned above, it was difficult for me to relate to some of the instances of discrimination experienced by my interlocutors who were, more often that not, raised in a more religious culture than I was. While I went to church every Sunday and was involved in various groups, the wider culture of metropolitan Boston was comparatively secular. Outside of church, having faith was largely a personal matter. Tanya, though, described the church she grew up in as "kind of a community thing. It was a way to hang out with my friends outside of school, socially acceptable, my parents encouraged it." Tanya attended the Baptist church near the center of town whose only rival was the nearby Methodist church. She told me, "I remember one time a family left the Baptist church for the Methodist church and they were trash-talked for years." One can only imagine the reaction of a family leaving to join the atheist community down the street. Another interlocutor, Jenna, lived in North Carolina outside of the Triangle for many years and summed up a sentiment I heard quite often from the people I spoke with as to what it is like when you travel a few miles from the area in any direction: "I got pretty used to people asking, 'Where do you go to church? What church do you go to? Want to come to

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church with us?" These examples, along with the experiences of my interlocutors related above, bear out the conclusions of Edgell et al. (2006) and Cragun et al. (20120) that anti-atheist stigma is grounded in the processes of reinforcement of shared conceptions of normative religiosity where theistic belief acts as a lowest common denominator of cultural inclusion, and that this stigma is most marked in more intimate social interactions where this boundary-making is primarily practiced among friends, families and coworkers.

So not much has changed since the trial of Socrates it seems. The famous words of Psalm 14:1, "The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God," seem to lack a sociological sensibility. Rather, the "fool," who is invested in uncomplicated relationships within a theistic culture, says, "there is no God," out loud. Indeed, several of my interlocutors opted for silence to maintain simple relationships with friends and families. Five of my nineteen interlocutors remain "in the closet" as atheists to their families and, as we saw, Jason and Tanya are now out to their families by less than voluntary means. This strategy of silence casts in high relief the dialectical relationship between anti-atheist stigma and atheist identification, the manifestation of both being highly informed and influenced by the other. To examine this dynamic, though, it is necessary to investigate the phenomenon of atheist identity more closely and see what commonalities, if any, we can identify in the narratives of deconversion offered to me by my interlocutors.

<u>Chapter 2: Atheist Identity</u>

2.1 Background

As I pointed out in the previous section on stigma, the term "atheist" has been used in an exclusively pejorative sense for the majority of its history. It was during the French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century that we see certain figures, namely Denis Diderot, Baron D'Holbach and Jacques-Andre Naigeon embrace the term "atheist" and claim it for themselves as an appropriate marker of their identity. Still, their use of the label was socially limited. D'Holbach's salon in rue Royale has become famous for the candid discussions that occurred there among Paris's elite philosophers but it was also one of the only places where these noted atheists could embrace the label, along with its contingent philosophy, without fear of censure. Diderot's use of a pseudonym and time spent in jail for writing *Letter on the Blind for the Use of Those Who See* and the necessity of D'Holbach employing a pseudonym for the initial publication of his book *System of Nature* bear out this fact quite clearly (Buckley, 1987). Still, these thinkers embody perhaps the first notable historical instance of an overt, unapologetic and even proud act of atheist identification.

Pulling the genealogy closer to our own time and to the shores of the United States, Robert Ingersoll became one of the first great polemicists that gained a popular following railing against organized religion in the late nineteenth century. Billed as "The Great Agnostic" rather than "The Great Atheist," notwithstanding his clearly naturalistic perspective, Ingersoll lectured to sold out auditoriums across the country where he would question the legitimacy of institutional religious authority, explain and glorify the scientific method and Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, advocate for

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humanistic values, and ridicule what he argued were the moral anachronisms and hypocrisies of the Bible (Jacoby, 2013). It would be a mistake to attribute his use of the "agnostic" label as a ploy to remain palatable to his audiences and there seems to be no real evidence that this choice was ultimately strategic. At the same time, though, it would be disingenuous not to wonder how his career might have gone (or not gone), had he adopted the identity of a full-fledged atheist. In any case, Ingersoll remains an anomaly in American history as an agnostic, known primarily for his critiques of religious belief and its institutions, and who was widely respected and liked among the American people.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Madalyn Murray O'Hair was an outspoken atheist, known primarily for her critique of religious belief and institutions, and nearly universally despised by the American people. In 1964, *Life* magazine called her, "the most hated woman in America" (Seaman, 2005). She made a singular contribution to American atheism as we know it today, though, by publicly embracing this marginalized identity while urging other atheists to do so as well. In 1968, in the first broadcast of a radio show she hosted out of Austin, Texas she said,

> I have had what is called 'a very poor press' and I intend to overcome that here in this city, on this radio program, in other cities on similar ones by saying directly to you what I really want to say, so that *you* can come to know the real me, and through me, what an Atheist really is (O'Hair, 1969, p. 3).

The "very poor press" O'Hair speaks of could be in regard to atheism in general. Her conviction to combat that marginalization by embracing her atheist identity and engaging in candid discussion about it in order to humanize herself to detractors is also a synecdochic device meant to suggest a general strategy for the cultural inclusion of

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atheists. Later in the same broadcast she says, "What on earth is an atheist but a human being, very much like you, with many of the same values, goals, and ideas" (p. 3).

The so-called New Atheists, a group of elite public polemicists that include Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett, have revived this approach for the 21st century. In the preface to the best-selling book *The God Delusion* (2006), Richard Dawkins writes that one of the ways he would like to "raise the consciousness" of atheists is by emphasizing atheist pride: "Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of…There are many people who know, in their heart of hearts, that they are atheists, but dare not admit it to their families or even, in some cases, to themselves" (p. 26). David Niose (2012), president of the Secular Coalition for America and former president of the American Humanist Association, points out the lessons to be derived from the gay rights movement in this context:

> In both the secular and LGBT movements, we have minority groups in which membership can usually be concealed from the view of the general public, although at high personal cost for gays and lesbians. We also have widespread prejudices that often result in family disapproval and various degrees of social ostracism. But with both groups, we find that a key to acceptance is identity—only by 'coming out' can Secular Americans and LGBT Americans change public perceptions and gain acceptance (p. 92).

Atheist identification, as framed by Dawkins and Niose, becomes politicized as a means to affect concrete social and political change. Additionally, Niose's association of atheism and the LGBT movement raises the question of whether, and to what degree, these identities can be implemented to the benefit of a more general agenda of liberal progressivism.

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Aside from contributing a more militant tone to contemporary atheism, the New Atheism was also instrumental in prompting a renewed interest among scholars in the social dynamics of organized atheism. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2010), for example, have investigated the influence of the New Atheism and new media on atheist identity and how they have contributed to increased acceptance of atheists: "'Coming out'…has not been simply a matter of expressing oneself as atheist along a well-worn legitimate route. It has involved emerging from invisibility to claim a personal and social identity that has carried a fair degree of stigma" (p. 140). They go on to express their belief that this process is becoming more legitimate, though, due at least in part to the New Atheism and its online presence, writing, "A central premise informing this article is that the substantial transformations in our contemporary mediascape are creating a new space for atheists to come out, speak out, and 'meet up' in a still largely religious society" (p.147). This "new space," as described by Cimino and Smith, is found online and in the public sphere in general, renovated by the influence of the New Atheism, which has provided the discursive framework within which atheists can engage with one another and construct atheist identities in a social setting.

The social-psychological aspect of the construction of atheist identity is beginning to receive some attention among social scientists as well. Sociologist Jesse Smith, for example, has laid some of the groundwork for the study of atheist identity in his article, *Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism* (2010). Smith defines "identity" as "that which we use to locate and identify

ourselves in social life" (p. 217),[1]and offers "four major elements in the construction of atheist identity in America: (1) the starting point: the ubiquity of atheism, (2) questioning theism, (3) rejecting theism, and (4) "coming out" atheist" (p. 210). Of course, Smith means these elements to function as a general framework for considering the social-psychological process of constructing an atheist identity toward which any given stage or element may apply more or less depending on the subject. I found this framework helpful, though, in considering the narratives presented to me by my interlocutors, although it fails to account for *types* of theism and atheism, with the former often influencing the latter, especially in regard to highly politicized religion and atheism. For example, a highly politicized atheism is more likely to emerge out of more religiously and politically coercive social contexts (Campbell, 1971/2013; Smith, 2013b), which I will discuss at further length in the chapter on atheist community.

As one can tell from the short history provided here, the concept of atheist identity as an "achieved identity" (Smith, 2010: 215) is quite new, and only now is it receiving scholarly attention as an identifiable social-psychological phenomenon. It is not a process that exists in a vacuum and it is characterized by the social, religious, and political dynamics of one's environment. These dynamics, then, can also be said to characterize one's atheism as well, once established. The New Atheism, national and local politics, the religiosity of friends and family, and social media are only a few examples of elements I found to be instrumental in my interlocutors' adoption of an atheist identity. As diverse as their narratives were, though, virtually all of them had in common the notion that their atheism was "achieved" as articulated by Smith or that the

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[1] Smith derives this definition from (Hewitt, 2000)

adoption of their atheist identity was a liberating moment that affectively terminated an entire dimension of religious anxiety.

2.2 Identity Among Triangle Atheists

While discussing instances of anti-atheist stigma with my interlocutors was, at times, especially difficult, I found that many of them became eager, and even lit up, when it came time to share their story about how they came to "realize" they were an atheist or about the process they went through that resulted in them claiming an atheist identity. Perhaps this is because deconversion narratives enjoy a rather esteemed position in American atheist culture. One of the most prominent examples of this narrative form is *Convert's Corner* on richarddawkins.net. Although no longer maintained by the website, *Convert's Corner* served as an online space in which to share personal narratives of deconversion, primarily those initiated by a reading of Richard Dawkins's books. Hundreds of testimonies are featured there and speak to the diversity of backgrounds and experiences from which people have come to their atheism.

The form was also on display in the more casual settings I found myself in with Triangle atheists outside of the interviews I conducted. TSA events were always social and during conversations members would sometimes refer back to moments that were crucial to them discovering their atheism. TPA events were also often followed by social events in which these stories were shared among members. Another popular trope was to refer back to an earlier conceptualization of atheism or religious skepticism one previously inhabited. "Back when I called myself an agnostic," is one example or, "when I was a more angry atheist," was another I heard from time to time. In all of these cases, a

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linear evolutionary progression is intimated that reinforces feelings of philosophical and intellectual development among individuals and the group. This is an important observation as it underscores the dynamic conceptual processes continually at work despite the "achieved" nature of atheist identity.

The association of atheist identity as indicative of intellectual or philosophical maturity was salient in my interviews of several interlocutors that described coming to their atheism after a period of intense and sometimes tortured reflection. It is hard to ignore the comparison here to explanations in classical anthropology to initiation rites and liminality. As Victor Turner (1966) describes it, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." Indeed, some of my interlocutors described to me, quite strikingly, the anxiety produced by feelings of groundlessness and ambivalence as they struggled through the process of losing their religion.

Vishnu, a young man living in the Triangle and a member of TPA, described a particularly deep introspective journey to me that ultimately resulted in a firm skepticism of anything supernatural including theism. Having grown up Hindu in India, his family, and especially his father, looked to their family guru for spiritual guidance. When Vishnu began considering spiritual issues as a child, he took the exercise rather seriously. He told me that the idea of God and Atman, which is often defined as the human soul, was something that piqued his interest at an early age.

> *I was like what is this thing, I want to get to the root of this, you know. So I started reading books and all that stuff, so to me…what I got out of all the books was, so basically, you go through all this training, practice, religion, all that stuff to basically become one with God…it's a quality where there's no conflict,*

> *there's no hurt, so naturally I wanted to become that. My ideal dream would be to go to the Himalayas and practice meditation and be free of all that.*

This fascination stayed with Vishnu for years into young adulthood, until he read the works of Jiddu Krishnamurti, who wrote on spirituality and philosophy in the 20th century. Krishnamurti had a profound effect on Vishnu. As Vishnu told me, "He said…you shouldn't accept any authority on spiritual matters or matters of soul. You have to discover it for yourself." This eventually led to Vishnu rejecting the religious tradition he had been brought up in and embracing a naturalistic worldview that rejected any kind of supernaturalism, although he's hesitant to call it atheism. "Atheism is the best thing to describe…it isn't really atheism or agnosticism..whatever there is, there is. There is truth." Krishnamurti's imperative to reject religious authority, then, extends also to labels that might confine Vishnu's worldview in any way.

Jason, who shared his telescope with his brothers above, also endured a significant period of philosophical angst on his way to atheism. Raised and home-schooled in a young-earth creationist household, Jason grew up loving science and using the Internet to expand on the home-school curriculum given to him by his mother. His passion for science and access to the Internet, however, were instrumental in eroding his belief in Christianity as it had been taught to him. Specifically, one online community popular among atheists and his family's strict belief in young earth creationism conspired to lead him away from his religion and theism in general. As Jason described the process to me,

> *The (online) Reddit community was huge for me in starting to realize the evidence actually supports (evolution) and all that was really necessary (for me to abandon Christianity)…is if it could be proven to me that evolution has happened. That was enough for me because I had been taught to interpret the Bible literally.*

Everything is true. Nothing is fallible. And if one thing can be proven fallible…I mean this is God's book. How is he going to let any air get into it? If I can't trust this thing, how I can trust anything else?

Once Jason started down this path, it wasn't long before he had to confront the eschatological implications of his doubt:

For about a week, when I was really starting to realize and internalize the fact that I don't believe in any of this stuff, I was extremely paranoid. I would drive especially carefully on my way to work, really thinking, 'I cannot wreck and die because if I do I might go to hell and I need to consider all this before I take a chance on dying'…and I tried my hardest to avoid thinking about it…I spent the whole week in bed…I would sleep as much as I could because to be awake meant that I had to think about it and it was scary and it was stressful…and I was waking up each morning a little more on the side of, 'You know I don't need to be stressed about this. It's OK that I don't believe it. If it's not true, then I don't need to be scared.' Waking up each morning, feeling a little bit better.

Jason told me that it was a few months after this that he started really calling himself an atheist although he doesn't like to use that term today. He avoids it not because he doesn't think of himself as an atheist but because of the negative associations people drew when he did use it. Jason told me, "It doesn't matter what the word means to you. It matters what it means to the person you're saying it to."

Some of the people I talked to that were raised in religious households and communities took these questions as seriously as Vishnu and Jason but experienced swifter deconversions than they did. Aaron was raised in a Seventh Day Adventist household and still isn't out to his family. Growing up, he was active in his religious community but, upon entering college, started doubting his faith and asking questions prompted by the philosophy courses he was taking. One day, he decided he needed to find out where he stood on God and religion:

It got to the point where I said, 'alright, I'm going to take all of the outside influences out of it and I'm going to sit down and however long it takes, if it takes

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months years, or whatever, I'm going to figure out exactly what I think about all this stuff and figure out where I stand. And, you know, I sat down in my room, thinking I had this long term struggle that I'm going to have to go through to sort of figure this things out, and yeah I sat down and started thinking about it and basically dealing with the questions and within five to ten minutes I was like, 'you know what, this whole religion thing to me is bullshit.'

Like Vishnu and Jason, Aaron's religious upbringing engendered in him an urgency to undertake an earnest analysis of his own opinions regarding religion and theism. Also, like Jason and Aaron, the result was an abandonment of both.

While the above instances of deconversion are of a more intense philosophical nature, not all of my interlocutors expressed having had such an experience. In fact, of the nineteen people I interviewed, six grew up in generally secular contexts and never gave much credence to theistic belief or had much trouble coming out as atheist. Of the remaining thirteen that were raised in religious households, none of them reported having absolutely no trouble in their deconversion but they each varied considerably in the psychological and social toll the experience had on them.

Sarah, for example, was raised in a religious household but described a turn to atheism that was gradual and intuitive rather than dramatic and philosophical. Her mother was a devout Presbyterian that was active in their church and her father was less religious but still believed in the basic doctrines of Christianity. When I asked Sarah about her path to atheism, she began by explaining a childhood marked by interests in science, science fiction, and fantasy. She told me about watching the television show Star Trek with her father and the more philosophically oriented episodes that dealt with meaning and religion. She recalled one episode where the main characters were called on to mediate a conflict between the inhabitants of one planet. She remembered the captain of the ship

commenting that the mediation would be difficult because these inhabitants, "still argue over God concepts." Sarah told me, "to me it made it seem like…(religion) was more of a primitive thing." Her interest in fantasy contributed to her skepticism as well: "I was into fantasy and by correlation of that I was into ancient mythology so I read a lot of the Greek myths and a lot of the Egyptian myths and at some point I was like, 'well no one believes in these anymore so why are some people still believing in this other God?'" Sarah then told me about going to college, becoming a Physics major (although she later switched majors to linguistics) and discovering a social environment where she could be herself and ask questions that had been off limits in her household growing up: "You could be irreverent there. You could have actual philosophical debates with people."

The label of "deconversion" seems inappropriate in Sarah's case. Rather, she seemed to articulate a scientific disposition that engendered a deafness to religion and religious ritual that had been there for as long as she could remember (Douglas, 1970). In terms of coming to identify as an atheist, it was simply a matter of learning the meaning of the word. "I think when I was 16 to 18, I would've called myself agnostic," she told me, "but when I actually got proper definitions on agnosticism and atheism, that's when I would say I'm an atheist."

2.3 Conclusion

Sadly, I do not have the room here to relate all of the interesting and diverse narratives I heard. What I have tried to focus on here, though, are three general archetypes that represent, as accurately as can be expected, a wide range of atheist identity constructions that have bearing in various disciplines including philosophy,

sociology and psychology. First, I explained the intensely philosophical and reflexive journey of Vishnu. Second, Jason's story related the psychologically arduous process of extracting oneself from solidified social and religious norms. I qualified these two archetypes, however by sharing the story of Aaron who, although growing up in a religious setting and preparing for a long philosophical journey, ended up finding it fairly easy to embrace atheism. Third, Sarah helped us understand the phenomenon of what might be called a latent atheism that warrants "deconversion" unnecessary and inapplicable.

The concept of "latent atheism" is something worth expanding on a bit here. Several of my interlocutors called themselves "science types" and recalled maintaining at least some skepticism toward religion and supernaturalism from a young age even if they didn't act on it in any way. In fact, only one of the people I interviewed expressed having a firm and devoted commitment to the faith of his family through adolescence. This same person later told me about the anger he felt once he became an atheist for having been "lied to" when he was younger. In any case, while Sarah, one "science type" that expressed a latent atheism, did not point to the role of any specific atheist group as crucial in her process of becoming an atheist, several of my interlocutors did. Five out of the nineteen people I interviewed told me that their identifying as an atheist was due in large part, if not entirely, to discovering atheist groups as part of a more general search for like-minded people or social groups. As Tanya told me, "When I moved to (the Triangle) I didn't know anybody, so I looked up (social groups online) and I tried to find local groups and it asked for my interests so I plugged them in and it pulled up TSA and I

thought 'Atheist….that's what I am!" Later in the interview she told me, "Honestly, if I had found a knitting group that I liked, I might have latched on to that just as much."

For much of its history, discussions of atheism have been purely philosophical, with much of its contemporary rhetoric forged in the crucibles of the Enlightenment, which emphasized rationalism, individualism, and the liberating faculty of human reason. It is no surprise, then, that the intellectual aspects of lived atheism are given the most attention in popular discourse. The rhetoric of the New Atheists, for example, is dominated by critiques of religious texts, appeals to their audience's logic, and the role of individual belief of religious truth claims in motivating acts of religious extremism (Dawkins, 2006; Harris, 2004; Hitchens, 2007). Atheism, for these New Atheists, is enacted by claiming religious texts and beliefs are false. They rarely discuss lived atheism as a social act with social goals and the atheist label is more often taken to be a signifier of something they think is more relevant, which is one's subjective position on philosophical and scientific subjects. This is, at best, an incomplete understanding of atheism today. As Jesse Smith (2010) points out in his discussion of "coming out" atheist,

> The significance and influence that any particular identity has for self-concept cannot be fully articulated until that identity has been both explicitly claimed and validated in meaningful social interaction. That is, although an individual may think of him/herself as an atheist, acknowledging the consistency of their view with that label, it is only when this label is voluntarily applied in concrete social interaction that it takes on its full social significance (p. 229).

As we have seen, the process of constructing an atheist identity can certainly be intensely personal as highlighted by the experiences of Vishnu and Jason. But atheist identities are not static. Rather, they are dynamic and continually evolving (Smith, 2010). They require continual reinforcement, validation, and articulation in social settings. It is in atheist

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communities that much of this work is done and where the nature of that work itself is

being perpetually conceptualized and innovated.

Chapter 3: Atheist Community

3.1 Background

    The academic study of atheist communities remains in its infancy. While sociological ethnographies like this one are emerging (Smith, 2013a, 2013b), there is still much work to be done. The existence of organizations like the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network bode well for the future of social science scholarship in this area, though, and the rise of religious disaffiliation in the United States (Funk & Smith, 2012) is reinvigorating conversations about secularization and irreligion in the United States. The discussion of atheist communities, then, remains primarily historical with only a handful of modern sociological treatments available to provide a point of departure for analyzing the role of atheist community in the Triangle. Because the studies are so few, I will discuss these sociological analyses in-depth to provide as comprehensive an introduction as possible to the questions that drive the study of atheist communities today.

    As I mentioned above, Colin Campbell's *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (1971/2013) is often referenced as the first call to establish a subfield in sociology devoted entirely to the phenomenon of irreligion. In the book, Campbell defines irreligion as, "…those beliefs and actions which are expressive of attitudes of hostility or indifference toward the prevailing religion, together with indications of the rejection of its demands" (p. 21). While Campbell is certainly the first to explicitly argue for the earnest study of these intellectual and behavioral responses to religion, he is not the first to attempt it.

Five years before Campbell published *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, N.J. Demerath II and Victor Thiessen published an essay titled *On Spitting Against the Wind: Organizational Precariousness and American Irreligion* (1966) in the *American Journal of Sociology*. A clue as to where the sociology of irreligion stood when Demerath and Thiessen wrote this essay can be found in its introductory paragraphs where they say, "the sociology of irreligion remains in the womb," and observe in a footnote that "Organizational studies of irreligion are non-existent" (p. 674). Their study, then, might mark the first sociological study of organized American irreligion in the modern United States and indeed reflects several themes that underscore studies of organized atheist and freethought groups to this day.

The study, as described by Demerath and Thiessen, "is an analysis of a small-town Wisconsin free-thought movement and its response to organizational dilemmas arising out of its irreligion. More particularly, it is an analysis of organizational demise" (p. 674). They go on to say that this freethought group, known as the Freie Gemeinde, "began in 1852, reached its zenith in the 1880's, and then began to atrophy with the pursuit of legitimacy" (p. 674). Going on to compare and contrast the dynamics of different freethought groups in Wisconsin during this period, Demerath and Thiessen make a distinction between this "atrophying" freethought group that operated within a religiously undifferentiated (Catholic) and rural environment and a more militant urban freethought group within a religiously differentiated environment:

> In a differentiated community, the dissident group may be militant precisely because its militance goes unnoticed or ignored. In an undifferentiated community, the dissident group is much more noticed and, therefore, must put a damper on its pronouncements. Thus, one may have militancy at the cost of neglect or one may have attention at the price of legitimation. Of course, after a

point, militancy may stimulate attention and legitimacy may bring on neglect (p. 682).

This tension between "militancy" and "legitimacy" within freethought groups, with the latter signaling demise, emerges frequently in sociological treatments of freethought groups and characterizes conflicts within these groups even in current studies on their organizational dynamics.

In a second essay, *Irreligion, A-religion, and the Rise of the Religion-Less Church: Two Case Studies in Organizational Convergence* (1969), Demerath once again compares and contrasts two freethought groups that embody the opposing polarities of militancy and legitimacy: the American Rationalist Federation and the Society for Ethical Culture respectively. This ethnographic study, though, is framed not so much according to the dichotomy they introduced in their 1966 essay, but as an argument for the advent of a new typological phenomenon: the religion-less church. The religion-less church is Demerath's answer to the paradox of the apparent decline and liberalization of mainline churches and the concurrent struggle of freethought groups to establish strong identities and attract new members. Speaking of the obvious decline in size and influence of these freethought groups, Demerath writes that, "neither have experienced the surge of growth and influence that might be expected in an increasing(ly) secular society" (p. 202). Reconciling then the surprising results of his ethnography with the ubiquity of the secularization thesis at that time, Demerath theorized that, "a possible convergence is underway between the organizational manifestations of both religion and irreligion," and that, "the convergence entails the growth of the 'religion-less church' as a phenomenon of our times" (p. 202).

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While it can safely be said, at this point, that his prediction has not been realized in any significant sense (although I will gesture toward contemporary efforts in this vein below), Demerath was still successful in identifying a central tension in irreligious organizations that is recognized by sociologists today. The internal conflict engendered by more "militant" members and those that push for greater cultural "legitimacy," is a crucial aspect of these groups that any contemporary sociological or ethnographic account must acknowledge and evaluate. At the same time, Demerath concedes that, "the irreligious groups at issue are hardly unique. Many of the same dilemmas and adaptations are discernable among the mainstream churches themselves" (p. 202). This observation obliges us to consider to what degree we include irreligious organizations within any applicable theory in the sociology of religion and congregationalism, and in what circumstances they might exhibit divergent traits from religious groups.

Long before sociologists took up this question, though, Colin Campbell wrote the aforementioned book, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (1971/2013) which is part history of western freethought groups and part musings as to how a sociology of irreligion can be derived from that history. For our purposes, I will focus exclusively on the latter and the issues raised by Campbell that have not lost their relevance and continue to characterize studies in American irreligion. While these are primarily matters of organizational difficulty, ideological divergence within and between groups, and impasses with wider American culture that make any significant growth of these groups challenging, one of Campbell's central arguments is that a sociology of irreligion must reflect the diversity of freethought organizations and not dwell on evaluations of organizational success that assume church-like or denominational aspirations. As he writes,

> Irreligious organisations are judged to be ineffectively organized because they lack certain characteristics of the traditional religious denomination or sect, that is a definite and positive ideology, a centralized and formalised organisational structure, a clear system of authority, a formal procedure for resolving disputes, a *gemeinschaftlich* atmosphere and a permanent and loyal group of members (p. 42).

Campbell feels this is a mistake and that approaches to the study of freethought groups should be as diverse as the groups themselves. An implicit rejection of Demerath and Thiessen's decision to consider the success and demise of their subjects' organizations in relation to the churchly bodies around them is indicated here. Campbell cautions against the *a priori* assumption that the fortunes of irreligious organizations will rise and fall in proportional contrast to those of religious institutions.

This caveat against a myopic view of irreligious organizational goals is buttressed by a distinction he makes earlier in the book between those freethought groups that want to abolish religion (abolitionists) and those that want to replace religion (substitutionists): "There is a long history of hostility between the abolitionist and the replacement schools of thought in the irreligious tradition, inasmuch as the former accuse the latter of being 'half-hearted' and of 'playing at religion' whilst the latter accuse the former of being 'merely negative'" (p. 38). Not satisfied that this covers all the bases, however, Campbell goes on to make another binary distinction between freethought groups, writing,

> Of more significance than whether the organizational model is a religious or a secular one is whether it is a communal or an associational one. The church or chapel model, together with the club, emphasise the functions which membership fulfills for the member… The trade union branch or the learned society on the other hand emphasise the functions they fulfill for society…Very different organizational consequences follow depending on whether primacy is attached to fulfilling the individual member's needs or those of society (p. 44).

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So, Campbell makes more explicit the fundamental difference between those irreligious organizations that look to foster community among their members and those that are primarily dedicated to political action and generating change in the wider society. We see the obvious manifestation of this principle in TSA and TPA respectively. In pointing out that both organized irreligion can exhibit various manifestations within and without the religious sphere, and that different freethought groups might have fundamentally divergent agendas, Campbell lays a groundwork that does justice to the complexity of the irreligious response and illuminates the breadth of the terrain of this field yet to be studied and comprehended.

In addition to these valuable distinctions, Campbell also points to a paradox in the formation of irreligious sentiment that seems to influence the organizational prospects of freethought groups in every age we witness them. That is that,

> the very success of irreligious movements brings about their own decline. In so far as the irreligious convince the population at large that secular concerns are of prior importance, then the shift of interest manifests itself, among other ways, by an indifference to the truth or falsehood of religion. As, therefore, theology ceases to be an issue, the irreligious message is ignored as much as the religious (p. 124).

Campbell attributes the historical weakness of freethought groups in America to the secularism inscribed in its political makeup in the form of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment. To make his point, he quotes historian Sidney Warren: "The United States was one of the most secular nations in the world and that, in part, explains the relative weakness of the secularist movement…The existence of…religious liberty made it unnecessary for people to join together in remonstrances against governmental suppression" (Warren, 1966). This conceptualization of irreligious sentiment also explains periods of greater freethought mobilization. As Campbell describes one

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example, "…the infidel association gained a certain amount of notoriety in the 1870's and 1880's and indeed became, for a while, the great national bogey…when a move to turn America into a theocratic state provided secularists with an obvious political platform" (p. 60). More currently, the argument can be made that the New Atheism was successful in the twenty-first century due only to a confluence of religious incursions into the public sphere that suggested a resurgence in dangerous religious orthodoxy including the Catholic child abuse scandal, the election of the openly born-again George W. Bush on the evangelical Christian vote, and, of course, 9/11.

Campbell, Demerath, and Thiessen then set the tone for the sociological study of organized irreligion by elucidating the internal dynamics and potential tensions of various freethought groups and calling attention to environmental factors that might indicate auspicious or unfavorable potential for growth. While Demerath and Thiessen nod toward the spectrum of political, ethical, and philosophical agendas that might occur within and between freethought groups, including their subsequent organizational differences, Campbell makes explicit the fundamental variance in function we see between groups and fleshes out more fully what kind of typologies we might be able to apply to further studies of irreligious organizations. Together, these early scholars of irreligion contributed to both the history and sociology of atheist organizations and communities by introducing fundamental dialectical relationships that are crucial in understanding their social dynamics: "militancy" and "legitimacy", "abolitionism" and "substitutionism", "association" and "community." These ideas continue to influence studies in irreligion and are certainly alive in the groups being studied today.

Jesse Smith (2013b), for example, explains how personal identity and narrative

inform atheist organizational experience and influence the larger conceptual group typologies above: "As atheists collectivize and coordinate, the values, motives, and goals they share come to reflexively 'act back' on the growing collectivity, eventually providing an organizational and interpretive framework that will help to set the parameter for future participants" (p. 86). In other words, individual motivations for membership or identification play a large part in composing the overarching ethos of any given atheist organization. Therefore, any structural explanation of atheist group formation or ideology is incomplete without a consideration of how individuals use the collectivity to inform and conceptualize their own identity.

3.2 Community Among Triangle Atheists

I found the binaries presented above not only applicable to organizational dynamics among atheists in the Triangle but strikingly indicative of various transformations and challenges I found these atheist organizations to be experiencing. To start with, the most obvious and thus far institutionalized separation that I found is that between "association" and "community." I have already described my research as primarily interested in the social dynamics within and between the Triangle Political Atheists and the Triangle Social Atheists. My selection of these groups was neither arbitrary nor the labels I chose of "political" and "social" a projection of my own subjective evaluation of their functions. Rather, these are the two largest and most organized groups in the Triangle with the TPA emerging out of the TSA as a project among its members to create an explicitly political and activist group.

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Tanya described the formation of TPA to me: "(TPA) wasn't formed until 2009 and that was because a lot of people saw (TSA) as a social group which is great and it has its place for sure but there were a lot of people in (TSA) that wanted an activist group, they wanted to do stuff, and (TSA) just really wasn't set up for that." Jim, the main organizer of TSA remembered the formation of TPA as well: "(TSA) isn't the platform for activism, so (TPA) grew out of (TSA), grew out of it in a friendly way, it wasn't antagonistic or whatever. So (TSA) will stick to the social stuff and (TPA) can do the activism stuff."

The unproblematic growth of TPA out of TSA is an example of a clear distinction that must be drawn between the three dialectical binaries presented above. Simply put, associations and communities are not antagonist entities and all my interlocutors expressed an appreciation and an awareness of the role and necessity of both the TPA and the TSA. The other two binaries, however, of abolitionist/substitutionist and militancy/legitimacy are necessarily antagonistic, predicated on divergent strategic goals and visions within organized atheism. One cannot seek to abolish congregationalism and replace religious congregations nor can one advocate for a militant approach of religious critique while seeking legitimacy within the religious sphere. To explain atheist organizations and communities with any accuracy, one must acknowledge these competing tendencies and the role of organizational conflict.

For a moment, though, let us put the abolitionist/substitutionist and militancy/legitimacy dialectics on the backburner. I will return to them later to help explain some of the overarching long-term goals of the TPA and organized atheism nationally. Rather, to remain focused on the immediate project, I am obliged to share a

particular instance of atheist organizational conflict in the Triangle that has had a

significant impact on its atheist culture and prompts intriguing questions for organized

atheism nationally. Atheism has a notable historical lineage in the traditions of both

Libertarianism and liberal progressivism. Follow these strands backward in Western

history and one arrives at the polarizing figures of Mikhail Bakunin and Karl Marx

respectively. Both men are famous for their scathing critiques of organized religion and

their descriptions of its role in the oppression of the proletariat. Bakunin, though, offered

visions of an anarchistic utopia while Marx theorized the institutionalization of a

Communist form of government. Today, in the Triangle, highly opinionated Libertarians

and liberal progressives seek communities of atheists just like themselves. This has lead

to conflict between these groups with possible repercussions for organizational growth.

I first heard about the conflict between Jim, the head organizer of TSA, and some

of its members, when I attended a TSA coffee gathering as I was first beginning my

research. Megan, a TSA and TPA member whom we know from the farmer's market

table above, told me the story of how a conflict within TSA in 2010 resulted in some

members splintering off of TSA and forming their own group. The break in membership

was precipitated by conflict on TSA's online message board. Some of TSA's members

believed Jim and some others were commandeering conversations by injecting their

Libertarian views too aggressively and in contexts that were not appropriate.

Exasperating the tension was an incident when Jim changed the group name without

consulting any other members. The same members, frustrated over the Libertarian strain

in the group, also opposed the implementation of a name change without any dialogue or

input from current members. Jim stood by his decision, claiming on the group's message

board, "Actually (this website's) terms of service grant me power." The splintering

faction formed their own group, which I will call the Triangle Democratic Atheists (or

TDA) because it was founded mainly on the principle of a democratic system of

management, soon after. TSA retained most of its membership although the second group

has developed a strong following in its own right. Jim has commemorated the 2010

conflict under his name and title on the group's webpage: "(Jim) – Organizer – Dear

Leader."

I spoke with Irene who was one of the original TSA defectors as well as one of

the main organizers of TDA. She told me that the clash between liberal progressives and

libertarians was "the main argument" but was careful to emphasize there were other

factors that led to the split including fundamental personality differences and

disagreement over whether the group should abide by a democratic ethos. The centrality

of the ideological clash is hard to ignore, though, and can be traced to how the main

initiators of the conflict conceptualize their own atheist identities. For example, when I

talked to Irene, we spoke about the Moral Majority and I asked if it had any part in her

becoming an atheist. She told me, "I think it brought out the leftist part and for me,

atheism goes right along with that. To me, it's not a separate thing at all from my

feminism or my vegetarianism or my environmental advocacy, or I'm bisexual. To me

it's all part of kind of one identity." I asked her what that identity would be and what she

would call it. "Progressive," she said.

Jim used similar language in our interview and in the same socio-political context

of the Moral Majority years in the 1980's, saying "I think being gay is my number one

motivation behind my atheist activism and being as vocal as I am…I grew up in the

eighties, the height of the religious right, and every time you turned on the television Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell were talking about how the sodomites were going to bring the downfall of America…and I was like, 'wait a minute. They're talking about me.'" At another point in the interview, he told me, "I think I was born (libertarian and atheist) because I was skeptical from a very young age. I definitely know I was born a libertarian and I was a libertarian 20 years before I even knew what that word was and I've always been skeptical of magic and religious claims so I was an atheist 10 years before I knew what that word was. For some reason, they do very much go hand in hand." For both Irene and Jim, their atheist identities are inextricably linked to larger moral and ideological frameworks. The organizational conflict precipitated by the collision of these frameworks stands as evidence of Smith's (2013) argument that atheist identities "act back" on the larger collectivity, and, evidently, sometimes not in the most pleasant manner.

As one interlocutor told me, though, this conflict "was so personal." While no conflict is immune from the sway of individual personalities, the debates between militancy/legitimacy and abolitionist/substitutionist are much wider in scope and have more concrete implications for organized atheism at the national level. In a survey I conducted with the help of the TPA and the American Humanist Association (AHA), the largest secular humanist organization in the United States, I attempted to gauge attitudes on these subjects in order to better understand how Triangle atheists compare to national measures. Surveys were made available to those on the email list of both organizations separately in the summer of 2013. Out of around 700 people on their email list, 151 people from TPA filled out the survey, while 456 people filled out the AHA survey

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which was included in their national newsletter going out to approximately 43,000 email subscribers.

On the question of militancy, I asked the respondents, "On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being 'not at all useful' and 7 being 'extremely useful,' how do you feel about the usefulness of confrontational 'militancy' (i.e. challenging religious people on their beliefs/thinking all religion is bad/wanting to do everything possible to eradicate religion) in the atheist/agnostic/freethought movement?" The average rating on this scale for TPA was 3.23, with "1" being the most popular choice receiving 25.5% of the responses. The average rating on this scale for AHA was 3.61 with "5" being the most popular choice receiving 18.1% of the responses. On another question, I asked, "On a scale from 1 to 7, to what degree do you identify as a 'militant' atheist, with 1 being 'not at all militant' and 7 being 'extremely militant'?" The average rating on this scale for the TPA was 3.08 with "1" being the most popular choice receiving 27.3% of the responses. The average rating on this scale for the AHA was 3.38 with "1" being the most popular choice receiving 20.8% of the responses. The Triangle, then, seems only slightly less invested in militancy than the national atheist community.

As the language of "eradicating religion" alludes to in this question, we can expect attitudes toward militancy to exhibit some positive correlation with attitudes toward abolitionism. After all, it seems reasonable to assume that those atheists interested in garnering more cultural legitimacy would be more open to adopting a widely accepted social form like congregationalism than those more militant atheists who we could suppose are more likely to be religious abolitionists. The results of the survey, however, do not bear this out. On one question meant to gauge attitudes toward several dimensions

of the recent growing trend of "atheist church" or atheist congregationalism, both the TPA and AHA respondents reported very similar attitudes indicating a general, but mild, approval of the idea of atheist congregationalism (see appendices).

The one measure, though, that did reveal a marked difference between the TPA and the AHA was the role of "community/social life" in motivating membership in atheist organizations. In a question that asked, "On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being 'not at all important' and 7 being 'extremely important,' how important were the following aspects of membership or participation that drove you to participate or become a member of a local or national atheist/agnostic/freethought organization?" While there was no marked difference between the rating of other motivations for membership (see appendices), TPA respondents gave an average rating of 4.21 for "community/social life" with the most popular rating being "7" with 21.2% of responses. AHA respondents, however, gave an average rating of 3.44 with "1" and "2" each garnering 20.4% of the responses. Do TPA respondents value atheist community and social life more than other atheists across the country? Maybe, but that is probably not the entire story. Instead, what we may be seeing here is a selection bias. While atheists might join local organizations to meet like-minded people, they may join national organizations like the AHA to engage in political activism at the national level. The AHA respondents, then, probably reflect a sample of atheists less disposed toward general socializing and local community building. A better way to explore this question, then, may be to compare various local atheist organizations to one another rather than a local organization to a national one.

3.3 Conclusion

Organizational conflict and the broader dialectical dynamics described above are only part of the story of atheist community in the Triangle. Such an account is important to understand the social and organizational aspects of atheism but it leaves out a large part of how atheist community is lived and experienced by its participants from day to day. Indeed, my experience of atheist community in the Triangle was marked primarily by the deep and enduring friendships I saw shared by many of these groups' members. During my year of research, I saw members take vacations together, attend each other's weddings, watch each other's kids, and comfort one another after the loss of a family member. Organizational affiliation may have brought some of these people together but many of the relationships formed have transcended that and developed into bonds that will outlast and endure organizational demise and renewal.

I have been taken aback myself at the welcome I received from the members of TPA and TSA, not just as a researcher, but as a fellow atheist and a friend. At all the events, meetings, and parties I attended as a part of this project, there was always someone that made sure to welcome me and there was always someone to talk to. I never felt out of place as a researcher nor unwelcome as a participant. This all to try and communicate what I found to be a central quality of Triangle atheist community: it is a generally inclusive and pleasant group of people that make outsiders and new members feel welcome and comfortable. As any organizer of a voluntary association can tell you, that is not an easy task to accomplish. The success of both the TPA and the TSA is notable in this regard.

To quote Jesse Smith again, this kind of humanistic success of the TPA and TSA "acts back" on the organizational characteristics of the groups as well. In fact, The TPA is renowned nation-wide as being one of the most successful local atheist groups in the country. When I attended the 2013 American Humanist Association in San Diego, the president of the TPA gave a presentation to other group organizers from across the country about best practices in organizing and recruiting new members. As part of my research, I even attended several TPA "actions meetings" where the board of the TPA and other volunteers discussed events, speakers, and ideas for new initiatives. The meetings never followed any set schedule and would often break up into smaller groups so people could discuss or plan their own pet projects. One board member told me, "(TPA) is the kind of group where, if you have a great idea, you better be ready to run with it, and you better be ready to run solo with it too, because everybody's stretched so thin." Indeed, many of the board members and volunteers of TPA have full-time jobs, families, and other obligations in their lives. Knowing this, I was often amazed at how hard some of these members worked and how much they cared about keeping TPA an effective organization. Undergirding this hard work and sacrifice, though, was not just a desire to see the TPA thrive; it was also the obligation many of the TPA members felt toward each other as friends and as participants in a social community.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have attempted to describe three aspects of atheist experience and how they are socially manifested in the Triangle region of North Carolina. I traced back the existence of stigma toward atheists to antiquity and shared some stories of how atheists in the Triangle navigated atheist stigma in their own lives. I pointed out that the earliest evidence we have of the phenomenon of publicly identifying as atheist seems to have begun around the French Enlightenment and I related the various ways in which atheists in the Triangle conceptualize their own atheist identities. Finally, I reviewed the small body of scholarship we have on atheist community and what it suggests about the novelty of the concept itself and described instances of organizational conflict and success among atheists in the Triangle. I hope that by sharing these dimensions of atheist life in the Triangle, I have a provided something close to an accurate portrayal of how the individual experiences of atheists in the Triangle inform their participation in atheist community life and how that community life, in turn, shapes their atheism. I also hope I have shown that atheists, just like any other religious group in the United States, have a need for a community that validates their identity and provides a framework for engagement in the public sphere. Indeed, how atheists imagine their participation in religious life in the United States will have a large influence in how atheist communities evolve going forward.

Perhaps a clue as to how atheism in the Triangle will develop in the future lies in a project currently being developed by the president of the TPA and some other volunteers. I was also happy to share my thoughts on it with the TPA board as it was being conceptualized. The idea is for Sunday programming for members and anyone else

that would like to attend that mirrors fairly closely the Protestant model of a Sunday church service. In its initial stages of planning it was described as a "humanistic alternative to religious services." The development of this idea is a testament to the recognition on the part of some of the members and leadership of TPA that while they were formed as an organization devoted to political activism, much of their strength is derived from the strong community and relationships that have developed around TPA. Programming aimed toward strengthening those ties makes sense, then, both in terms of keeping current members and attracting new ones.

The idea of atheist congregationalism does seem to be gaining wide popular appeal. Two well-known examples are the Humanist Community Project, which is run by the Humanist Community at Harvard, and the Sunday Assembly. The Humanist Community at Harvard describes the former as an effort "to create, establish, and connect a nationwide network of Humanist communities focused on individual, group, and societal betterment" (Harvard, 2012). The latter, as described on their website, is "a godless congregation that celebrate life. Our motto: live better, help often, wonder more. Our mission: to help everyone find and fulfill their full potential. Our vision: a godless congregation in every town, city and village that wants one" (Sunday Assembly, 2013). Both of these projects have received some media attention and the Sunday Assembly recently made headlines by announcing its plan to raise £500,000 in order to create a website that will give people around the world the knowledge and resources necessary to establish their own Sunday Assemblies. The TPA has even considered adapting the Sunday Assembly model for their purposes.

I also heard general agreement from my interlocutors that they liked the idea of "atheist church" or at least some kind of Sunday programming. There were, however, plenty of reservations. Zac, a young TPA member who attended university in the Triangle said,

> I think it's a good thing as long as we don't start at 8:30am and I think there's a really big temptation there to make it feel spiritual. You know, if you have, like, science praise songs. I don't want praise songs…I think it would be bad to create an atmosphere that feels kind of spiritual. I would be opposed to that because the message that we try and push is that we're good by ourselves with no supernatural crap and if we turn right back around and try and find some spiritual experience, I'm not a huge fan of that.

Barbara was another TPA member I talked to. She was also a member of the Ethical Humanist Society of the Triangle (EHST), which is associated with the American Ethical Union, the legacy of Felix Adler's Ethical Culture movement of the late nineteenth century. When many people think of atheist or secular humanist congregationalism, they think of Ethical Culture. Despite its rich history, however, it has had trouble attracting new membership in recent years. Barbara valued her commitment to the EHST: "It's all the good aspects of church-going," she told me. "It's the social benefits and everyone helps each other out." But she did recognize that it has its problems. "It's very small and the majority of them are older. They definitely have a problem attracting new members because certainly if they get younger peoplecoming in they (say), 'oh geez, I get to sit here and meet with my grandparents." When we spoke about new efforts to build atheist and secular humanist congregationalism, though, Barbara remained confident that Ethical Culture could benefit from the renewed interest as opposed to ceding the jurisdictional ground to other organizations. If Sunday programming takes off for TPA and they adopt a more congregational model, it seems unlikely that this will hamper their political

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activism or interfere with the main function of TSA, which is to provide a social dimension to atheist life in the Triangle. Instead, it is more probably a way to introduce a new dynamic to organized atheism in the Triangle that, aside from providing a context to engage politically and socially, offers a more regular and constant reminder of the foundational philosophy and values that unite atheists and, in turn, reinforces cultural continuity among its participants. This is an understanding of the social function of congregations (Chaves, 2004) that articulates quite well what atheist community and culture in the Triangle is lacking and what accounts for much of the strength of other religious congregations.

Whether or not this is the future for atheist community in the Triangle remains to be seen. What seems more certain, as I mentioned above, is that many of the social bonds that have been formed, in large part due to sharing stories of experiencing stigma and discovering and constructing atheist identity, will survive any organizational shifts or failures that are sure to occur. Therefore, as long as these relationships remain grounded in a shared atheism, we can be confident that organized atheism, in whatever form, will endure also. There may have been a time when atheism in the Triangle resided mainly on the bookshelves and in the philosophy departments of the area's universities. Now, though, to invoke Durkheim's famous analysis of religion, it is an eminently social thing, lived, breathed and enacted in the various coffee shops, bars, and homes where Triangle atheists meet to see old friends, discuss atheism, and participate in a broader community of like-minded people.

Appendix A.
Triangle Political Atheists Survey

1. What is your gender?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	57.6%	87
Female	41.7%	63
Other	0.7%	1
answered question		151
skipped question		0

2. Which category below includes your age?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
17 or younger	0.0%	0
18-20	0.0%	0
21-29	8.6%	13
30-39	24.5%	37
40-49	23.8%	36
50-59	20.5%	31
60 or older	22.5%	34
answered question		151
skipped question		0

3. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
White	94.7%	142
Black or African-American	4.0%	6
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.0%	0
Asian	0.7%	1
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0
From multiple races	0.7%	1

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Some other race (please specify)	1
answered question	**150**
skipped question	**1**

4. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than high school degree	0.7%	1
High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)	3.3%	5
Some college but no degree	12.0%	18
Associate degree	5.3%	8
Bachelor degree	38.0%	57
Graduate degree	40.7%	61
answered question		**150**
skipped question		**1**

5. Which of the following best describes your job function?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Accounting/Auditing	3.1%	4
Administrative	6.2%	8
Advertising/Marketing	3.9%	5
Analyst	0.0%	0
Art/Creative/Design	3.9%	5
Business Development	0.0%	0
Consulting	3.1%	4
Customer Service	0.0%	0
Distribution	1.6%	2
Doctor	3.9%	5
Educator (E.g., teacher, lecturer, professor)	13.2%	17
Engineering	8.5%	11
Finance	1.6%	2

	Response Percent	Response Count
General Business	0.0%	0
Health Care Provider (other than doctor or nurse)	7.0%	9
Human Resources	0.8%	1
Information Technology	11.6%	15
Legal	1.6%	2
Management	3.9%	5
Nurse	1.6%	2
Production	0.8%	1
Product Management	0.0%	0
Project Management	3.1%	4
Public Relations	0.0%	0
Purchasing	0.0%	0
Quality Assurance	1.6%	2
Research	3.9%	5
Sales	6.2%	8
Science	3.9%	5
Strategy/Planning	0.8%	1
Supply Chain	0.8%	1
Training	2.3%	3
Writing	1.6%	2
Other (please specify)		44
answered question		129
skipped question		22

6. Were you raised in a religious household?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	73.0%	100
No	27.0%	37
Other (please specify)		21
answered question		137
skipped question		14

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7. On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "not at all important" and 7 being "extremely important," how important were the following aspects of membership or participation that drove you to participate in or become a member of a local or national atheist/agnostic/freethought organization?

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Response Count
Community/social life	19	25	19	17	17	22	32	4.21	151
Separation of church & state	6	8	4	11	19	24	79	5.76	151
Religious hypocrisy	14	15	7	17	14	28	55	5.04	150
Reduce influence of religious institutions in the public sphere	8	6	8	7	20	21	81	5.73	151
Reduce marginalization of the non-religious	2	10	4	12	21	24	78	5.81	151
Advocate for human rights and social justice issues	6	11	5	19	24	28	58	5.38	151
Education/learn more about humanism/atheism/freethought	9	11	15	25	22	26	42	4.91	150
Participate in community service projects	18	26	23	30	24	22	8	3.75	151
Seeking an alternative to religious community for my children	81	9	7	6	7	8	25	2.81	143
Other (please specify)									8
							answered question		151
							skipped question		0

8. On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "not at all useful" and 7 being "extremely useful," how do you feel about the usefulness of confrontational "militancy" (i.e. challenging religious people on their beliefs/thinking all religion is bad/wanting to do everything possible to eradicate religion) in the atheist/agnostic/freethought movement?

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Response Count
	38	24	21	25	21	12	8	3.23	149
							answered question		149
							skipped question		2

9. On a scale from 1 to 7, to what degree do you identify as a "militant" atheist, with 1 being "not at all militant" and 7 being "extremely militant."

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Response Count
	41	29	20	21	21	12	6	3.08	150
							answered question		150
							skipped question		1

10. To what degree were the four main "new atheist" authors (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens) integral to you finding your atheism, agnosticism, or non-belief?

Answer Options	Not at all influential	They had a small influence	They had a moderate influence	They had a great influence	They are the main reason I am an atheist, agnostic, or non-believer	Rating Average	Response Count
	68	28	21	32	2	2.15	151
						answered question	151
						skipped question	0

11. A growing trend in atheist/agnostic/freethought groups around the country is increased engagement with religious communities. On a scale from "strongly opposed" to "strongly in favor," how would you describe your attitude toward these dimensions of interaction with religious organizations?

Answer Options	Strongly opposed	Opposed	Neutral	In favor	Strongly in favor	Rating Average	Response Count
Dialogue focused on areas of agreement (i.e. interfaith speaking events or panels)	0	7	37	52	54	4.02	150
Political alliances focused on legal change (i.e. gay rights, separation of church & state)	2	1	16	44	87	4.42	150
Joint service projects in the community (i.e. feeding the homeless)	1	6	29	45	69	4.17	150
Other (please specify)							5
						answered question	150
						skipped question	1

12. Some freethought groups around the country and the world are experimenting with things like "atheist church" or "humanist community." On a scale from "strongly opposed" to "strongly in favor," what is your opinion of Humanist groups providing these various dimensions of something akin to freethought congregational life?

Answer Options	Strongly opposed	Opposed	Neutral	In favor	Strongly in favor	Rating Average	Response Count
A physical building or community center that freethinkers could call their own	4	5	35	60	46	3.93	150
Life-event services (i.e. baby naming, coming of age ceremonies, weddings, funerals, etc)	3	8	47	51	42	3.80	151
Mindfulness training/exercises sans supernaturalism (i.e. meditation,	2	14	58	42	34	3.61	150

						Rating	Response
breathing exercises)							
Weekly Sunday meetings with education programs for adults (i.e. atheist/humanist perspectives on specific issues and larger questions of meaning/purpose)	8	9	56	52	26	3.52	151
Weekly Sunday meetings with education programs for children	12	12	58	45	24	3.38	151
Weekly Sunday meetings with music	15	15	78	27	16	3.09	151
Weekly Sunday meetings with entertainment and humor	11	12	59	48	21	3.37	151
Weekly Sunday meetings with social connection and support	10	8	46	52	35	3.62	151
Weekly Sunday meetings with arts and culture	11	8	59	48	25	3.45	151

	answered question	**151**
	skipped question	**0**

13. In what areas would you like to see more or less of an emphasis from your local and national atheist/agnostic/freethought organizations? Please select all that apply.

Answer Options	Much less of an emphasis	Less of an emphasis	Emphasis is about right	More of an emphasis	Much more of an emphasis	Rating Average	Response Count
Advocacy (atheist identity recognition, church/state separation, etc)	2	4	50	54	37	3.82	147
Charitable work	1	4	67	52	24	3.64	148
Collaboration with like-minded religious organizations	4	13	73	37	19	3.37	146
Community-building (art, culture, events for members)	1	4	64	57	22	3.64	148
Resources for parents/children (education, summers camps, daycare)	2	2	56	53	33	3.77	146
Adult Educational Programs on Humanism/Atheism/Science	1	2	52	59	32	3.82	146
Other (please specify)							10

	answered question	**150**
	skipped question	**1**

14. Have you thought about leaving any local or national atheist/agnostic/freethought organizations in the past year? If so, why? Please select all that apply.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Too expensive	8.5%	4
Felt the organization wasn't doing enough	12.8%	6
Disagreed with a particular resolution or statement issued by the organization	17.0%	8
I'm a member of too many organizations	21.3%	10
Freethought ceased to be a priority for me	0.0%	0
Not enough time	57.4%	27
Other (please specify)		38
answered question		47
skipped question		104

Appendix B.
American Humanist Association Survey

1. What is your gender?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	70.6%	320
Female	28.7%	130
Other	0.7%	3
	answered question	453
	skipped question	3

2. Which category below includes your age?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
17 or younger	0.4%	2
18-20	0.2%	1
21-29	5.3%	24
30-39	9.0%	41
40-49	13.4%	61
50-59	20.0%	91
60 or older	51.6%	235
	answered question	455
	skipped question	1

3. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
White	94.8%	422
Black or African-American	0.4%	2
American Indian or Alaskan Native	0.4%	2
Asian	1.1%	5
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.0%	0
From multiple races	3.1%	14
Some other race (please specify)		12
	answered question	445
	skipped question	11

4. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Less than high school degree	0.4%	2
High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)	1.3%	6
Some college but no degree	13.6%	61
Associate degree	6.5%	29
Bachelor degree	29.7%	133
Graduate degree	48.4%	217
answered question		**448**
skipped question		**8**

5. Which of the following best describes your job function?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Accounting/Auditing	1.8%	6
Administrative	5.3%	18
Advertising/Marketing	0.6%	2
Analyst	1.5%	5
Art/Creative/Design	3.9%	13
Business Development	0.0%	0
Consulting	3.0%	10
Customer Service	3.6%	12
Distribution	0.0%	0
Doctor	4.7%	16
Educator (E.g., teacher, lecturer, professor)	17.2%	58
Engineering	9.2%	31
Finance	1.5%	5
General Business	1.5%	5
Health Care Provider (other than doctor or nurse)	4.7%	16
Human Resources	1.2%	4
Information Technology	10.1%	34
Legal	3.3%	11
Management	4.5%	15
Nurse	3.0%	10
Production	2.1%	7
Product Management	1.2%	4
Project Management	0.6%	2
Public Relations	0.9%	3
Purchasing	0.0%	0
Quality Assurance	0.6%	2
Research	3.3%	11
Sales	1.2%	4

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Science	4.5%	15
Strategy/Planning	0.0%	0
Supply Chain	0.3%	1
Training	0.6%	2
Writing	4.5%	15
Other (please specify)		199
answered question		**337**
skipped question		**119**

6. Were you raised in a religious household?

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	71.9%	307
No	28.1%	120
Other (please specify)		52
answered question		**427**
skipped question		**29**

7. On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "not at all important" and 7 being "extremely important," how important were the following aspects of membership or participation that drove you to participate in or become a member of a local or national atheist/agnostic/freethought organization?

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Response Count
Community/social life	92	92	58	67	60	42	41	3.44	452
Separation of church & state	13	11	10	23	28	85	282	6.15	452
Religious hypocrisy	27	26	24	43	56	84	192	5.42	452
Reduce influence of religious institutions in the public sphere	11	9	5	17	33	93	285	6.25	453
Reduce marginalization of the non-religious	9	8	10	29	57	107	232	6.02	452
Advocate for human rights and social justice issues	12	8	16	54	63	117	177	5.70	447
Education/learn more about humanism/atheism/freethought	18	25	35	74	77	98	124	5.12	451
Participate in community service projects	84	74	64	89	70	41	24	3.46	446
Seeking an alternative to religious community for my children	254	39	22	34	19	28	36	2.43	432
Other (please specify)									36
answered question									**455**
skipped question									**1**

8. On a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being "not at all useful" and 7 being "extremely useful," how do you feel about the usefulness of confrontational "militancy" (i.e. challenging religious people on their beliefs/thinking all religion is bad/wanting to do everything possible to eradicate religion) in the atheist/agnostic/freethought movement?

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Response Count
	80	79	60	67	83	51	32	3.61	452
answered question									**452**
skipped question									**4**

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9. On a scale from 1 to 7, to what degree do you identify as a "militant" atheist, with 1 being "not at all militant" and 7 being "extremely militant."

Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Rating Average	Response Count
	94	90	54	62	88	50	15	3.38	453
								answered question	453
								skipped question	3

10. To what degree were the four main "new atheist" authors (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens) integral to you finding your atheism, agnosticism, or non-belief?

Answer Options	Not at all influential	They had a small influence	They had a moderate influence	They had a great influence	They are the main reason I am an atheist, agnostic, or non-believer	Rating Average	Response Count
	186	87	84	85	12	2.23	454
						answered question	454
						skipped question	2

11. A growing trend in atheist/agnostic/freethought groups around the country is increased engagement with religious communities. On a scale from "strongly opposed" to "strongly in favor," how would you describe your attitude toward these dimensions of interaction with religious organizations?

Answer Options	Strongly opposed	Opposed	Neutral	In favor	Strongly in favor	Rating Average	Response Count
Dialogue focused on areas of agreement (i.e. interfaith speaking events or panels)	13	31	121	196	94	3.72	455
Political alliances focused on legal change (i.e. gay rights, separation of church & state)	5	7	41	199	203	4.29	455
Joint service projects in the community (i.e. feeding the homeless)	12	22	77	186	157	4.00	454
Other (please specify)							23
						answered question	455
						skipped question	1

12. Some freethought groups around the country and the world are experimenting with things like "atheist church" or "humanist community." On a scale from "strongly opposed" to "strongly in favor," what is your opinion of Humanist groups providing these various dimensions of something akin to freethought congregational life?

Answer Options	Strongly opposed	Opposed	Neutral	In favor	Strongly in favor	Rating Average	Response Count
A physical building or community center that freethinkers could call their own	7	22	136	183	104	3.79	452
Life-event services (i.e. baby naming, coming of age ceremonies, weddings, funerals, etc)	5	18	120	182	128	3.91	453
Mindfulness training/exercises sans supernaturalism (i.e. meditation, breathing exercises)	14	27	187	153	73	3.54	454
Weekly Sunday meetings with education programs for adults (i.e. atheist/humanist perspectives on specific issues and larger questions of meaning/purpose)	17	37	166	151	83	3.54	454
Weekly Sunday meetings with education programs for children	21	39	169	144	80	3.49	453
Weekly Sunday meetings with music	24	56	234	89	50	3.19	453
Weekly Sunday meetings with entertainment and humor	20	48	212	119	50	3.29	449
Weekly Sunday meetings with social connection and support	18	32	150	170	82	3.59	452
Weekly Sunday meetings with arts and culture	18	37	182	148	68	3.47	453
					answered question		454
					skipped question		2

13. In what areas would you like to see more or less of an emphasis from your local and national atheist/agnostic/freethought organizations? Please select all that apply.

Answer Options	Much less of an emphasis	Less of an emphasis	Emphasis is about right	More of an emphasis	Much more of an emphasis	Rating Average	Response Count
Advocacy (atheist identity recognition, church/state separation, etc)	5	9	109	174	151	4.02	448
Charitable work	3	8	163	186	88	3.78	448

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Collaboration with like-minded religious organizations	23	57	183	144	38	3.26	445
Community-building (art, culture, events for members)	3	16	166	194	65	3.68	444
Resources for parents/children (education, summers camps, daycare)	4	10	151	187	94	3.80	446
Adult Educational Programs on Humanism/Atheism/Science	1	11	112	201	123	3.97	448
Other (please specify)							20
					answered question		**452**
					skipped question		**4**

14. Have you thought about leaving any local or national atheist/agnostic/freethought organizations in the past year? If so, why? Please select all that apply.

Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Too expensive	17.4%	15
Felt the organization wasn't doing enough	19.8%	17
Disagreed with a particular resolution or statement issued by the organization	23.3%	20
I'm a member of too many organizations	30.2%	26
Freethought ceased to be a priority for me	4.7%	4
Not enough time	30.2%	26
Other (please specify)		114
answered question		**86**
skipped question		**370**

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