

**Paths Out of Religion:  
A Cartography of Atheism**

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DISSERTATION

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## Summary

This project examines sources of variation among the wide array of individuals who describe themselves as ‘atheist.’ Broadly speaking, I hypothesize the continuing influence of factors such as childhood religiosity, time-period, and organizational affiliation explain a portion of the variation between atheists. A mixed-method analysis drew a sample of atheists raised in religion, utilizing recruitment flyers throughout Chicagoland and neighboring states. 201 online surveys and fifty semi-structured interviews polled respondents about their religious upbringings, experiences questioning and leaving religion, and current stances and definitions surrounding atheism. Analysis finds religious intensity in respondents’ upbringings exerts influence over the misgivings they experienced with their childhood religion, eventually culminating in exit from theism. Childhood religious intensity also exerts direct and indirect influence on present-day beliefs: specific mentions of residual, dogmatism, and one’s symbolic boundaries around atheism. Respondents’ decision to affiliate with an atheist group stemmed from zealotry and earlier social networks, though precise motivations differ widely between atheists, and may change over one’s lifetime. Finally, there is a cohort effect in how atheists wish to engage religion: early cohorts stress a battle centered around rights, while later cohorts focus on stewardship and human progress. Overall, these findings yield support for residual effects from one’s childhood religion, as well as influence from the broader social and political climate outside one’s household and previous community of worship. The study also lays the groundwork for future research, cataloguing a spectrum of variation in definitions of atheism and epistemological stances concerning the (non)existence of god.

## **I. Introduction**

Atheists represent a small – yet growing and vociferous – segment of the American population. Between the 2007 and 2014 instances of the Religious Landscape Study, their numbers roughly doubled (Lipka 2016). Their voices have garnered more attention as the advent of the internet and popularity of ‘New Atheist’ authors allow for greater visibility and dialogue among non-believers (Cimino and Smith 2011). Despite these developments, atheists and other non-believers remain relatively under-examined by the sociology of religion.

Atheists take divergent routes to their present beliefs. While a small segment grows up without belief in god, most atheists originally start in some form of religion. Even among those raised in religion, experiences are highly varied. A large proportion of present atheists grew up with mild-to-moderate religious emphasis in their households. However, a select few are what Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) term “amazing apostates,” able to reject theism despite a highly religious upbringing. They swim against the current, defying high levels of retention in stricter faiths. It causes one to wonder whether these divergent paths to disbelief leave an indelible mark on how atheists view and define atheism and religion.

In the abstract, one’s decision whether or not to believe in a god makes few other prescriptions for his or her life. At their barest, belief and disbelief do not extend far into other realms, exerting little influence over actions, moral codes, political views, or other identities. Those who are deist – believing in a deity which set the universe in motion before aloofly stepping back – exemplify this logic about belief in the abstract. Belief exerts remarkably little influence without a specific conception of god or a litany of expectations and ideals attached to it.

Only when one's belief in a god entails ancillary beliefs, moral codes, roles, political stances, and worldviews does the belief begin to become the central pillar of his or her identity and guide daily life. The ancillary expectations attached to a belief in god are thoroughly documented, as evidenced by the myriad of comparative religion texts and religious studies courses that categorize and delineate the considerable variations occurring both across religious traditions as well as within them.

New atheists do not step into a ready-made identity, offering a comprehensive checklist of expected beliefs and behaviors (Smith 2011). As atheism centers primarily on negation – at least in the abstract – individual atheists have considerable leeway to define what atheism precisely entails. Compared to organized religion, there are fewer edicts and rules. There is no analogue to the Ten Commandments. Some go so far as to declare, “Atheists have no beliefs in common but their disbelief” (Grothe and Dacey 2004). Nevertheless, there exist basic constraints and patterns in how atheists define and experience atheism.

In America, atheism is not defined in a vacuum. As an identity based primarily on the negation of theism and religion, it follows from one's understanding of what is rejected. Religion is ubiquitous in America, so atheists must contend with it, defining atheism vis-à-vis theism (Smith 2011). Religion's influence – in one's specific upbringing and in the broader social and political issues of the time-period – all spell out precisely what is disavowed. Additionally, although atheism is leaderless and disorganized, at least compared to religion, there nevertheless exist numerous groups based around the identity, with some combination of social and political aims. These groups – as well as highly visible ‘public’ atheists – offer their conceptions of what it precisely means to be an atheist. While they lack the powerful tools of scripture and fire and

brimstone to enforce their conceptions, groups nevertheless offer socialization into what an atheist identity entails.

While a considerable amount of scholarship and ink has been devoted to variations among those who believe in some form of higher power, there nevertheless exist parallel variations among those who do not believe. Scholars are working to amend the imbalance, but *disbelief* still receives less attention. Just as theists have to determine the nature of their deity, atheists (and other non-theists) also have to wrestle with how their disbelief affects their lives.

Why disbelief in a god or gods is a loaded question – implying ancillary beliefs and expectations – traces back to multiple prongs: the general ubiquity of theism in America, one's specific religious upbringing, the circumstances of that exit from religion, and the role of other disbelievers in defining atheism.

### **The Four Potential Sources of Variation**

Time and space may influence how one defines atheism and its relationship with organized religion. The general religious climate in one's country and time-period furnishes potential ancillary beliefs. As theism remains ubiquitous in America, it permeates many facets of life and demands engagement, even by nonbelievers (Smith 2011). Additionally, as organized religion – and its relationship to public matters – mutates, time-period matters. Recent decades have seen increased ties between religion and conservative politics (Hout and Fischer 2002, Hout and Fischer 2014). Even non-theists must engage religious dogma and believers, which can potentially influence their views of what precisely they are rejecting and how non-believers should act as a counterpoint to religious intrusion into politics and public life. Thus, the role of religion in one's larger country can serve as a source of ancillary beliefs and expectations for



atheists. Even among those born and raised in the same place, differences may appear when accounting for cohort.

In addition to the general religious climate, the particular religious milieu atheists grow up in provides another source of variation. The intensity (and type) of religion in their upbringing imparts conceptions about religion and its role in morality and society. While questioning religion and the existence of a deity, one confronts those beliefs more overtly attached to religion and identify those beliefs that only tangentially relate to their religious upbringing. Otherwise, beliefs may hangover even after exiting their original religion. Both possibilities highlight the potential role atheists' religious upbringing may play in their present-day beliefs and stances.

Third, the circumstances of exit from religion vary. Atheists display considerable nuance in their reasons and justifications for leaving religion, as well as the length of the doubting period and the acrimony they face during exit. The length and fallout from leaving religion both follows from one's previous religious upbringing *and* carries the potential to influence the additional beliefs and expectations he or she subsequently attaches to atheism.

Finally, during their doubting process and upon exiting religion, atheists may encounter a myriad of non-theist voices. Between organizations, online message boards, and high-profile 'New Atheist' authors, there are numerous potential sources vying to impart their particular vision of what stances and beliefs a genuine and productive atheist should take. As atheists differ widely in the socialization they receive from outside sources, this stands as a final source of potential variation.

## **Primary Aims**

This project encapsulates two broad, interconnected themes: variations and ripples.

I devised the survey and interview guide to build upon earlier works that either traced a general outline of religious exit or focused on cataloguing heterogeneity among atheists. Building upon these exemplars, I seek to *explain* the variations that exist among atheists, both in their circumstances and reasons for exiting religion and in their present-day definitions, actions, and beliefs.

Towards these aims, this study focuses on the circumstances of respondents' upbringing, their birth cohort and the intensity of religion with which they grew up. This study is a story of the ripples of one's religious upbringing, which may resonate beyond their exit from religion, to affect the present-day beliefs, actions, and political stances they tie to atheism. In essence, it probes whether one's religious socialization thoroughly erases upon disavowing the overt teachings of theism, or whether individuals are not merely blank slates.

To accomplish this, 201 self-described atheists took an online survey, of which I randomly selected fifty to participate in semi-structured interviews. Both asked respondents about their religious upbringing, experiences questioning and exiting religion, and their present-day beliefs and actions concerning atheism.

### **Other Contributions**

This study's primary theme is the continuing influence of one's religious upbringing. However, it contributes to the scholarship on atheists in additional ways.

Foremost, its methodology is rather unique, compared to most recent studies of atheists. As a small, stigmatized population, atheists are difficult and time-consuming to reach. Many studies resolve this by sampling either exclusively or primarily through atheist organizations or message boards (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Chalfant 2011, Smith 2011, LeDrew

2013, Schutz and Roth 2014). While more convenient, this strategy has the notable drawback of reaching only a small subset of the population of atheists. In this study, only about a fifth of the sample regularly affiliated in some regard, leaving the vast majority of atheists invisible to these earlier studies. My sample drew via recruitment flyers, avoiding this common pitfall. Doing so allows for investigation into differences between those who seek out atheist groups and the unaffiliated. Thus, I can consider whether membership in those organizations has any major effect. Consequentially, this will appraise the generalizability of many earlier studies of atheists.

Often studies that consider one's religious upbringing treat religious intensity as a single, monolithic variable (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Fitzgerald 2003). This study splits childhood religious intensity into two related yet distinct prongs, childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism. Doing so allows for a more nuanced understanding of how one's religious upbringing affects their exit from religion and present-day beliefs and stances. The two prongs of religious intensity are treated as scales, offering advantages over other studies which employ a simple high-low dichotomy (e.g. Fitzgerald 2003).

The sampled respondents yielded a wide range of both ages and time identifying as atheist. This variation allows for focus on the role of time-period – both birth cohort and atheist cohort – in determining how the rise of the Religious Right during the 1980's and the rise of the 'New Atheist Movement' during the mid-2000's may have influenced atheists' definitions and public engagement. Additional research still needs to consider how the New Atheist Movement has promulgated what atheism entails, particularly how its 'founding fathers' of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens have influenced definitions of the label and set the terms for public engagement.

Finally, this study has potential to fill certain gaps in the scholarships of atheism. It focuses on examples and determinants of respondents' first misgivings with religion, both content and level. This builds on strictly qualitative pieces that limit themselves to vignettes and rote categorization, attempting to expand to explanation (e.g. Zuckerman 2012). Similarly, this study probes the underexplored topics of the symbolic boundaries drawn around atheism and atheists' conception of the public good. This remains underexplored, as most attempts to consider definitions and the public aims of atheists focus on organizational discourse or public figures (e.g. Ritchey 2009, Cimino and Smith 2007, respectively).

The following provides an overview of subsequent chapters.

## **Roadmap**

The second chapter reviews the various literatures guiding this study. Particular focus is devoted to role exit, namely residual effects from childhood religious intensity. Next, intersectionality sensitizes this study to possible variations across race and gender. I consider the effects of identification, atheist organizations, and the 'New Atheist Movement' may have in influencing the beliefs and definitions of some atheists. The section also includes a broad review of empirical studies of atheism and the irreligious. Their findings guide the design of this study by providing a foundation of established results, but also identify additional areas that remain underexplored, that the survey and interview might address.

The third chapter outlines the recruitment of respondents into this study: the three criteria for inclusion, access strategy, and compensation. This study employs mixed methods, providing an overview of text of the online survey and the general structure of the interview portions. In addition to demographic measures, appendices provide a detailed summary of the questions and descriptive statistics of several survey scales which serve as independent or control variables

throughout the analyses. Vignettes illustrate the important distinction between the two forms of childhood religious intensity, religiosity and religious particularism. Finally, I outline the coding of the interviews, with special attention given to explaining the criteria for sorting the level and content of respondents' first misgivings.

The next five chapters analyze various potential sources of variation across atheists. The first two focus on one's exit: their first misgivings and the impact of encountering information that impugns their religion's claims to be both timeless and universal. These two exit chapters focus exclusively on the fifty interviewees, as open-ended questions were required to ascertain peoples' complex, meandering journeys out of religion. The subsequent three chapters deal with variations in present-day stances: dogmatism, atheism in the public sphere, and symbolic boundaries around atheism. These three chapters include all 201 survey participants, supplemented with quotes and explanations from interviewees.

The first empirical chapter focuses on atheists' first misgivings with religion, explaining the potential levels at which misgivings occur and the three main kinds of content of those misgivings. Vignettes illustrate each combination of level and content that appeared in the fifty interviews. Following the descriptive opening, an inferential portion considers the effects of religious upbringing in eliciting various misgivings.

The fifth chapter expands beyond first misgivings, focusing on whether respondents' overall doubting process involved wrestling with information that impugned their religions' claims to be timeless or universal. The former prong I term 'longitude,' troubles stemming from learning about the historical context and mutable nature of one's religion. In this strand, respondents have to deal with evidence that religious stances and edicts shifted over time. The latter prong I term 'latitude,' representing distress from learning more about other religions or

developing closeness with individuals outside one's religion. I provide vignettes for each facet of longitude and latitude. While an inferential portion tests the role of religious upbringing (and schooling) in making one more or less susceptible to either longitude or latitude.

The sixth chapter, which shifts focus to contemporary beliefs and stances, opens with illustrations of residual from the interviews. Some respondents consciously recognized ways in which their previous religion exerted persistent influence over their beliefs and predispositions. However, this study supposes that conscious examples represent only the tip of the iceberg. There are less immediately evident facets that one's original religion continues to influence. I analyze present-day dogmatism – the certainty one's current stances are correct and unshakeable – via multiple regression as one potential arena for hangover of one's religious upbringing.

Chapter seven examines the degree respondents inject atheism into their relationships and public life. It considers whether religious upbringing and social milieu influences the choice to affiliate with an organization or message board. Explaining variations in choices to affiliate is particularly crucial, in order to appraise the methodology and generalizability of those previous studies which sample through organizations and message boards. The chapter closes by turning from strength of one's public views about religion to the content, considering the possibility of an ongoing shift in the aims of atheists.

The eighth chapter focuses on definitions of atheism by considering the symbolic boundaries atheists use to appraise the genuineness of others' claims to the identity. I consider seven sources of controversy, with interview selections used to demonstrate that respondents in the sample represent a wide spectrum of stances concerning these contentious beliefs and actions. Descriptive statistics of the seven categories demonstrate which guideline is most critical for a purportedly genuine atheist to adhere. An inferential portion investigates sources of

variation of how inclusive or exclusive one's definition of atheism is. The chapter closes by pointing to a second axis of symbolic boundaries, in need of more systematic future analysis: the productive atheist, in contrast to the counter-productive 'angry atheist.'

The final chapter synthesizes the five empirical chapters into a broader story about variations in exit experiences and present-day actions and stances, discussing evidence for (and against) the role of demographics, cohort, religious upbringing, circumstances of exit, and socializing forces into atheism. The chapter also highlights the study's contributions, with particular attention to the potential for residual and the non-monolithic nature of religious intensity. In closing, I review everything this study is not, frankly appraising limitations and potential blind spots in identifying directions left for future studies.

## **II. Relevant Literature and Opportunities for Contribution**

This study heeds Pruyser's (1992) and Pasquale's (2010) calls for atheist and non-theist research to shift from generalities to explanations of variation. Earlier studies – which offered guidance for this study's design – typically outline the general trajectories taken while leaving theism (e.g. Smith 2011). Those that consider variations typically use a simple binary that treats religious intensity as monolithic (e.g. Fitzgerald 2003). I hope to expand on these works, considering and evaluating multiple sources of variation.

As introduced in the previous chapter, four main sources may explain variations among atheists. The first possibility is time-period, the overall religious climate during one's upbringing and exit from religion. The second is childhood religious intensity, the degree of one's religious upbringing. The third possibility is the circumstances of one's exit. As a final possibility, variations may occur due to socializing forces after one exits religion, in the form of irreligious peers or atheist authors and organizations.

This chapter reviews previous work for each potential influence, covering both empirical work and its theoretical underpinnings. Additionally, I outline why it was necessary to draw from multiple literatures, as traditional conversion studies – those focused on entrance *into* a religion – often prove insufficient for explaining exit *from* religion altogether.

### **Issues in Applying Classical Conversion Literature to Atheists' Exits**

Seminal conversion studies focus chiefly on conversion to Christian churches or into New Religious Movements, being ill suited for explaining exit from religion (Gooren 2007). Classic conversion motifs, such as those offered by Lofland and Skoynod (1981) and Kilbourne and Richardson (1988), are modeled on conversion *into* some religion. As a result, several of the



forms are inapplicable to atheists and the few that remain valid leave little room for differentiating among individual atheists.

Foremost, among atheists, belief almost invariably precedes participation in a community, if one even opts to join one (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997). This eliminates half of a popular dichotomy in conversion literature, as few ‘converts’ participated in a group prior to formally changing their beliefs.

However, classic conversion literature is useful in considering social environment. Previous works highlight social factors that influence individuals’ decisions to change religions or amend their levels of religious activity (Gooren 2007). Additionally, conversion often entails a shift in one’s reference group (either socially or due to geographic distance), leading to greater empathy for and familiarity with those outside one’s original faith (Greil 1977). Finally, heterogeneous social settings offer access to dissenting viewpoints that may challenge and discredit one’s beliefs (Greil 1977); while pre-dating the popularity of the internet, this extends to the plethora of information about other viewpoints and religions readily available online.

While useful in sensitizing us to social factors, classical conversion studies over-emphasize recruitment, whether through organizational actors or social networks (e.g. Gooren 2007, Bromley and Shupe 1979). Recruitment remains atypical during exit from theism. Contrasted with theists, non-theists are less prone to active recruitment, opting instead to spur others’ questioning (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, Smith 2011). The bulk of atheists exit religion after a protracted period of active, intellectual questioning, rather than having their doubts sparked by the ‘evangelization’ of other people (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997). While they often confer with a variety of individuals over their doubting period – both with true believers and skeptics – outright recruitment into disbelief is rare.

I asked respondents what they have said or would say to a questioning believer who came to them for counsel. Overwhelmingly, respondents avoided outright preaching, opting instead to ask questions back, share their unique narratives, or recommend writings they found useful.

Heather encapsulated the general sentiment in her response.

I would be a little bit wary to make them question any more than they have to. They should go through that on their own. I think that's something that can be really traumatic if it's pulled from you just as much as it's shoved in your faith. [...] I don't think it's right to try and strip someone's beliefs out from underneath them. I think it's unkind and pathetic. No one needs that. If anyone is going to come to any rational conclusions, it should be of their own free will.

Surely, there are cases where evangelical atheists aggressively push disbelief. However, such cases are atypical. Even when constructing religion as not necessary for oneself, many nonreligious people concede that others might need it (Sumerau and Cragun 2016).

This study considers the effects of social environment and inter-religious contact, drawing from the fruitful aspects of conversion research. Beyond these insights, I had to pull from several different branches of sociology to fill in blind spots. Doing so allows for greater attention to heterogeneity, overlooked while applying traditional conversion perspectives.

### **Intersectionality: Race, Gender, and Religion**

Race and gender serve as demographic controls when examining whether the effects of the primary hypotheses are real or illusory. The strength of group identification varies by the relevance of other group memberships (Sidanius and Pratto 2001). Thus, it is necessary to consider differences across racial and gender categories. I consider the possible implications of intersectionality, along with empirical evidence of racial and gender differences, prior to focusing on any of the four other prongs.

According to intersectionality theory, multiple categories of privilege and oppression overlap and interact (Collins 2000, McCall 2005). Rather than being strictly additive, the effects of various categories of power have a unique interplay with each other. Traditionally, intersectionality focused chiefly on race, gender, class, and sexuality. Others extend intersectionality to other categories, such as disability or citizenship status. Relevant for this analysis, some also add religion. For instance, Miller (2013) employed intersectionality in explaining why White males continually dominate leadership positions and discourse in atheist groups.

The intersection between race and religion does not occur in a vacuum, but rather is influenced by the historical role religion has played for communities of color. The Black church was instrumental during the Civil Rights Movement, serving as a center of leadership and organization (Morris 1984). Its utility for spurring activism continues beyond the Civil Rights Movement (Patillo-McCoy 1998). Similarly, the Catholic church and community plays a central role in helping new immigrants – particularly Latinos – adjust and integrate to America (e.g. Mooney 2009). In these and other ways, religion plays unique roles in various communities, spelling different reasons for disengaging, differing definitions of what precisely one is disengaging from, and unique consequences for disengagement.

Differences in the stigma of disbelief are also important. Being atheist is one of the greatest ‘deal-breakers’ which would preclude Americans from voting for an otherwise impeccably qualified candidate (Edgell et al 2006). In daily life, the non-religious also report many instances of discrimination based on their beliefs (Cragun et al 2012). However, not all groups bear the brunt of stigma equally. Greater emphasis placed on women’s sexual purity entails more stigmatization for being irreligious (Schutz and Roth 2014). Similarly, the continued

importance given to the mother as the primary force in child-rearing – and thus the main source of socializing the child into religion – puts greater emphasis on women’s religiosity over men’s, resulting in greater pressure on women to stay in religion and greater acceptability of ‘passing’ as theist among those who do exit (Schutz and Roth 2014). White men possess resources and privileges that make it easier for them to weather the stigma associated with disbelief, compared to women and people of color (Miller 2013).

Early results from the interviews underscore these differences. Only twenty-seven percent of White males volunteered experiencing some form of negativity towards non-believers (stigma towards individuals or belittling of non-theist beliefs and morality). In comparison, fifty-four percent of women and people of color mentioned similar examples of negativity.<sup>1</sup> Although based on only fifty interviewees, this lends credence to the assertion that White males’ twin privileges of race and gender provide wherewithal to shrug off criticism and stigmatization.

Thus, a doubly marginalized identity – being both a religious minority and a racial or gender minority – puts more stress on individuals. For White women and people of color, openly claiming atheism is fraught with more potential pitfalls and steeper penalties. It also entails breaking with an institution that has historically been a focal point for political organizing. There are more disincentives to drive women and people of color to either not claim an atheist label or, if they do, to be less open about it.

### **Time-Period: Shifts in Public Religion and Atheism**

Religion is not static. Over the past half century, the relationship between organized religion and politics mutated. When current atheists grew up and when they left religion may

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<sup>1</sup> The differences are marginally significant.

influence how they conceptualize atheism and religion. Due to what Smith (2011) terms the ubiquity of theism, even those raised nominally religious – rarely attending services and receiving little religious education – have to grapple with religion and its implications in America and abroad.

### *Religion and Politics Over Recent Decades*

Increasingly, the most visible and vociferous religious intrusion into politics aligns with the Republican party, aimed towards furthering conservative causes. The debate over abortion serves as one early bellwether of this phenomenon. Prior to *Roe v Wade* 1973, pro-life was typically a Democratic stance, with Republicans largely either pro-choice or abstaining from the controversy. However, through the eighties, influential Christian conservative political entrepreneurs worked to adopt abortion as a central plank in the Republican platform and make abortion politically salient to evangelicals. This tie strengthened the link between the Republican party and evangelicals (Munson 2011). These bonds between evangelicalism and the Right grew in recent decades, expanding beyond issues of abortion to other social issues, for instance birth control and gay marriage (Bowie 2014, Campbell and Monson 2008). Additionally, members of evangelical denominations tend to adhere to conservative, laissez-faire explanations of inequality (Felson and Kindell 2007). Conservative Protestant discourse often results in an outright rejection of structural explanations for inequality (Emerson and Smith 2000).

Such ties between religion and conservative politics can drive liberal and moderate individuals to distance themselves from religion (Hout and Fisher 2002, Hout and Fischer 2014). This, in part, accounts for a rise in non-theists and unchurched believers. Backlash potentially influences atheists' definitions of precisely what they are rejecting in theism and what a secular pushback to religion should entail.

Atheism is defined vis-à-vis religion, rather than in a vacuum. The intrusion of politics into religion is a catalyst for some respondents, specifically cited as their first misgivings with religion. However, even for those whose doubting periods completely ignored the overlap of religion and politics, the religious climate in America (or their country-of-origin) influences their views of how atheism relates to religion. The time-period when one grew up therefore represents one source of cohort effects.

Another relatively recent development is the easing of Cold War tensions over the past few decades. The height of the Cold War represented the apex of stigmatization of the non-religious. The ‘godless communists’ were juxtaposed with ‘Christian Americans,’ leading to the insertion of “In God we trust” into currency and the phrase “under God” into the pledge of allegiance (Barb 2011). This time-period signified the conflation of atheism and immorality.

Older atheists, those who came of age during the height of the Cold War, experienced the greater amount of stigmatization of the period, potentially making atheism an even more embattled identity. In contrast, the most recent generations – while still experiencing stigma – did not have to contend with a comparable magnitude. Similarly, online platforms now provide further opportunity for open debate and building a virtual community (Cimino and Smith 2011). Those from earlier, more embattled time-periods may stress more certainty of their beliefs, from having to deal with considerable backlash and stigmatization.

### *The ‘New Atheists’*

The rise of the ‘New Atheist Movement’ is a more recent development. Though relatively loose and lacking any clear central organizations, earlier studies identified commonalities (Cimino and Smith 2011).

Prior to the New Atheist Movement – and the dissemination of atheist definitions and aims through the internet – the most prominent, high-profile atheist was Madalyn Murray O’Hair (Seaman 2005). Thrust into the national limelight in *Abington School District v. Schempp* 1963, which banned school-organized prayer in public schools, O’Hair’s publications spelled out a rights-centered argument for atheism and against religion. She went onto file subsequent lawsuits over violations of the separation of church and state and church taxation issues (Schaffner 2012). Later in the organization’s tenure, it expanded beyond a strict rights-centered approach, also incorporating arguments centered on sustainability and other stewardship issues.

The ‘New Atheist Movement’ continues this transformation. Two of the ‘four horsemen’ of New Atheism – Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris – come from scientific backgrounds. Those in the New Atheist Movement increasingly stress an inherent conflict between science and religion, where scientific materialism offers the sole avenue to knowledge and truth (Cimino and Smith 2011). Often, adherents endorse a sharp dichotomy between religion and science, what Barbour (2000) summarizes as biblical literalism and scientific materialism, respectively. Biblical literalism treats the Bible as the timeless, infallible word of god, the ultimate arbiter of all disputes about knowledge and the nature of truth. (Other religions may also be literalists about their respective holy books.) In stark contrast, scientific materialism stresses the nature of the universe as knowable only through rigorous, empirical observation into the nature of matter that comprises it, with no other avenues towards truth. New Atheists portray the two as fundamentally incompatible.

Additionally, two other attributes coincide with the New Atheist Movement: anti-supernaturalism and criticism of religion (Stenger 2009, Cragun 2015). Anti-supernaturalism rejects more than purely religiously sanctioned stances, also rejecting any beliefs that resist

empirical confirmation. Secondly, criticism of religion heightens the ordinary level of confrontation, often entailing a willingness to interject one's beliefs both into the public sphere and to aggressively 'witness' to the religious about the incorrectness of their stances.

Even for those who were never active participants in an atheist or secularist community, the discourse of prominent atheists nevertheless remains salient, potentially influencing one's stances and actions (Smith 2013a).

In total, three broad historical shifts occurred over the past half century: the rise of the Religious Right as the dominant instance of religion in politics, a decline from Cold War-era stigmatization of non-believers, and the rise of the New Atheist Movement, which supplanted earlier definitions of atheism with a strong emphasis on scientific empiricism and confrontation with religion. These shifts point to the potential influences of the time-period during which one became atheist. They also highlight the role of the time-period when one conducts initial research into what an atheist identity entails.

### **Childhood Religion and Residual**

Sociological research of atheism still needs to comprehensively consider the influences of religious upbringing on the circumstances of exit and present stances and actions. Doing so can determine whether individuals are akin to blank slates, capable of being systematically 'wiped clean' once they disavow their previous religion. If individuals are not blank slates, their religious upbringing can resonate after their exit, affecting how they view and experience atheism.



### *Religious Teachings as Schemata*

For the faithful, religion provides a variety of heuristic tools for interpreting and organizing information. Religious symbols, teachings, and practices act as a means for understanding the physical and social world (Olson 2011), in addition to the divine. Individuals learn these from a young age, learned soon after introduction to religion. However, could their efficacy persist, even after one exits their childhood religion and disavows the overarching beliefs?

In understanding how religious teachings function, it is useful to consider them as cognitive schema. According to McIntosh (1995: 2), a cognitive schema is “a cognitive structure or mental representation containing organized, prior knowledge about a particular domain.” For any given religion, there is no singular schema. Rather, there are multiple interrelated schemata, which provide guidance and categorization for a wide array of circumstances (McIntosh 1995). Schemata are fragmentary, guiding one’s actions in and understanding of their social and material world (DiMaggio 1997).

Due to offering divine edicts supported with the promise of eternity, religion has primacy in moral, epistemological, and ontological matters (Ysseldyk et al 2010). It serves as a source of purpose and furnishes tools for self-evaluation (Baston et al 1993). For many, religion is their primary focus, guiding many facets of their lives.

As schemata are transposable, they are capable of extending beyond their originally intended spheres, applying to a variety of novel situations (Sewell 1992). Previous research has highlighted the plethora of areas into which religious schemas extend, including diet (Cottee 2015), self-presentation (Davidman 2014), feelings about pornography (Sherkat and Ellison 1997), conservative economics (Felson and Kindell 2007), explanations and justifications for

racial inequality (Emerson and Smith 2000), corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat 1993), and coping skills (McIntosh 1995). This study focuses on whether such far-ranging schemata can persist even after exiting that religion. Previous work yielded modest evidence of this. In a survey of Latinos, formerly-Catholic converts to Protestantism exhibit greater belief in Mary's divinity than Latinos raised Protestant (Funk and Martinez 2014); despite exiting Catholicism, former adherents still tend to endorse the Catholic view of Mary.

While frictions are inevitable, individuals and groups possess agency, resolving conflicts by manipulating schemata – religious and secular – in novel ways. At the individual level, evangelical women in abusive marriages find support in Scripture for divorce, despite their churches' opposition (Sharp 2009). At the organizational level, LGBT-friendly Protestant churches draw support from the Bible, despite many Christian churches interpreting the same book to markedly different ends (McQueeney 2009).

While these instances are resolved through applying schemata in creative ways, some religious beliefs prove too inflexible to resolve conflicts. In these cases, individuals begin a prolonged questioning period, which can result in leaving their original religion. In many of these instances, individuals simply convert to a more compatible religion (Vargas 2012). Others wrestle for a prolonged period – discouraged from leaving by a mixture of guilt and stigma – but eventually find the issues unresolvable and leave organized religion or theism altogether (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Zuckerman 2012).

This study focuses on the latter, investigating how comprehensively one can discard schemata learned through religion. While a key stage in exiting theism is the process of 'unlearning' the religious beliefs accumulated and internalized during one's socialization (Smith 2011), there exists the possibility that those schemata that indirectly stem from religion – such as

the brief summary provided earlier – might persist after one leaves religion. Schemata may persist after exit when their link to religion is less evident and not consciously noted. For previous religious teachings to be a source of variation amongst atheist respondents – all of whom grew up in some form of religion – there must be variability in how deeply they are engrained, how evident they appear to those exiting religion, or how easily they are discarded. Qualitative work tackles specific instances of persisting effects, cataloguing some of the ways in which those raised deeply religious continue to experience effects of their religious upbringing. Some examples include issues of gender roles, self-presentation, and diet (Davidman 2014, Cottee 2015). This study can identify additional present-day stances that religious upbringing influences.

### **Exit from Religion**

Ebaugh's (1988) four-step process of role exit is instrumental in orienting this study, as well as integrating previous studies of atheists. She devised the process through interviews with a variety of individuals who had left a previous role. Ebaugh's study was broad, considering professional, marital, and other exits. Aside from ex-nuns – whose exit contained both a religious and professional component – Ebaugh largely limited herself to secular examples. With such an assortment of roles, many of the eleven variables she identified will not have any meaningful variation when applied strictly to religious exits. Nevertheless, the abstract process is useful for understanding religious exit.

In the first step, one experiences their first doubts, a sense of unease with the role, which he or she is eventually able to articulate (Ebaugh 1988). These can arise from either internal conflicts or friction with other identities and roles. First doubts spark further questions, potentially leading one to reappraise their commitments and attachment. Qualitative studies of

atheism often provide a litany of first misgivings with religion (e.g. Zuckerman 2012). However, the content of these first misgivings remains underexplored.

Next, one engages in anticipatory socialization, learning broadly about potential alternatives (Ebaugh 1988). In this period, one may seek out alternative sources, whether written authorities or simply others in their social networks. Several qualitative studies of atheism illustrate people's attempts to resolve their misgivings through consulting a variety of sources (e.g. Zuckerman 2012).

As one engages in anticipatory socialization, they begin to consider alternatives. In the case of questioning religion, these are secular alternatives, as well as other religions. As religious schemata can extend beyond their original domains, there is the possibility that they may persist, even after one rejects the broader, overarching belief system. Ebaugh (1988) terms these pervasive beliefs and stances 'role residual' or 'hangover identity.' Particularly for examples that extend outside the traditional domain of religion, atheists may be prone to certain beliefs and predispositions stemming from a religious upbringing. Following anticipatory socialization into alternatives, one finds themselves with the decision of whether to formally exit.

The third step in role exit occurs when one reaches a turning point, some watershed moment symbolically representing a definitive decision to exit. Such a threshold is critical for reducing cognitive dissonance, readying oneself for exit, and earnestly considering one's options (Ebaugh 1988).

In the final step, one settles into being a former theist. Having previously belonged to the discarded role distinguishes the ex, contrasting him or her from those who never had to exit (Ebaugh 1988). The ex-role can be fruitful to disentangle differences among atheists: both based

on whether or not one grew up in religion, as well as across varying levels of childhood religious intensity.

Following anticipatory socialization, Thornton and Nardi (1975) list three additional steps individuals move through in settling into a new identity: a formal stage, through an informal stage, finally culminating in a personal stage. Anticipatory socialization and the formal step entail learning and adhering to rigid definitions and prescribed behaviors. These employ sharp, black-and-white thinking about what constitutes the identity. The latter two steps occur later in the process. One gains appreciation for variability, eventually settling into an idiosyncratic understanding of the identity. According to this sequence, true appreciation of variability occurs with time, while newcomers adhere to more rigid, unyielding definitions.

#### *Variation in Exit (and Retention)*

Certain elements of atheists' previous religious upbringings vary, holding the potential to account for present differences. Of Ebaugh's (1988) eleven variables influencing exit, centrality is particularly relevant to this project. Some respondents came from households with a great degree of emphasis on religion, where religion was ever-present and the primary source of guidance for their family. Others grew up only nominally religious, knowing only the broad strokes of their holy book, rather than its intricacies.

While all respondents in this study grew up as theists, some were only nominally religious, growing up with only a cursory understanding of their religion's teachings. For instance, Glenn's religious socialization into Catholicism was so meager that he laughed, "I didn't even know Easter was Christian until [I was] a teenager." Meanwhile, other respondents were intimately familiar with their faith, such as Terrence, who studied the intricacies of Christianity so he could more effectively witness to non-Christians and create literature aimed at

converting those from other faiths. This wide spectrum signifies a great deal of variability in familiarity with religious schemata. Those who view religion as more central to their sense of self – the very cornerstone of their identity – will likely learn schemata that extend into a great many facets of life.

Greater centrality also results in a more contentious exit period, manifested as both internal struggles and external sanctions. These particularly tumultuous doubting periods often signify greater difficulty in leaving religion and fully uprooting all the expectations, practices, and beliefs associated with the previous religious identity.

Prior quantitative work demonstrates differences between those raised highly religious and mildly religious: longer doubting periods and more tribulations for those with high religiosity (Fitzgerald 2003).

Beyond centrality, another of Ebaugh's (1988) eleven variables holds relevance as well: whether single or multiple exits are required. In instances requiring multiple exits, leaving religion brings upheaval to other facets of one's life, compounding the difficulty and trauma. The interviews yielded some examples. Those with religiously homogenous social networks faced the severing of ties with highly religious friends and family. One illustration was Sonya, employed as a dog-walker and babysitter for people in her church community, who was shunned and lost those jobs once she stopped attending services. The overlap between religion and her informal sector jobs spelled major penalties for Sonya:

They were afraid of me, of having me around their children, their beloved pets, their property. It was a palpable fear, like there was demons circling my head or something. You're contaminated in a material way.

Side bets represent external interests which are staked on an identity or activity, heightening one's level of commitment; leaving the identity or dropping the activity gets

increasingly costly, due to the linked side bets (Becker 1960). When it comes to religion, relationships and public approval serve as side bets that can complicate exit (Ebaugh 1988). One may have to disengage from some social relationships – or even lose their source of income – when they exit religion.

Religious exit represents one side of the coin, the other being religious retention.

Retention research underscores the efficacy of side bets in retaining church members, making their exit less likely. Gunnoe and Moore (2002) found retention higher among believers with a social circle drawn primarily from their church, while those with fewer social ties to their church have a greater likelihood of leaving. The religious homogeneity of one's social circle also holds the potential to affect the questioning process. Social side bets hinder one's ability to learn about alternatives during anticipatory socialization. Conversely, a heterogeneous social network – including numerous social connections outside of one's religion – can furnish more opportunity to discover alternatives with which to contrast and appraise one's current beliefs.

Beyond social ties, there are other side bets increasing religious retention. Individuals strive to appear moral, devising moral identities that serve as evidence of one's worth and trustworthiness (Katz 1975). Religious communities provide one with role models to serve as exemplars of moral behavior and reference groups to appraise themselves morally (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, Smith and Denton 2005). Exiting a role thus entails forfeiting this comparative reference group furnished by religion (Ebaugh 1988).

To more smoothly exit religion, religion and morality must be decoupled. Doing so is often critical, listed as the second of Smith's (2011) four stages for leaving religion. While retaining moral beliefs, atheists have to redefine them, recasting them as rational rules necessary to live civilly in a stable society, rather than divine edicts obeyed to ensure salvation. Those

exiting religion devote a considerable portion of their exit process to learning secular morality and recasting it as comparable to religiously ordained morality, if not superior (Smith 2011).

In summation, this work on retention highlights two factors working to keep theists in their religion, as well as prolonging the exits of eventual atheists. First, a strong religious community makes it less likely one will leave their particular religion. Side bets – where a substantial portion of one’s social circle is staked on remaining in the religion – make it more difficult to exit or even research alternatives (Ebaugh 1988). For individuals in tightly cloistered religions, such as Hassidic Jews, exiting one’s religion can necessitate venturing out by oneself, essentially having to rebuild one’s social circle from scratch (Davidman 2014).

Secondly, the ties between religion and morality also complicate exit. This occurs internally, when one has to forfeit the reference group provided by their religious community. There are also external forces at play, given the conflation of religion and morality in America, which result in stigma and discrimination against atheists (Barb 2011, Edgell et al 2006). Particularly for those raised highly religious, moral and community issues are a significant obstacle to even entertaining the possibility of exiting religion. These may influence the content of misgivings or the strategies one undertakes while exiting religion.

One study utilized role exit to explain leaving the religion of one’s upbringing (Cragun 2007). Although not specifically limited to atheists, it considered factors influencing retention in religion, through Ebaugh’s work on role exit. Major findings include pursuit of higher education, moving to another region, and marrying a spouse outside of one’s religion as predictors of leaving one’s childhood religion.



## *Effects of First Misgivings*

First misgivings represent an intervening link, connecting the degree and type of childhood religion with one's present-day stances and beliefs. To date, I am unaware of any study that systematically uses atheists' first misgivings as a predictor of their present-day stances.

In part, this oversight is due to the prohibitively large amount of time required. Gathering and coding in-depth interviews about initial misgivings makes it difficult to achieve a large enough sample size to draw statistically significant conclusions. This study yielded fifty interviews. Although a paltry number, it holds potential to consider the influence of first misgivings.

While trudging into this under-explored territory, temper expectations. As will be explored later, often a single misgiving is insufficient to lead one to exit religion and theism. Rather, atheists often report a prolonged questioning period where, after their first misgivings, they considered additional arguments against religion and the existence of a god. Individuals often engage many subjects over their questioning periods, rather than simply exiting after the first difficulty (McKnight and Ondrey 2008). Still, first misgivings exert influence over the entire questioning process and are memorable for respondents, due to how difficult it can be to reappraise something once as central to one's life and identity as religion. Their unique role in the doubting process makes first misgivings another factor capable of accounting for variations among atheists.

One exception considered how first misgivings could influence which non-theist label one uses to identify. Fazzino (2014) found atheists cited issues of correctness, while agnostics

and the spiritual-but-not-religious more often cited moral issues. While extending beyond self-identified atheists, her findings testify to variations stemming from first misgivings.

Unexplored as another possibility, the form of one's first misgivings may influence their decision to affiliate with an atheist or secularist organization, due to different perceptions of the shortcomings of religion. Mobilization often requires a sense of urgency, in order to rouse collective action (Benford 1993). Shortcomings focused on the institutional aspect of religion – large church structures which can exert considerable influence over politics and the lives of others – might therefore be more likely to lead to affiliation with an atheist or secularist organization, in order to serve as a counterpoint to the long reach of organized religion.

### **Atheists as a Group**

Earlier sections briefly addressed the implications of atheists as an organized group. For instance, considering cohort highlighted the impact of the definitions and aims put forth by the New Atheist Movement and other organized groups. Here, I focus on identification with other atheists and affiliation with organized groups.

#### *Social Identity*

According to social identity theory, group membership and structural position partially influence individuals' stances (Tafjel and Turner 2004). Social identity theory concerns itself with the perception of being part of a social collective, where identification may result in internalizing beliefs and behaviors associated with other members of that perceived collective (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Social identification focuses on 'I am', rather than 'I believe', although the two categories are tied tightly together (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Individuals

employ social categories to divide their world into groups they identify with and those that they do not, divvying it into in-groups and out-groups (Tafjel and Turner 1979).

Collective identity is built upon a sharp differentiation from other groups, where individuals evaluate their own positively, vis-à-vis out-groups (Tafjel 1978). Such conceptions are not created in a vacuum, but rather are “relational and comparative,” defining one’s own group in contrast to others (Tafjel and Turner 2004). While mobilization can bolster preference for one’s in-group, individuals feel some preferences even in the absence of these motivators (Ashforth and Mael 1989).

One key way to accomplish this is to erect symbolic boundaries, delineating what qualities or practices a genuine group member must have, compared to outsiders (Hunt et al 1994, Lamont and Molnar 2002). These boundaries can be cognitive, communicative, or political (Lamont and Fournier 1993). Cognitive boundaries are principally of interest for atheism, though intertwined with the other forms, particularly political boundaries when legislative or social change is desired. The level of group identification is particularly salient, as higher identification results in more rigid adherence to the group’s beliefs and attitudes (Tafjel and Turner 1979).

Identification with one’s own group – and the bias in favor of it – increases in instances of perceived threat (Giannakakis and Fritzsche 2011). Feeling peril for one’s group – whether genuine or not – causes individuals to rally around that shared identity. This insight connects identification to aforementioned findings concerning the effects of the broader political climate and the content of one’s first misgivings with religion. Circumstances that heighten the threat non-believers perceive religion as posing increase their likelihood of coalescing around the atheist label.

An empirical study of atheists found positive correlation between dogmatism and identification with fellow atheists (Altemeyer 2002). For the irreligious in general, there is a similar relationship between identity salience and dogmatism (Gurney et al 2013). Those who have the greatest investment in a group identity are also the most certain that their stances will withstand the test of time. Heightened identification could result in numerous other outcomes, including higher zealotry, greater symbolic boundaries, and increased likelihood of affiliating with an atheist group.

### *Secondary Socialization and Group Membership*

Atheists' decision whether or not to affiliate with an organization or message board potentially serves as an intervening variable, linking previous religious upbringing to their current actions and opinions. Chapter seven investigates factors influencing the likelihood of affiliation, while other analyses test whether affiliates differ from non-affiliates in any meaningful ways.

Much like houses of worship provide the religious with expectations and information about the world, secularist organizations and message boards represent a major source of secondary socialization for atheists. Certainly, atheism is not a 'ready-made' identity, at least not to the degree which religion is (Smith 2011). Nevertheless, these groups define what being an atheist entails for their members, promulgating aims and values and defining who does and does not qualify for inclusion. Even beyond the walls of organizations (or the web addresses of message boards), these definitions from organizations and influential actors may diffuse into the general population of non-theists, reaching unaffiliated atheists (Smith 2013a). However, those who are active participants in atheist or secularist organizations or boards receive their messages directly and frequently.

Earlier studies investigated the dynamics within atheist organizations and message boards. Ritchey (2009) looked at a small, rural atheist organization and found close ties to liberal politics, as well as a strong emphasis on honing critical thinking skills for debates with theists. Challenging religious believers to public debate was one of members' paramount activities. Analysis of message board rhetoric by Chalfant (2011) catalogued common threads in the construction of atheism employed in 'deconversion narratives' over public forums. In addition to one's own understanding of their exit, Chalfant notes that posters also create their narratives for public consumption, pulling from the available repertoire of terminology and experience. They provide a glimpse into the culture of the message boards. He found that atheists frame atheism as an inherent, default stance, only deferred temporarily by a religious upbringing (Chalfant 2011). This stance lends itself to high certainty about one's present beliefs, as well as the confrontational, zealous stance towards engaging religion, as belief in god appears as a false consciousness. Other tendencies included a sharp distinction between atheism and religion and a willingness to be open about one's disbelief, to the point of evangelizing (Chalfant 2011). Chalfant's sample cannot distinguish between this being particular to active participants of message boards. Perhaps the broader population shares this level of zealotry and sharp black-and-white thinking concerning religion and atheism.

While unaffiliated atheists remained invisible to these earlier studies of group dynamics and discourse, subsequent work addresses this oversight, directly contrasting affiliates with non-affiliates. Langston, Hammer, and Cragun (2015) surveyed affiliated and unaffiliated atheists on their opinions and motivations for whether they affiliated. Current affiliates wound up diverging from former affiliates and non-affiliates in some key areas. In one particularly germane difference, non-affiliates (and former affiliates) are more accepting of a diversity of social and

political opinions in the secular and atheist community; the affiliated tend to hold more comprehensive, unyielding views of what a true atheist should believe. Furthermore, non-affiliates and former affiliates were more accommodating of religion and less likely to cite a fundamental incompatibility between science and religion, compared to present affiliates. Overall, affiliates rated more zealous about their disbelief (Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015). However, it is unclear which comes first, the chicken or the egg. Ritchey (2009) demonstrates the stress that atheist groups place upon engaging believers in debate, as well as a shared sense of liberal politics. However, the most zealous may also put the most stress on atheism as an identity, being more likely to search out the organizations in the first place.

Altogether, all these facets of sociology drive the subsequent analyses, setting the particular hypotheses guiding the five substantive chapters. I now turn to the study's methodology and data collection process. As a mixed methods study, the survey portion allowed for testing the hypotheses derived from these various strands of sociology, while the open-ended interview portion elicited additional hypotheses and ideas, occasionally requiring further consideration of disparate literature.

### **III. Methods**

This study set out to answer one broad research question: What are some factors influencing variations amongst atheists? Along with it came several specific questions. Does religious upbringing demonstrate a persistent effect? Does the time-period matter? Do first misgivings matter? Does one's decision to affiliate matter?

Previous research largely overlooks these questions. Prior to undertaking the study, I compiled expectations for these questions, drawing from various facets of sociology. During collection and preliminary analysis, I refined several of these expectations.

With such a broad, underexplored topic, mixed methods were preferable, as strengths of each proved beneficial. As the quantitative portion, the survey provides a large sample of respondents, in easily comparable variables. This allows for systematic analysis of the various potential causes, while utilizing a variety of controls to discount indirect effects. The qualitative interview considers how atheists make definitions and meanings. This assists in understanding how a marginalized group like atheists forges their own conceptual categories, rather than simply borrowing those from the religious. An open-ended format was necessary for capturing the narratives of one's exit from religion, rather than forcing respondents to simplify their experience to fit in a single, predetermined category. Rather, categories and patterns emerged during data collection and analysis. Finally, the qualitative portion allows for greater illustration of how respondents understand the topics posed to them in the survey. Together, both threads help weave a deeper understanding of the factors influencing variations among atheists.

## **Criteria for Inclusion in Study**

This study had three criteria for inclusion. Potential respondents had to be at least eighteen years-of-age. They had to have grown up religious. This criterion ensures respondents had to grapple with and exit from religious beliefs, rather than being non-religious merely as an unquestioned default stance. With this stipulation, childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism can function as predictors, as well as the circumstances and justifications behind their exit from religion. The requirement of a religious childhood disqualifies only a small subset of the population of US atheists. Some respondents met this criterion with the bare minimum of religious intensity and instruction, growing up only nominally religious.

Self-identification as atheist was the final criterion for inclusion. I did not provide respondents with any set definition of ‘atheist,’ nor did I exclude anyone for using additional labels to define himself or herself (e.g. agnostic or secular humanist). Self-identification represents a looser criterion than belief, insuring a wide range of respondents who shared only an ‘atheist’ identity. Respondents did not necessarily share a conception of what that identity precisely entailed, nor was ‘atheist’ necessarily the exclusive descriptor used to define one’s beliefs concerning religion.

‘Atheist’ is a far more malleable label than its dictionary definition suggests (Bullivant 2008). Belonging (self-identification) shows imperfect overlap with behavior (attendance of religious services or participation in religious activities) and belief (disbelief in God). Among the religiously unaffiliated – a concept that lumps atheists with agnostics, deists, and unchurched believers – only thirty percent did not believe in God and only seventy percent never attended services (Bibby 2007). This discrepancy lessens – yet is still present – when examining only atheists. The 2007 Religious Landscape Survey found that nineteen percent of self-described



atheists reported believing in a God or higher power. Using non-exclusive self-identification allows for subsequent analyses that consider particular belief about god. Stricter inclusion criteria would have precluded this possibility.

### **Sampling Details**

This sample avoided recruitment through organizations or message boards, unlike many previous studies (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Chalfant 2011, Smith 2011, LeDrew 2013, Schutz and Roth 2014). This was an intentional decision, in order to procure substantial variation in degree of affiliation with organizations and boards. As a result, I can appraise differences between affiliates and non-affiliates.

In lieu of organizations, I recruited respondents through flyers placed on college campuses, cafes, and bookstores throughout Illinois and into Wisconsin and Indiana. Appendix A contains the recruitment flyer. Some respondents opted to mention the study to associates who qualified, creating a slight snowball effect. Respondents opted into the study by contacting me via either email or phone. I informed them of the particular aims and demands of the study, checked their criteria for inclusion, and procured informed consent, through either a physical form or electronic assent.

The online survey portion began collecting responses on October 10, 2013 and ran through April 25, 2015. Overall, 201 respondents completed the survey portion of this study. Following completion of the surveys, an online random number generator selected potential interviewees. I contacted selected respondents by email to ascertain if they were still interested in participating in the interview portion. If the respondent did not reply, I made one follow-up email, before abandoning attempts at contact. If the respondent consented, I scheduled an in-person or telephone interview at their convenience. In-person interviews occurred on whichever

college campus was most convenient for the respondent. I conducted fifty total in-depth interviews, beginning on November 1, 2013 and running through January 6, 2015.

### **Incentives**

Respondents had the potential to receive modest monetary compensation for the time they spent participating in the study. Survey participants had a 1-in-100 chance of winning an Amazon gift card, with the winner randomly selected (using a random number generator) from a batch of one hundred respondents. Additionally, all interviewees were compensated ten dollars for their time.

The monetary reward was compensatory, without exerting undue influence over respondents. The 1-in-100 chance was comparably low, so respondents understood how unlikely winning would be. Meanwhile, the ten-dollar interview compensation was fair – and not overly enticing – given the time spent. As many interviews lasted an hour, it was roughly comparable to the minimum wage in Chicago. Regardless, several interviewees attempted to turn down their compensation. In these cases, I made one final attempt before desisting, informing them that they could donate it to the charity of their choice.

### **Tradeoffs with Sampling Design**

As with the earlier studies, I was unable to draw a true probability sample. Instead, respondents had to opt in, due to seeing one of the recruitment flyers and contacting me. For a topic like atheists, drawing a large probability sample is prohibitively difficult. Foremost, atheists represent but a small subset of the American population, so drawing a sample of two-hundred through random digit dialing would require an enormous investment of time and funds. Additionally, as a stigmatized identity, cold calling atheists would turn away a large portion of

potential respondents, who may be skeptical of my motives. Instead, for these two key reasons, the present design – which allowed potential respondents to reach out to me on their own terms – was a necessity.

While this methodology bypassed the generalizability pitfalls associated with sampling strictly through organizations, it raised another problem. Due to most respondents coming from college campuses, the vast majority were college-educated and in their late teens through early thirties at time of data collection. This exaggerates the tendency for atheists to be younger and highly educated, overcompensating for studies sampling from atheist and secularist organizations that yielded mean ages past middle age (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Pasquale 2010). However, the sample was not monolithic, yielding respondents with less than a high school education and ages ranging into the mid-seventies. As access problems persist in reaching atheists, focusing chiefly on campuses proved unavoidable in order to draw a sample in which affiliated atheists were not drastically overrepresented.

### **Survey Details**

The online survey platform Limesurvey administered the survey. After providing informed consent, I provided respondents a link to the survey and a unique five-digit respondent identification code, for connecting survey responses to subsequent interviews. The full text of the survey appears in Appendix B. I instructed respondents they could skip any question they did not wish to answer. I considered surveys completed if respondents made it to the final question, regardless of whether they skipped questions en route. In total, 201 surveys were completed, with nine discarded as incomplete.

## **Interview Selection**

I randomly selected respondents to take place in the interview using the random number generator at random.org. If selected, I contacted them via email to gauge interest in participating in the interview portion. In total, I reached out to sixty-eight respondents for interviews and fifty consented to interviews. The length of time between completion of the survey and interviews was generally within two weeks, though a few cases had over a month span, due to scheduling conflicts or difficulties contacting potential interviewees.

## **Interview Details**

Whenever possible, interviews were conducted in-person on campuses in the Chicagoland area. Upon respondents' request, some interviews were over telephone. All fifty respondents consented to their interview being audio-recorded, later transcribed and coded. Some fruitful conversation occurred prior to respondents' consent to audio recording. In these cases, I recreated the tenor of the conversation from memory, but none of the precise dialogue is included in this analysis.

Interviews were semi-structured. The interview guide provided in Appendix C served as an informal template from the beginning. In practice, however, interview structure was more malleable. It is best to view the interview guide as a compass, rather than an atlas. It pointed to topics to cover during the interview, but I let the interview proceed organically.

As seen in Appendix C, interviews were roughly chronological. They began with a narrative of one's religious upbringing. Interviews continued through misgivings, questioning strategies, and exit from religion. They finally culminated in present experiences and definitions of atheism. The interview allowed for following a meandering narrative out of religion, as earlier

research shows that individuals often oscillate between doubt and renewed belief during their questioning period (Zuckerman 2012).

While not by design, the interviews generally followed Seidman's (1998) interview series model. They began with life history, then perspectives and experiences leaving religion, and finally covered definitions and meaning-making within atheism. If a respondent jumped around in their narratives, I followed tangents through their logical conclusion. Furthermore, the list of questions grew as earlier respondents brought up certain unexpected topics. Question wording changed in light of what elicited responses easiest, without leading respondents.

Despite beginning data collection with particular hypotheses, the qualitative interview portion nevertheless borrowed from grounded theory method (Strauss and Corbin 1994). As atheism remains an under-explored topic, themes arose in early interviews that necessitated the tweaking of existing hypotheses and procuring additional information from subsequent respondents. One particular example of this was the topic of first misgivings, where additional frames only emerged during the interviewing, transcribing, and coding of the first few respondents, assisting in the development of new probes and areas of inquiry for later interviewees.

### **Interviewer Characteristics and Manner**

Collecting data as a middle-class White male in his late twenties (at the time of data collection), I possessed considerable privileges that carried the potential to undermine rapport with my respondents. I tried to draw upon my self-deprecating sense of humor to lessen asymmetries. Additionally, as a White male, I fit with the stereotype of who a typical atheist is. My demographics should not have surprised respondents when they arrived to their interviews. Furthermore, a few respondents discussed instances of racial- or gender-bias among non-

believers, mentioning unequal representation or implicitly prejudiced strategies used by atheists. The fact that they felt willing to speak so freely about these topics suggests the potential for bias was negligible. Nevertheless, keep the role of interviewer characteristics in mind throughout the rest of this analysis.

I walked a fine line in how detached I was as an interviewer. I did not set out to share my own (easily concealable) identity as an atheist with my respondents. However, I freely offered it in several instances. While I tried to keep the discussion focused on the respondent, occasionally I drew briefly on my own experiences to connect with a particular respondent and pose a follow-up question, if it appeared the most expedient way to further conversation. In rare instances, respondents directly inquired about my beliefs. I offered freely when asked. One instance was Sonya who, prior to the start of the interview, asked whether I was an atheist. When I affirmed I was, she shared that she was prepared to cancel the interview if the principle investigator possessed a religious agenda. (Recall in the last chapter, she faced stigma and ostracism from religious acquaintances when she curtailed her church attendance.) Given her experiences, she was understandably cautious about divulging her beliefs. In rare instances like Sonya's case, mentioning my atheist identity was necessary to put the respondent at ease.

Please consider my standpoint throughout this analysis. When studying a topic like religion, it is impossible for researchers to approach it in a completely value-free, neutral manner, despite one's best efforts (Sprague 2005).

### **Caveats**

I designed the interviews to take between thirty minutes and an hour, as respondents read on the recruitment and consent materials. In reality, interviews ranged between twenty to seventy minutes, with a mean length of forty-two minutes.

The relationship between interview length and the two measures of childhood religious intensity is of mild concern. Both childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism have weak positive correlations with interview length.<sup>2</sup> Though not surprising – when religion played a larger role in one’s childhood, there was more to discuss in the interview – it is grounds for pause, since some analyses consider whether a respondent mentioned a particular frame in recounting their exit. However, thorough probes and follow-up questions should have ensured this concern does not impugn any findings.

Additionally, conversion studies demonstrate the possibility of biography reconstruction. During this, an individual amends and reinterprets their experiences, following a conversion, potentially distorting their original account (Snow and Machalek 1983). Beckford (1978), for instance, found that Watchtower converts reinterpret their process to fit with the movement’s narratives. This caveat should sensitize us to the influence collectives and organizations – whether theist or atheist – can exert over recollections.

## **Interview Uses**

Interviews served two purposes. First, interviewees’ quotes and biographies provided ‘vignettes,’ examples to clarify terminology and results. I intend for the vignettes to help illustrate concepts and distinctions that might initially appear abstract, making them three-dimensional by situating them in the histories and lives of actual individuals. While the fifty interviews yielded many options, I purposely selected which cases I used as vignettes, picking respondents whose stories or quotes were some combination of poignant, concise, and representative. Secondly, I coded the interviews, identifying patterns and distilling variables. As

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<sup>2</sup> Pearson’s correlation coefficients of .24 and .31, respectively.

in the case of the next two chapters, interview codes often serve as a focus of analysis, where I attempt to explain variations in the appearance and prevalence of specific interview categories.

### **General Coding Procedures**

Following transcription – during which preliminary memos were taken – in-depth coding began, using the program Atlas Ti. During a second pass through the text, I ensured uniformity in application of the codes. Finally, a third round of coding combined codes into overarching families that shared common themes. Additionally, some codes with a very small amount of incidence merged, when both related to similar topics.<sup>3</sup>

### **Coding of First Misgivings**

While subsequent misgivings were also of interest, first misgivings receive special attention, as they represent the first cracks forming in one's childhood faith. This study defined misgivings as the "first awareness one had, either logically or emotionally, of shortcomings in their religious upbringing." Respondents who asked for elaboration received a version of this definition. I opted for the term 'misgivings' over 'doubts' to avoid the cognitive bent implied by the latter. The term 'misgivings' includes emotional reasons for questioning one's faith.

Additionally, emerging patterns helped to devise probes for later respondents. The following categories revolved around two key axes of misgivings that guided coding. Coding of first misgivings focused on the level of social life they occurred at and their content. The four valid levels of one's first misgivings were the doctrinal, institutional, interpersonal, and individual

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the constraints of IRB-approval, funds, and time, I was not yet able to train another coder to help appraise inter-coder reliability. Instead, I returned to the relevant portions of the transcripts a few months after initial coding, to reassign the codes and then compare with my initial assessment.



levels. This reflected Kilbourne and Richardson's (1988) dichotomy of intraindividual versus interindividual, but expanded it into four categories. The content of respondents' first misgivings was either as correctness, morality, or necessity.

### *Levels of Misgivings*

The doctrinal level refers to those misgivings arising from the substance of religious beliefs. Misgivings coded under the doctrinal umbrella can take on both a focused or abstract character. Some focused on one's particular religion, featuring issues of internal inconsistency or questionable morality in the holy book or religious dogma. Some instead had a more abstract character, although often these typically arose later in the doubting process, after initial, specific doubts. Examples of abstract misgivings included cosmological arguments against the existence of God, such as questioning theodicy or viewing religious mysticism as fundamentally incompatible with – and inferior to – scientific empiricism. Regardless of whether the misgiving focused on one particular religion or organized religion in general, flaws in religious dogma unite all misgivings arising at the doctrinal level.

Institutional-level misgivings arise from the stances or actions of religious organizations. These focus on one's local house of worship or at a larger organization, such as the Vatican or the Religious Right. Typically, institutional-level misgivings occur because of the hypocrisy of church stances: their inability to accurately apply religious teachings, let alone be exemplars. The opulence of churches is one such example of this. Perceived violations of the separation of church and state by the Religious Right are another example. There were numerous other examples citing various religious institution-supported structures or stances that also fell in this level.

The interpersonal level stems from disagreements with the stances and actions of highly religious individuals. Misgivings at the interpersonal level cite the unwillingness of devout believers to apply the ideals of their belief system to their day-to-day living. In short, they fail to practice what they preach. The interpersonal level includes both interactions with believers from one's own religion and those of other religions. However, first misgivings from the latter group are far more common, which is attributable to two factors. First, individuals tend to have closer ties and more sustained contact with members of their own religion. Second, while the shortcomings of members of other religions can be attributed to their (inferior) faith, one does not have such luxuries with fellow believers.

Finally, first misgivings may occur at the individual level. Foremost, there are issues of anger – with god or religion in general – over tribulations one has to face. Whereas questioning theodicy is abstract, issues of anger are intimate. Often considered a key reason for leaving religion, anger is remarkably rare in most studies of atheism and exit from religion (e.g. Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, Fitzgerald 2003, Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Smith 2011). Only one interviewee out of fifty had anger as the catalyst for his first misgivings. Other respondents report losing the spiritual 'feeling' they once had from their original religion. Although this may instead lead to 'seeking' behaviors to find the proper religion for oneself, it can eventually culminate in atheism. Finally, some individual-level issues merely stem from an ever-shrinking role of religion in one's life, until one eventually questions what religious belief and behavior actually provide.

### *Content of Misgivings*

The content of one's first misgivings fell into three categories: correctness, morality, or necessity.

First misgivings addressing correctness call into question the accuracy of one's religion or theism in general. There are two main threads to misgivings addressing correctness: the philosophical and the empirical, although respondents' conversion narratives often intertwined both. The former targets internal inconsistencies. The latter targets the disjunction between religious explanations and scientific explanations of natural phenomena.

First misgivings addressing morality questioned whether religion was ethical, doing so in one of three ways. Some respondents questioned the morality of religious edicts or certain passages in their holy book. Others had revulsion to religious groups or agendas pushing political aims contrary to one's beliefs. Finally, others cited the perceived hypocrisy of deeply religious individuals.

First misgivings that address necessity target the need to have religion or belief in god in one's life, resulting in a minimization of its role. These can arise from emotional appeals, be it anger or a fading lack of feeling from religion. They can also be highly reasoned, where one takes an inventory and judges that religion provides scant guidance or explanation. By definition, all necessity misgivings occur at the individual-level.

### *Ambiguous Cases*

If interviewees gave multiple examples of their first misgivings, I probed whether they could identify any particular one as their first misgiving. If they could not recall which came first or said the two misgivings were concurrent, I coded their misgivings as occurring at multiple levels and/or regarding multiple forms of content.

Additionally, some misgivings were not possible to parse as belonging to a single category. One such example is Jill, whose first misgiving occurred upon learning of a sibling's sexual abuse at the hands of the head of her church. As she recounted

The way that my mom spun it was that they were victimized by the pastor, so it wasn't really their... He had pulled the wool over their eyes about it. So they laid the blame solely on him.

However, she eventually considered whether the abuse could purely be attributed to one rotten apple, eventually she was able "to make the connection between what they were, what actually happened and the structure at which it was allowed to happen." Though she knew the head closely as a close family friend, she eventually questioned the institutional aspects of how he abused his power and why the organization downplayed and whitewashed the abuse. In doing so, her first misgivings occurred at both the interpersonal and institutional levels. A few other interviewees fit this mold as well, with first misgivings straddling two codes.

As demonstrated by such ambiguous cases, the codes were not discrete. In total, nine interviewees had first misgivings that were attributable to multiple levels and seven interviewees had misgivings that were attributable to multiple content. Presented below are the raw frequencies and percentages of respondents whose first misgivings occurred at a particular level and content.

Earlier work argues that atheists cite issues of correctness, while agnostics and the spiritual-but-not-religious cite morality and hypocrisy (Fazzino 2014). However, fully half of the interviewees in this study had a moral component to their first misgivings with religion.

**Table 1.** Level of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Level of Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Doctrinal	27	54%
Institutional	18	36%
Interpersonal	6	12%
Individual	8	16%

**Table 2.** Content of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Content of Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Correctness	24	48%
Morality	25	50%
Necessity	8	16%

The following chapter provides further explanations of the categories, as well as vignettes.

### **The Two Facets of Childhood Religious Intensity**

This study stresses that the effects of religious upbringing persist in some regards, even after disavowing one's original religion. How 'deep' an atheist once was into religion can exert a persistent influence over how they presently define atheism and religion. Contrary to earlier studies that treat childhood religious intensity as a single, monolithic measure (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006), this analysis splits it into two prongs: childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism.

A cursory examination of the survey results finds childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism to have a strong, positive correlation ( $r=.71$ ). However, a substantial number of respondents wound up notably higher in one measure than the other. Beyond the raw numbers, what precisely does this difference look like? The following present brief vignettes of the two interviewees that had the greatest difference in z-scores in each direction.

*Vignettes: High Religiosity, Low Particularism*

Rhoda was raised Catholic by a Catholic mother and a Jewish father who were “really hardcore liberals.” As she described it “my parents disagreed with a lot of the political teachings of the church, but identified with a lot of the core religious ideas and that’s what made them raise me Catholic and kept them inside that.” They were forthright with her about disagreements with Vatican stances, particularly on LGBT issues and birth control. Throughout childhood, she remained involved in the church, regularly attending service and going on a few mission trips, which she still described as being “really valuable experiences, outside of religion, even.” Her parents ensured she had a well-rounded religious upbringing, celebrating Jewish high holidays with her father’s extended family.

Vikram grew up in India, raised strongly Hindu by his mother, who taught him to pray ceremoniously at home, follow religious dietary stipulations, and frequently attend temple. Despite being in a majority Hindu state, Muslims and Christians were also present in his school. A few of them became childhood friends with no qualms from his mother. As a pre-teen, he moved with his mother and brother to join his father in America. He recalled the culture shock of America not being due to the kind of religion, as he already had prior experience co-existing with Christians, but instead the degree of religiosity. He was amazed at how unimportant religion and spirituality seemed to the daily life of his new classmates and neighbors. Raised to be accepting of other faiths, he nevertheless had trouble conceiving of day-to-day life without some form of religion being omnipresent.

*Vignettes: Low Religiosity, High Particularism*

Glenn recounted, “I was baptized as a one-month-old into the Catholic church. But the extent of my religious experience up until I was fifteen or sixteen was going to church on

Christmas for midnight mass.” He had no religious instruction during his youth, not learning about the Easter holiday’s Christian origins until he was a teenager. However, he tied Catholicism to culturally being a Filipino, particularly when he would visit extended family back home. He spent much of his childhood in a conservative, “very in-your-face evangelical” part of Texas. As most of his classmates wore their faith on their sleeves, he “still owned the Catholic identity,” despite his heretofore relative ignorance of its specifics. Religion was a way of identifying and positioning himself among others, rather than a source of guidance and spirituality.

Leslie grew up Jewish, attending monthly. Her parents expected her to be active in the Jewish faith, but Hebrew never came easy to her. She joined the choir mainly to avoid Hebrew class and served as a teaching assistant and camp counselor, chiefly as a summer job. As she recalls, the classes and camp did not have a religious focus, mainly socializing the students into the Jewish culture instead. While tolerant of Christians and other faiths, there was a strong emphasis on maintaining Jewish culture: “I could bet money that my parents at that time would prefer me to marry a Jew. It was never outwardly spoken.”

### *Summary*

As Rhoda and Vikram illustrate, a high religiosity, low particularism childhood entails being raised to practices one’s religion on a personally meaningful level and going beyond simple, rote participation. At the same time, one grew up with an appreciation and tolerance of other faiths, having close contact with them. When religion was instrumental, it was as a basis for charity, as in Rhoda’s mission trips.

Glenn and Leslie illustrate a low religiosity, high particularism childhood. In these cases, individuals did not learn and practice religion for its spiritual ends. As Glenn’s case shows, one

can reach adolescence and still be oblivious to basic theology. Instead, religion was mainly used as an avenue to transmit culture – whether Filipino, Jewish, or another – and to demarcate one’s in-group from others. These individuals were culturally religious and little else.

### **Other Variables**

Appendix D contains a summary of survey variables which commonly appear throughout the analysis. These include both aforementioned measures of childhood religious intensity, present-day dogmatism and zealotry, economic and social liberalism, race and gender, past and present social circle, and affiliation.

The survey and interview codes contained a multitude of other variables not covered here. The appendix contains all common independent variables. Single-use independent variables and strictly dependent variables receive ad hoc attention in their respective chapters.

Altogether, the combination of survey variables and interview codes allow for analysis of the differences in atheists’ circumstances of exit and present-day beliefs and stances. The following five chapters turn to this substantive analysis. I first consider the circumstances of one’s exit from religion, analyzing whether variations in first misgivings stem from interviewees’ religious upbringing.



#### **IV. First Misgivings: The Initial Cracks in One's Faith**

This chapter focuses on respondents' first misgivings, those initial inklings that something was amiss with their original religion. These first misgivings sparked respondents' inquiry, leading them to introspection. Many sought outside sources, some skeptical, others religious. Many also researched religious alternatives. Regardless of the particulars, all eventually wound up as atheists.

Earlier studies devoted little time to the impact of childhood religious intensity on first misgivings with religion. One noteworthy exception, by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), offers vignettes for forty atheists, half raised with high religiosity and half raised relatively irreligiously. Generally, the former group tends to experience first doubts stemming from either church stances or shortcomings in their holy book, such as inconsistencies or immoral edicts. Meanwhile, the nominally religious experience first doubts from hypocrisy of believers or cosmological issues with the general concept of God. Those with religious upbringings tend to focus on topics specific to their religion, compared to the more abstract topics of the nominally religious.

Others have suggested that those who are marginalized in other areas tend to dispute the institutional aspects of religion. Cragun's (2011) review of *50 Voices of Disbelief: Why We Are Atheists* notes that the explanations of female contributors focused more on the patriarchal nature of religion and religious institutions. Furthermore, female and LGBT respondents tend to cite church stances as reasons for leaving religion (Zuckerman 2012). Thus, the privileges – or lack thereof – afforded by one's demographics lead to variations in first misgivings. The disadvantaged often begin with criticism of organized religion's role in reproducing inequalities.

While I focus on first misgivings in this chapter, a single misgiving often proves insufficient to cause exit from one's original faith (much less become atheist). Instead, exit typically requires a combination of various misgivings (McKnight and Ondrey 2008). Nevertheless, first misgivings serve as an important focal point, representing a link to one's original religious upbringing. The form of the misgiving points to where a crack appeared in their religious armor. First misgivings carry the potential to guide one's subsequent questioning, as well as influence their views and actions as an atheist. I consider these possibilities in later chapters.

### **The First Step on a Journey**

Before discussing first misgivings, it is necessary to note that these first misgivings often herald the start of a prolonged questioning period, spanning multiple topics. Grant's meandering path out of religion illustrates how multiple misgivings are often necessary to culminate in atheism. He grew up Catholic, but received very little religious teaching at home. Instead, his parents delegated his religious socialization to the local parochial school. Grant experienced his first misgivings during what he characterizes as his teenage "rebellion situation," with the issue of theodicy causing him to doubt whether god can be truly omnibenevolent if also omniscient and omnipotent. Additional doubts concerning the feasibility of transubstantiation soon followed. He read a bit about the occult during this time, seeing it as "far more fascinating." Once he graduated from Catholic high school, he was able to put the question of religion out of his mind for a few years. However, he was reintroduced to religion in his early twenties, through his involvement in a twelve-step program and the birth of his two children. He became an active member of his wife's Lutheran church, characterizing it as being "Catholic without the magic." He described the reduced emphasis on dogma and the mystical as making Lutheranism seem like

it took all of “the better parts of Catholicism.” He attended for a while, but eventually pulled away from Lutheranism. His family encountered turbulent times, which everyone in the congregation knew about, but opted not to offer emotional support, either gossiping or ignoring them. He began to question Lutheranism due to the perceived hypocrisy between the lofty talk of community and the reality of their actions: “You can’t take them at their word, when you watch their behavior, they don’t really believe, they’re not acting as if these are really the priorities.” His questioning led to amusing contradictions, “I was actually teaching confirmation students also on Wednesday nights as I’m reading *The God Delusion*, at one point.” Eventually, the preponderance of arguments against theism added up and he decided to consider himself atheist.

Grant’s story is not unique. Often, formally breaking with theism requires a series of misgivings. Grant’s journey is particularly meandering, a fact he was cognizant of and supports with reference to a Youtuber<sup>4</sup>:

[To questioning peers] I have suggested a specific YouTube series. This guy, at the time he was studying to be a computer scientist. Obviously super smart. It’s a pretty in-depth deal. [...] I don’t know that there’s any one thing that I can say “go check out.” I just found that particular series to be comprehensive enough that it really covers a lot of ground. *He even covers how beliefs work and compared it to computer networks, where there’s all these redundancies built in and you need enough nodes to fail at the same time to crash the system.* [Italics added] And so no one author can possibly address in one book all of these things. You got everything: prayers to dogma to the community of believers to all these different things.

The Youtuber’s summary resonated with Grant and his prolonged, meandering questioning period. Drawing on the computer network analogy, Grant justified how a single misgiving often proves insufficient to make one an atheist. Instead, it is frequently a preponderance of various issues, building over a span of time.

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<sup>4</sup> Despite attempts, I was unable to ascertain the Youtuber’s name to credit him.

Brittany's story demonstrates how a cascade of doubts can occur between first misgivings and atheism. Her catalyst was disillusionment with her holy book. She described herself as a "creationist" evangelical, who took a literalist reading of the bible. However, once she learned about Mesopotamian poetry's influence on the book of Genesis, "it was almost like a domino effect. When one thing went, something else went. And the implications of that took something else down." A lynchpin of her theological upbringing, it called the rest of the Bible into question, "and so as the creation story went, the story of the fall went with it. Because that can't logically follow. And without the fall, issues of salvation come into question." Her rigid, literalist faith lacked the malleability to accommodate this first misgiving, a critique of multiple facets soon followed in quick succession.

Even when asked for their first misgivings with religion – a challenging time that leaves an indelible mark on one's memories – some respondents were not able to point to a single misgiving. Others gave a response that straddled several categories for content or level. In these cases, I coded their responses as belonging to whichever categories their stories contained. Thus, the categories are not tidily mutually exclusive. In total, thirteen respondents were unable to be neatly categorized in a single content category and a single level.

Whereas the methods chapter introduced the coding categories, the following section elaborates, introducing examples of the various content of individuals' misgivings, then providing examples within each at all observed levels.

### **Incorrectness of Religion**

Twenty-four respondents reported their first misgivings stemmed from the incorrectness of their original religion. Within this family of misgivings, respondents reported difficulty

credibly believing their religion's stances. Impugning the accuracy of religion was a key avenue towards researching alternatives and eventual exit.

Questions concerning correctness emerged at multiple levels. The vast majority occurred at the doctrinal level, where respondents report either internal inconsistencies in their holy book or the inability of their holy book to weather scientific or philosophical examination.

Comparably rarer – yet still present – were first misgivings occurring at the institutional level. These dealt with either the illogicality of organizational stances or religious organizations misapplying one's holy book.

#### *Incorrectness of Religion: An Doctrinal Vignette*

Beth provided an example of first misgivings concerning doctrinal correctness. She characterized her upbringing as having an “intermediate amount” of religion. Her family attended church weekly and sent her to CCD for religious education, but never put much emphasis upon prayer, Bible reading, or religious education within their household. By Beth's summary, “My parents weren't very strict in influencing the Catholic religion on me. They just did the basic stuff.” The rest was left to the church to impart religious instruction, with minimal follow-ups at home. Beth recounted that her religious classes often glossed over the symbolism of the teachings.

When she first began to have misgivings, they were focused on the veracity and believability of the miracles in the Bible:

I remember sitting in religious education one night and we were going over the Ten Commandments or a story about, I think where someone's living inside a whale and I didn't understand why they were living inside a whale, how that could happen. And then I was thinking about all the other stories that we had learned, like when he makes one piece of bread into one thousand pieces of bread [...] and how he was able to feed all these people. And it just didn't really make sense to me. It just seemed like science

fiction or some kind of mythology that someone had made millions of people believe. And it just didn't line up for me. And that's when I started to question it, but that's when I was in eighth grade.

Interrogating and pursuing these misgivings were not high priority for Beth, as she continued along with confirmation. But such issues of feasibility continued to bother her over the next several years.

Several other interviewees cited issues of doctrinal incorrectness. Many focused on different religious teachings, but all expressed similar issues with the truthfulness of religious dogma, from the feasibility of transubstantiation to the clash between a literal interpretation of *Genesis* with the evidence for evolution and an old Earth.

#### *Incorrectness of Religion: An Institutional Vignette*

First misgivings concerning institutions frequently focus on the moral aspect, failure to meet the moral ideals of the religion. However, Jenny's first misgivings focused on the correctness of institutional stances. Growing up Vietnamese-American, her parents raised her within the religious aspect of Buddhism. Her mother would light incense daily at their home altar for the family to pray. Her family also attended and assisted at a local temple, though as Jenny recounted, "But to me it didn't really seem to have a lot of significant personal meaning." As Jenny recalled, she was raised in the performative aspects of Buddhism, while the more philosophical aspects were rarely emphasized. This became problematic when she had a unit in her social studies class on world religions. As they read material about Buddhism and watched the 1993 film *Little Buddha*, Jenny began to realize a discrepancy. Buddhism's philosophical origins – and much of the teachings and biography of the Gautama Buddha – were conspicuously absent from what was preached and practiced at her temple and by her family.

You learn about the philosophy of not getting attached to things. Yet, I was being told to pray... And the idea that Buddha is not a god, he's a teacher. But the way that my parents practiced Buddhism, it's like you are praying to an altar and in that sense it seemed like Buddha was a god. And in that sense it didn't really connect with what I learned.

Jenny found herself wrestling with the disjunction between philosophical Buddhism in theory, and how its origins were distorted at her temple and home. This soon expanded to other topics:

It wasn't until I got older that I realized that with most religions it gets political, especially as the religion spreads. I felt that the biggest one was this idea that Buddha was a god that you pray to and ask things of. Which... I feel that the best part of Buddhism is that there is no god per se, there's just the teacher. So for me that was my first "I don't really get this" or I don't understand where my parents' beliefs are, versus "I don't really know what the truth is," you know?

### **Immorality of Religion**

Half of the interviewees reported first misgivings that included a moral component. In these instances, rather than asserting that religious miracles, history, or applications were incorrect, respondents reported that facets of religion violated their basic understanding of morality. Such violations could occur either in intrinsic flaws in the rules or distorted applications of those rules. Respondents attributed violations to either religious doctrine, the actions of religious organizations, or the hypocrisy of believers.

#### *Immorality of Religion: A Doctrinal Vignette*

Diana provided an example of misgivings about doctrinal morality, the morality of damning non-believers.<sup>5</sup> She was raised moderately Presbyterian by her father, who was White. Her mother grew up in China and was atheist by default. Her mother occasionally attended

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<sup>5</sup> Concerns with the morality of damnation appear in a later section, as well, as a specific kind of latitude. As discussed in this context, these are mentions of the morality of damnation that were introduced as the respondent's very first misgiving in their exit narrative. Examples mentioned in the latitude chapter include subsequent misgivings, in contrast.

services with the family as support, but was forthright about her lack of belief. Due to her mother's disbelief, doctrine requiring belief in Jesus to enter heaven was a source of anxiety for Diana throughout her childhood. When she began to socialize more, expanding her social circle to include friends from different faiths, this issue festered, eventually growing into her first misgiving with Presbyterianism. As she recounted, her first misgivings were centered around this issue

Mainly the idea that everybody I knew who was not in Christianity was going to hell. About sixth grade... about middle school or so I started having lots of friends of different faiths and different backgrounds. I went to a very diverse school and so it pained me a lot that idea that my own mother and all of my friends I loved were going to hell. And then I went to this church where they'd water down the message a lot. They wouldn't give you very straight answers. "My friends are going to hell, right?" And they'd be like "Well, back track. Let's go to what Jesus said." They wouldn't explicitly be like yes. So that kind of leaves it to your own imagination to get you really scared and emotional about that. I supposed that would be the main source of misgivings, that whole idea of salvation and damnation. Different people find different things to be bothered by. Some people its pain, some people it's how much bad things were in the world. For me it was just the idea my friends were going to hell.

Diana's story is not so unique, as other respondents – such as Megan, whose misgivings are recounted in the next chapter – reported issues of morality of damnation to be their catalyst.

Others in this category spoke of the immorality of certain biblical edicts or, like Grant, had issues believing in the omnibenevolence of an almighty deity. The finer details may vary, but misgivings concerning the morality of one's holy book and overall doctrine are common.

### *Immorality of Religion: An Institutional Vignette*

First misgivings targeting the morality of religion also arise from the institutional level. In these instances, respondents began to question the actions of their religious organizations, either locally or globally. Upon finding the organization not to be an exemplar of the religious ideals they were taught, some get disillusioned.



One common source of moral doubts at the institutional level are over the Vatican's handling of its sex abuse scandal. The Vatican's blind-eye caused some Catholics to begin questioning the infallibility of the pope. Others cited the lack of gender equality present in their religions. Still others cited the homophobia present in their faith.

However, there are other sources of questioning the morality of religious institutions, such as Kelsey's experiences. She was raised moderately Catholic, with her parents generally delegating her religious socialization to church and CCD classes. Outside of sporadically saying grace, she did not recall religion permeating her daily life at home. However, upon turning ten, she became a self-starter, opting to attend religious retreats and summer camps. Despite going to these large gatherings, she placed herself towards the spiritual end of the continuum, "[It was] more of a spiritual talking to god kind of thing. There was a lot of Catholic doctrine that I didn't agree with at the time, but that was okay. I wasn't really focused on that." Her disagreements grew too large to ignore a few years later, as she and a peer attended a Catholic retreat:

So, I would say around fourteen or fifteen was when I first started questioning. I went on this retreat. And it's this huge Catholic retreat. Literally ten-thousand-plus Catholic kids go to it. And one of the defining moments for me was at the end of it, there's this mass and it's a really ornate, lavish mass. And I remember thinking this is ridiculous, this is kind of stupid. That was definitely a defining moment where I was just kind of questioning what this was and why... all the outfits and stuff were relevant. [...] There's this really particular moment. In Catholicism they have these bells that are used in one part of the ceremony and the bells they use I remember there are twenty of them. And it was the wealth and theatrics of this is not in line with what is being taught. It was a lot about why would you spend money on that and a lot about surely religion should be a lot simpler than this.

Being forced to confront the opulence of the service – and how it clashed with her understanding of a very personal, spiritual relationship with the divine – was a watershed event for Kelsey. It focused her attention on the imperfection of church stances, particularly how the church was mired in material concerns, clashing with her interpretation of Catholicism. This led

to broader questioning. Her interest in science called into question religious edicts that were contrary to modern-day scientific explanations. Like misgivings over Catholic sex abuse, Kelsey's also focused on the inability of a religious organization to exemplify its own lofty moral ideals.

*Immorality of Religion: An Interpersonal Vignette*

Pete grew up moderately Catholic. His parents chiefly delegated his religious socialization to religious education classes he took through the eighth grade. His family rarely attended church and religion did not play a large role in his home life. He first began to have misgivings during his undergraduate education, when he became more cognizant of vocal Christians who behaved in ways he did not perceive as Christ-like, failing to practice what Christianity preached:

Pete: First and foremost, what I perceived as sort of Jesus's teachings and being open-minded and accepting everybody. There was a lot of hardcore Christians who were sort of shutting out groups of people or other religions or homosexuality and things like that didn't seem to make sense from my point of view. I'd say that was mid-college when I was nineteen or twenty or so.

Interviewer: Okay, that was, fundamentalist Christians? Were those people you actually crossed paths with or just hearing about them?

Pete: I wouldn't say I had firsthand known anybody to be like that, to be like that shunning of other groups of people but just perception in media or just, yeah, decision-making based on these seemingly arbitrary rules to me, that were kind of more arbitrary.

Pete is somewhat distinct. Most who cited issues of interpersonal morality were more deeply integrated in their religious communities, having close knowledge with the member or members whose immorality caused concern. Examples include Christine, whose Bible camp counselor would mail her scripts to try to convert her non-religious mother, and Jill, whose brother was sexually abused by a church elder who was also a family friend. Being familiar with the individuals who spark one's misgivings is more common, but Pete's narrative demonstrates

the existence of a spectrum of intimacy in these misgivings, where it is possible for more fleeting contact to spark questions.

While problems with the institution (or its members) do not directly inspire one to discard theism altogether, they inspired one to look at religious doctrine with a more critical eye, as in the case of Kelsey's subsequent analysis of whether religious explanations of natural phenomenon hold merit. Pete's interest in the sciences led him to approach religious explanations as hypotheses, critically evaluating them in light of the evidence in support or opposition.

### **Necessity of Religion**

First misgivings concerning the necessity of religion typically required a lower level of childhood religious intensity, where religion already occupies a relatively small portion of one's time and identity. In these low-intensity situations, individuals began by immediately questioning what religion provided them.

#### *Necessity of Religion: Personal Vignette*

The only level at which issues of necessity occurred was the personal one, where respondents decided that religion did not have anything unique to offer, prior to actually engaging and questioning either its correctness or morality.

Viktor was one of eight respondents to start by questioning religion's necessity. He was a one-and-a-half generation Russian immigrant, raised Eastern Orthodox. He attended Sunday school and sporadically attended mass, but his parents never put much emphasis on specifics, doing little to differentiate Eastern Orthodoxy from Catholicism and Protestantism. His family celebrated Christmas on both December twenty-fifth and January seventh, with each serving as

an opportunity for visiting with whatever extended family could attend, rather than its date being dictated by any religious aspects. Overall, Viktor's childhood was well below average in both the religiosity and religious particularism scales. Religion was delegated to the background of his childhood. He had no need to reflect upon it in depth until socializing with far more devout neighbors and classmates caused him to examine what religion provided them:

Viktor: I understand believing and following things that your parents say, I understand following and believing the law. I understand following and believing moral things. And all of those things kind of summarize what everyone tries to attribute to religion. So it seemed like there was no point to it if you could do your own. Follow your own way properly, without hurting anyone else, hurting yourself, so forth, what's the point of having something as a god and, I mean, I remember in first and second grade learning about dinosaurs and geology and the rest and like okay. It makes sense, evolution. Why... What's this divine power thing that some people talk about?

Interviewer: So it was mainly just you felt like...

Viktor: What's the purpose of believing?

When asked what advice he would give someone from a similar background, just starting to doubt, Viktor opted instead to pose a series of questions to this hypothetical interlocutor: "Why do they believe in god? Why do they have a religion? [...] What purpose does it serve to have this religion? Is it worth your time having it?" While differing on particulars, Viktor's story is similar to many whose first misgivings concerned the necessity of religion. An upbringing low in religious intensity led to examination of what religion actually provided to them. An inability to identify anything unique to religion led to both a gradual lessening of religion's already paltry role in their lives, as well as heightened scrutiny of its other faults.

Anger over personal misfortune could potentially lead the highly religious to question the necessity of their faith. Conceivably, having been raised with great stress on religion, it is an easy target for one's blame in the face of hardship. Zuckerman (2012) finds a few instances of respondents who were once deeply religious, only to have doubts catalyzed by a series of

personal misfortunes. However, these few vignettes are the exception, rather than the rule. Others have found a dearth of evidence for anger being a key motivator for leaving one's original religion, regardless of childhood religious intensity (e.g. Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, Fitzgerald 2003, Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). There was only one case out of the fifty interviews where the respondent began questioning due to anger over personal misfortune.

Dirk was raised mildly Jewish, having a Bar Mitzvah and sporadically attending a synagogue, but stressing that his family "didn't take it seriously. We didn't really celebrate holidays. There wasn't much religion in my life, growing up." Religion was never a big part of his life, but he remained nominally Jewish until his doubting was sparked:

When I was twenty-six my sister died in an accident. I took it very badly at the time. I questioned whether there was a power that allowed these kinds of things. And it impacted my mind more than anything else at that point. I soon became more reliant on my own strength than any other outside strength.

Anger over this tragedy spurred Dirk to consider what religion even offered to him, soon deciding that its usefulness to him was supplanted by his own internal strength. However, Dirk was the only example of anger over personal misfortune in all fifty interviews. Additionally, he was never particularly religious, rating well below the mean on both childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism. Rather than allow for the possibility that the highly religious can also first question the necessity of religion, Dirk underscores that first misgivings about religion's necessity are the domain of the less religious.

### **Summary of Frequency of Mentions**

The following two tables summarize the percentage of first misgivings that mentioned each level and content category, at least in part. These same tables appear in the previous chapter, when I introduced the coding of interviewees' misgivings.

**Table 3.** Level of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Level of Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Doctrinal	27	54%
Institutional	18	36%
Interpersonal	6	12%
Individual	8	16%

**Table 4.** Content of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Content of Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Correctness	24	48%
Morality	25	50%
Necessity	8	16%

### **Explaining First Misgivings Impugning Religion's Personal Necessity**

Following from the narratives of Viktor, Dirk, and others, I expect that those whose first misgivings focused on personal-level questions of religion's necessity will have had low religious intensity. The rare instances of misgivings of anger should be more prominent among those raised with low levels of religiosity. Previous research has found a positive relationship between religiosity and making meaning out of traumatic personal events (Park 2005). Those with more religious childhoods should possess the wherewithal to explain a particularly trying time within their religious framework as being part of a divine plan, rather than having it serve as a catalyst for their doubting period.

Specific instances of anger are exceptionally rare. For the other examples of misgivings concerning personal necessity, the effects of religiosity should function similarly. As Viktor's narrative illustrates, some individuals' first misgivings come from closely examining what religion provides them – whether emotionally, morally, or epistemologically – then extending their questioning once they cannot arrive at a satisfactory answer.

This general question of necessity presumes a level of familiarity with secular morality and scientific explanations, which one has learned alongside religious teachings during their childhood. Meanwhile, for those raised in a highly religious environment where religious explanations are paramount, the intricacies of secular and scientific explanations are largely unknown. Those with highly religious childhoods will likely first examine moral or logical shortcomings in their religious doctrine, prior to anticipatory socialization into secular alternatives. Thus, I expect that

**Hypothesis 1a:** Those raised with lower religious intensity will be more likely to have first misgivings at the personal-level which center on the necessity of religion.

The hypothesis – like most tested in this chapter – makes no direct claims as to which prong of childhood religious intensity will prove more effective. However, one can informally expect that childhood religiosity will be more key, as the reasoning for the hypothesis deals with the highly religious’ familiarity with and knowledge of the explanations of their religion.

The results of the hypothesis tests for this hypothesis are shown below.

**Table 5.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Personal Necessity Mgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Personal Necessity	8	20.75	14.14	5.00
Not Personal Necessity	41	26.83	12.69	1.98

**Table 6.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Personal Necessity Mgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Personal Necessity	8	8.88	6.42	2.27
Not Personal Necessity	41	11.39	6.40	1.00

Neither childhood religiosity nor childhood religious particularism exhibits even marginally significant differences. Nor do they when both are included in a binary logistic

regression equation.<sup>6</sup> In spite of the anecdotal evidence provided by individual respondents, childhood religious intensity exerts no apparent influence on whether or not one's first misgivings reference personal necessity, at least at the present sample size of fifty.

### **Explaining First Misgivings Impugning Religion's Correctness**

The previous hypothesis supposed that beginning with misgivings about necessity requires a lack of religious emphasis during one's upbringing. As a corollary to this expectation, I expect that individuals with higher levels of childhood religious intensity will be more likely to cite first misgivings concerning religion's incorrectness than those who do not. In order for first misgivings to reference correctness, he or she must have a basic understanding of their religion's teachings.

However, temper expectations. The threshold of religious knowledge required is not high. One merely needs a cursory understanding of creation mythology or faith-sanctioned miracles. In the interviews, a mild socialization often led to respondents doubting the correctness of religious stances.

Thomas was one example. He grew up in a mildly Catholic family, "but [Catholicism] never really held a terribly central place in my life." His family attended church on Sunday, but never made any effort to dress up for it or socialize after mass. He attended parochial school – because it offered the best quality education in his neighborhood – where he recalled a Catholicism class that "was very compartmentalized," covering rules but never addressing "how does this play into the theology." His first misgivings occurred at age nine, centering around "the idea of transubstantiation: this is bread, say a mass, now it's the body of Christ. Still looks like

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<sup>6</sup> Available upon request.



bread, still tastes like bread. [...] Just not really buying any of the claims.” With the idea of transubstantiation being poorly introduced – compounded by minimal additional teaching at home – it was a natural step for him to doubt its validity.

Nancy was another example. As a young child, her family was fairly involved in their Catholic church. However, at six, her family moved and soon stopped attending church – save for on “big holidays” – as her parents “didn’t get along with the people there.” After the move, she had minimal religious instruction, “I obviously think most of what I learned about it came from the church, not my parents.” Her first misgivings occurred due to an inability to reconcile what she learned in public school with the meager religious teachings she heard. It was an issue of “mostly just not understanding how to reconcile things like evolution and the Big Bang with how the church uses it. But it’s really so many years and the church is just still like ‘these things are created’ but we evolved from monkeys and that doesn’t mesh. Those two ideas.”

Although focusing on different religious teachings, Thomas’s and Nancy’s narratives contain numerous parallels. Both grew up with low religious intensity (scoring well below average on both prongs), receiving incomplete teachings about religious stances and lacking thorough inculcation into the full cosmology. As their cases show, first misgivings impugning religion’s correctness may arise when one just has a cursory socialization into the religion. One may know enough of the dogma of their religion, but not so deeply that one cannot entertain competing explanations.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> However, other cases impugning religion’s correctness may require a greater level of religious intensity. For example, misgivings specifically citing internal inconsistencies in one’s holy book presuppose an intimate knowledge of it.

Thus, the narratives of Thomas, Nancy, and others point to tempering expectations, though the best single hypothesis about the matter remains

**Hypothesis 1b:** Those raised with higher religious intensity will be more likely to have first misgivings which center on issues of correctness.

The results of the hypothesis tests for this hypothesis are shown below.

**Table 7.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Correctness Mgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Correctness	24	27.46	11.60	2.37
Not Correctness	25	24.28	14.24	2.85

**Table 8.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Correctness Mgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Correctness	23	11.65	6.37	1.33
Not Correctness	26	10.38	6.50	1.27

The results are once again not marginally significant. Nor is significance achieved by including both in a binary logistic regression equation.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence of an effect of childhood religious intensity on first misgivings concerning correctness.

### Explaining First Misgivings Impugning Religion's Morality

The expectations for morality-centered misgivings generally follow the reasoning for correctness-centered misgivings. Once again, a certain threshold of familiarity typically must be reached, either familiarity with dogma or close familiarity with fellow believers.

Additionally, respondents with the highest levels of religious intensity were often solely situated in a religious worldview, where arguments over correctness may prove ineffective.

<sup>8</sup> Available upon request.

Being firmly entrenched in their religion's paradigm made it difficult for scientific explanations to gain any traction. Instead, affective arguments – which target the morality of one's faith – may have carried more weight in challenging childhood beliefs.

Religion is still viewed as a prerequisite for morality in America (Barb 2011). Atheists pass through a stage of decoupling religion and morality, framing secular morality as equal to – if not superior to – religious morality (Smith 2011). However, among those raised highly religious, this step is more critical. The link between religion and morality is deeply internalized, requiring considerable effort to maintain one's moral identity while exiting religion. One has to struggle with an internal definition of self, in addition to public sentiment.

Following from these foundations, I expect that

**Hypothesis 1c:** Those raised with higher religious intensity will be more likely to have first misgivings which center on moral issues.

The results of the hypothesis tests for this hypothesis are shown below.

**Table 9.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Morality Misgivings (from Interviews)\*

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Morality	24	30.04	13.85	2.83
Not Morality	25	21.80	10.88	2.18

**Table 10.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Morality Misgivings (from Interviews)\*\*

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Morality	25	13.24	7.20	1.44
Not Morality	24	8.63	4.50	.92

Both hypothesis tests are statistically significant in the hypothesized directions: childhood religiosity at the .05 level and childhood religious particularism at the .01 level. The differences

between the two groups are 8.2 points on the 48-point childhood religiosity scale and 4.6 points on the 24-point childhood religious particularism scale, roughly one sixth of each total scale.

In order to disentangle the shared effects, I included both measures in binary logistic regression equations, first as the sole variables, then along with demographic controls.

**Table 11.** Binary Regressions Predicting Moral Misgivings (from Interview)

	<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>		<i>+Demographics</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	.01 (.04)	(1.3%)	.03 (.04)	(3.2%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.12 (.08)	(12.7%)	.08 (.08)	(8.6%)
White			.19 (.72)	(20.5%)
Male			-.62 (.69)	(-46.4%)
Birth year			-.19* (.09)	(-17.2%)
Year Misgivings			.16+ (.08)	(16.8%)
Constant	-1.63*		-.47	
N	48		48	
df	2		6	
R <sup>2</sup>	.20		.34	
Chi-square	7.77*		13.96*	

When considering only the two prongs of childhood religious intensity, neither has any significant effect when controlling for the other measure. However, the inclusion of both measures significantly ( $p < .05$ ) improves the prediction of whether there was a moral component to first misgivings. At this point it is general childhood religious intensity, rather than either specific prong, which necessitates a moral component.

Controlling for demographics – race, gender, and date of birth and date of first misgivings – does not change the impact of childhood religious intensity. Neither prong is significant, but considering both measures of childhood religious intensity adds a marginally significant<sup>9</sup> (just shy of  $p=.05$ ) improvement to the prediction. Accounting for overall childhood religious intensity does improve the prediction equation. When tried with controls, but isolated from the other measure, both have positive effects which are significant at a .05 level.<sup>10</sup> This effect is from general childhood religious intensity, rather than anything unique to either prong. Overall, moral misgivings represent the sole instance of content being influenced by one's religious upbringing.

While race and gender have no impact, cohort does. Controlling for the other, earlier birth cohorts are more likely to cite a moral component, while those who had their misgivings recently are also more likely. Both signify a longer period before moral misgivings. Moral components occur more frequently among those who are older at their first misgivings, representing over a three-year difference. Those who refrain from questioning their religion until older typically are more likely to start critically examining their faith with moral issues.

### **Explaining First Misgivings at the Doctrinal Level**

First misgivings at the doctrinal level require a modicum of familiarity with one's religion, suggesting greater levels of childhood religious intensity among those who begin their questioning phases at the doctrinal level.

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<sup>9</sup> With a chi-square of 5.81.

<sup>10</sup> Output available upon request.

However, some of the interviewees' narratives highlight the need to temper expectations. Several respondents who cited doctrine did so due to a partial or uneven socialization into religion. In these cases, either a religious concept was inadequately explained or teaching was delegated wholly to school or Sunday school with little reinforcement at home. Transubstantiation proved particularly problematic when socialization was partial or uneven, as seen in Grant's narrative. Despite moderating expectations, I nevertheless expect that

**Hypothesis 1d:** Those raised with higher religious intensity will be more likely to have first misgivings arise from the doctrinal level.

The results of the hypothesis tests are provided below.

**Table 12.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Doctrinal Mgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Doctrinal	27	27.96	10.98	2.11
Not Doctrinal	22	23.23	14.93	3.18

**Table 13.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Doctrinal Mgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Doctrinal	26	11.81	5.97	1.17
Not Doctrinal	23	10.04	6.88	1.43

Neither prong of childhood religious intensity shows enough difference to be even marginally significant. Nor do they upon including both in a binary logistic regression equation.<sup>11</sup>

### Explaining First Misgivings at the Institutional Level

The impact of childhood religious intensity on institutional-level first misgivings is uncertain, not lending itself to a single hypothesis. For some, frequent service attendance and

<sup>11</sup> Available upon request.

participation outside of service provided them with the familiarity to question their religious institution.

However, high-profile religious scandals (e.g. sex abuse within the Catholic church) and the intrusion of religion into politics ensure even those raised with low religious intensity can be familiar enough with institutional shortcomings. The nominally religious can glean information from the salacious headlines to question whether religious organizations practice what they preach.

While allusions to the Catholic sex abuse scandal or institutionalized gender inequality were more frequently witnessed, Jhumpa's narrative provided a unique example which touched on similar themes. She was raised nominally Hindu, with a large portion of her family being open in their skepticism. She described participating in an October festival as "the only kind of regular thing that I did as a kid, if it can be seen as religion. But again it was more cultural to me than religious." However, following history and current events still provided her with enough wherewithal to question Hinduism for its contribution to religious strife and inequality:

The first few [misgivings] were actively politically charged. So I think this was 1993 and I was in high school. There were these major riots that had happened in India. This was based on the Hindu nationalist political party getting into power and basically tearing down a very historic mosque and this was not in the area I lived in, this was national news. And my family was very distressed about it. But there were also widespread riots that happened around India. At that point, the political rhetoric was really divisive. There was a huge majority of Hindus that was reveling in this idea that the mosque was torn down and Muslims were bad and they should leave India and go back to Pakistan. Things like that. So that was not just misgivings, that solidified my disgust for religion. I'm no longer disgusted with religion, but at that point I was. But before that, I always questioned the idea of castes within Hinduism. And the idea of caste stratification is so embedded in Hinduism it's almost not seen as religious, but as social stratifications. But the point I think I started understanding from my social studies classes that the caste system is part and parcel of Hindu religion.

Due to cases like Jhumpa's, it is difficult to predict a direction for childhood religious intensity's effect. Some examples stem from an intimate knowledge of the workings and politics of one's church or temple, while others address various scandals gleaned from current events. Nevertheless, the results of the hypothesis tests are provided below.

**Table 14.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Institutional Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Institutional	17	26.29	14.24	3.45
Not Institutional	32	25.59	12.49	2.21

**Table 15.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Institutional Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Institutional	18	10.50	6.25	1.47
Not Institutional	31	11.26	6.58	1.18

There are no differences based on one's childhood religious intensity. Beyond the level of religious intensity, the type of religion may play a role in whether or not one's first misgivings focus on religious institutions. Compared to Protestants, Catholics have a more centralized church, which offers a more visible target for potential misgivings. Additionally, it received attention for its highly publicized sex abuse scandal.

Many Protestant denominations lack a highly centralized church to act as a clear source of misgivings, at least on par with the Vatican. Protestants also have more wherewithal to switch to a different denomination, should they have disagreements with their current one. The teachings they learned during their upbringing are more transposable. Problems with their organization may just entail leaving that church and shopping for a new one, rather than questioning religion altogether. In comparison, Catholics cannot nonchalantly exit their religious



organization upon disagreeing with it. There is greater opportunity for institutional disagreements to fester and grow into one's first misgivings with religion. I therefore expect that

**Hypothesis 1e:** Those raised Catholic will be more likely to have first misgivings which center on institutional issues, compared to those raised Protestant.

However, the results do not support this hypothesis. Thirty-six percent of Catholics have first misgivings at the institutional level, compared to thirty-five percent of Protestants. This difference is insignificant. First misgivings stemming from the institutional level are equally accessible to all, regardless of their kind or degree of childhood religion. Perhaps this can be attributed to the availability of news reports on oversteps and hypocrisy of religious organizations.

Finally, we return to earlier findings, derived from accounts of high profile atheists. Women often cite institutional aspects in recounting their first misgivings (Cragun 2011). Extending this to race, which has been even more neglected in the research on atheism, I expect similar results. Atheists who are doubly marginalized – being racial or gender minorities, in addition to religious ones – will be more sensitive to the intrusion of organized religion into politics and the abuses of organized religion in perpetuating inequality. Stated as a formal hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1f:** Women and people of color will be more likely to have first misgivings which center on institutional issues, compared to White males.

**Table 16.** Mentions of Institutional Misgivings by Race and Gender (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Woman of Color</i>	<i>Man of Color</i>	<i>White Woman</i>	<i>White Man</i>
Institutional	25%	28.6%	65%	6.7%
Not Institutional	75%	71.4%	35%	93.3%

As seen above, the results are nuanced, but conclusively demonstrate that demographics influence institutional-level misgivings. A chi-square value of 13.49 shows these results to be

significant ( $p < .01$ ). Only seven percent of White males mentioned an institutional aspect, compared to twenty-nine percent of men of color, twenty-five percent of women of color, and sixty-five percent of White women.

While the gender differences among people of color are negligible, there are enormous differences between White men and women. Roughly two-thirds of White women cite institutional shortcomings for their first misgivings, compared to only a single White male interviewee. People of color, regardless of gender, sit between these two extremes. Institutional shortcomings can take a variety of forms – from greed to sex abuse to bias to even correctness – but they largely appear to be the substance of White women’s misgivings, with White men inured to them. These findings persist in a binary logistic model: there is no difference between women and men of color, but White women cite institutional issues significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more, in comparison to White men.<sup>12</sup>

### **Explaining First Misgivings at the Interpersonal Level**

Finally, interactions with believers caused some to experience their first misgivings. In this instance, there are two competing pulls.

Knowing religious individuals who are off-putting or hypocritical may lead to a backlash among the nominally religious, who otherwise lack familiarity with specific religious doctrine or organizations. In this case, lower childhood religious intensity leads to interpersonal misgivings. In vignettes published earlier, those raised irreligiously often cite examples of hypocrisy among believers (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006).

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<sup>12</sup> Available upon request.

However, those raised with high religious particularism – where theirs was elevated above others – may find it traumatic to encounter members who are as hypocritical or off-putting as members of religious out-groups. Encountering ‘bad apples’ may spark questioning whether their religion’s moral code actually improves people. By this explanation, there would be a predisposition for first misgivings at the interpersonal level among those raised with high levels of religious intensity.

Due to these competing arguments, it is impossible to select a single hypothesis. The results of the hypothesis tests are presented below.

**Table 17.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Interpersonal Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Interpersonal	6	29.67	21.90	8.94
Not Interpersonal	43	25.30	11.54	1.76

**Table 18.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Interpersonal Misgivings (from Interviews)\*

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Interpersonal	6	16.33	7.45	3.04
Not Interpersonal	43	10.23	5.97	.91

Only one of the prongs of childhood religious intensity matters. While there is no impact from childhood religiosity, childhood religious particularism is significant ( $p < .05$ ). Those reporting misgivings at the interpersonal-level are roughly six-points higher on the twenty-four-point scale.

**Table 19.** Binary Regressions Predicting Interpersonal Misgivings (from Interview)

	<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>		<i>+Demographics &amp; Period</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	-.11 (.07)	(-10.5%)	-.10 (.07)	(-9.7%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.35* (.16)	(41.8%)	.35* (.17)	(41.8%)
White			-.25 (1.15)	(-21.7%)
Male			.62 (1.19)	(84.9%)
Birth year			-.12 (.12)	(-11.5%)
Year Misgivings			.09 (.11)	(9.9%)
Constant	-3.61**		-3.21	
N	48		48	
df	2		6	
R <sup>2</sup>	.27		.34	
Chi-square	7.37*		9.51	

Upon controlling for childhood religiosity in a binary logistic regression equation, the effects of childhood religious particularism persist. A one-unit rise in childhood religious particularism increases one's odds of citing an interpersonal component to one's first misgivings by 41.8%. There are similar effects when demographic and cohort controls are added.

Childhood religiosity has no impact, nor do any of the control variables. The effects stem solely from childhood religious particularism. Considering both measures of childhood religious intensity in the full equation adds significantly to its predictive power, although childhood religiosity has no independent effect.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> With a chi-square of 6.34.

There are two potential explanations for the effects of childhood religious particularism. Its impact may be due to doctrine which elevates one's own religion above others, as the sole way to behave morally and achieve salvation. Encountering contradictory information – believers who are also morally repugnant – causes one to question whether their faith is the arbiter of right and wrong, salvation and damnation.

The other possibility disputes a direct effect from a particularistic religious ideology. Those in particularistic faiths had significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more homogenous social circles.<sup>14</sup> As an effect of having contact almost exclusively with others in their faith, perhaps one had greater knowledge of peers' faults and less ability to avoid those they find off-putting. If this latter explanation were the case, controlling for the composition of one's social circle would alter the effects of childhood religious particularism. Essentially, this is an argument from opportunity. A closed, homogenous social circle allows for greater prospects of conflicts with fellow believers.

The output is provided below.

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<sup>14</sup> F-ratio=2.52.

**Table 20.** Binary Regression Predicting Interpersonal Misgivings, Including Social Circle (from Interview)

	<i>+Social Circle</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	-.10 (.07)	(-9.5%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.35* (.17)	(42.2%)
White	-.19 (1.16)	(-17.4%)
Male	.58 (1.19)	(78.4%)
Birth year	-.12 (.12)	(-11.0%)
Year Misgivings	.09 (.11)	(9.0%)
Heterogeneity of Social Circle at First Misgivings	.13 (.39)	(13.7%)
Constant	-3.39	
N	48	
df	7	
R <sup>2</sup>	.34	
Chi-square	9.62	

This equation tells precisely the same story as the previous one. Childhood religious particularism has an identical effect (which is still significant at the .05 level). None of the other variables achieve marginal significance, nor does the newly-considered social circle. This confirms the effects of childhood religious particularism to stem from the doctrine espoused, rather than indirectly through the composition of one's social circle.

Those who start questioning religion at the interpersonal-level do not arrive at their questions from having an insulated, homogenous social group, where constant contact with fellow believers, eventually leading to friction. Rather, it is the doctrine that elevates one's

fellow believers among those from other faiths – regardless of how many or few one knows – which makes one susceptible to disillusionment from immoral or hypocritical peers.

## Discussion

The following tables show the means for childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism for each level and content category. Recall that, due to having ambiguous or multiple first misgivings, some respondents fell into multiple categories. Thus, a few individuals contribute to multiple categories.

**Table 21.** Mean Childhood Religious Intensity by Content of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Content of Misgivings</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religiosity</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religious Particularism</i>
Correctness	27.46	11.65
Morality	30.04	13.24
Necessity	20.75	8.88

The above table showcases the greater incidence of moral first misgivings among those with high levels of religious intensity. The low levels of childhood religious intensity among personal necessity are not statistically significant, due to low sample size.

**Table 22.** Mean Childhood Religious Intensity by Level of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Level of Misgivings</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religiosity</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religious Particularism</i>
Doctrinal	27.96	11.81
Institutional	26.29	10.50
Interpersonal	29.67	16.33
Individual	20.75	8.88

This table illustrates the higher incidence of interpersonal misgivings among those raised with high levels of childhood religious intensity, particularly particularism.

### *Childhood Religious Intensity*

The effects of childhood religious intensity align with studies looking at the other side of the coin, religious retention. Those raised more religiously tend to place greater emphasis on their community, both during and outside of services, which makes exit less likely. The presence of religious role models – including a highly religious peer group – helps to increase retention (Gunnøe and Moore 2002). Given the undertow involved with being highly religious and deeply invested in one's religious community, it is unsurprising that those few who swim against the current begin their doubting periods by questioning the very aspect which retains many. Interpersonal misgivings – which focus on the immorality and hypocrisy of one's peers – start one's process of disengaging with their religion, as it removes the luster of belonging to the community. When a particularistic faith elevates itself above others (and non-believers), questioning whether one's peers truly are morally upstanding is an integral first step towards earnest questioning and eventual exit.

A similar story is told in the case of moral misgivings. Previous work has documented both the assumptions tying religion to morality in America (Barb 2011) and the comprehensive step atheists must go through in decoupling religion and morality (Smith 2011). While all who leave religion in America have to deal with the public sentiment and stigma, there is a wide spectrum of how deeply ingrained these presumed ties between religion and morality are. The nominally religious often are taught a morality which is independent from religious dogma. For example, Viktor was unsure what precisely religion actually offered him. Meanwhile, the highly religious often learn solely religious bases for morality, where all moral rules are passed down by the divine through the Ten Commandments or other edicts. Even considering exit can appear daunting, as one is giving up the only moral system one knows, effectively having to reconfigure



one's moral identity and rework his or her self-conception. First misgivings which call into question the morality of one's religion can lessen the trepidation associated with questioning one's sole moral system. In contrast, doubts about the correctness of one's religion – such as miracles or creation mythology – can prove ineffective if one still holds that religion as the final and sole arbiter of right and wrong.

While the strength and homogeneity of one's social circle is often cited as a key factor in retaining religious members, first misgivings citing interpersonal issues occur most often among the highly religious. Similarly, the need for a moral reference group – or the fear of being or appearing immoral can preclude questioning or serious consideration of exit. First misgivings concerning morality are also overrepresented among those raised highly religious. For the first misgivings of those deeply embedded in their religion to gain traction – and successfully lead to exit and the eventual disavowal of theism – they often have to target the very pillars which prop up the faith of the very religious: their religious community or the synonymy of religion and morality. Addressing either or both facets allows doubters to deal with the potential loss of community and reference group, as well as the sense of moral vertigo that leaving a deeply held identity can entail.

For other content and levels, I found no persistent effects from respondents' childhood religion on the sample of fifty interviewees.

### *Timing*

Misgivings focusing on morality occur later than other options, even upon controlling for childhood religious intensity. Pulling away from a religious community, one which is seen as the arbiter of right and wrong, can be a particularly painful process. Outside of one's particular

religious group, in American society at large, the messages are similar. Public opinion considers religion and belief in god as a prerequisite for being moral (Edgell et al 2006, Barb 2011).

Due to the powerful affective ties here – the need to think oneself as a moral, upstanding person and have others view oneself as such – it is unsurprising that moral misgivings take the longest to form. Allowing the possibility of moral shortcomings places more strain on one than issues of correctness or necessity.

### *Demographics*

There were gender differences in propensity of institutional-level first misgivings, albeit ones which are conditional on race. Among Whites, hardly any males had their misgivings catalyzed by the shortcomings of religious institutions, compared to the majority of White females. However, equal rates of women and men of color cited institutional misgivings.

The conditional relationship is curious, but can perhaps be attributed to the central role that religion has held in many racial minority communities, both politically and socially. The positives provided ensure the religious organization is evaluated more evenly by members of both males and females. However, future research into this relationship is sorely needed.

### **Impact of First Misgivings**

The content and level of one's first misgivings are occasionally considered as predictors of some present-day stances and actions in subsequent chapters. Beyond these future analyses, I also considered whether first misgivings impact respondents' choice to research religious alternatives during their doubting period.

While few actually commit to formally joining a new religion, the majority of interviewees – sixty percent – researched a specific religion or religions. Many framed their

interests in terms of the new religion offering what their original one lacked. Examples of this run from Grant joining Lutheranism as it appeared to him as “Catholic without the magic” to Denise soliciting information from Jehovah’s Witnesses because they “were probably the best Christians, even though they get the worst rep. [The Jehovah’s Witnesses she spoke with] knew the most about the Bible from an academic perspective.”

In particular, Buddhism was popular, with fifteen interviewees<sup>15</sup> researching the philosophical aspects of Buddhism during their doubting periods. While these interests were fleeting, the decision to research alternatives stands in stark contrast to immediately discounting organized religions entirely. Two tables follow, showing the percentages of respondents who researched religious alternatives, for each level and content of first misgivings. (Recall that the categories were not mutually exclusive, with some respondents being classified at multiple levels or contents.)

**Table 23.** Percentage Researching Another Religious Option by Content of Misdgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Content of Misgivings</i>	<i>Percentage Researching Another Religious Option</i>
Correctness	75%
Morality	60%
Necessity	37.5%

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<sup>15</sup> These include all seven interviewees who had a quest phase. If someone considered multiple alternatives, Buddhism invariably appeared on his or her list.

**Table 24.** Percentage Researching Another Religious Option by Level of Misgivings (from Interviews)

<i>Level of Misgivings</i>	<i>Percentage Researching Another Religious Option</i>
Doctrinal	77.8%
Institutional	55.6%
Interpersonal	50%
Individual	37.5%

A few of the percentages fall markedly different from the overall sixty percent. First misgivings concerning personal necessity were below the standard rate. Meanwhile, those mentioning issues of correctness and/or at the doctrinal-level were notably above the standard rate.

The thirty-eight percent of respondents with misgivings of personal necessity were not significantly less likely to have researched religious alternatives, however. It would follow that if one starts their questioning period with the belief that religion does not offer anything unobtainable from secular sources, they have little impetus to research other religions. However, there is currently no evidence providing statistical support. (Nevertheless, this is a fertile area for a future study with a sample size above fifty.)

Seventy-eight percent of respondents whose first misgivings had a doctrinal component researched alternatives, compared to only thirty-nine percent of those who did not reference doctrine. These differences are significant at a .01 level. Those who cited issues of correctness are also significantly ( $p < .05$ ) more likely to have researched alternatives than those who did not – seventy-five percent compared to forty-six percent, respectively. The effects of doctrinal first

misgivings persist in a binary logistic regression equation with standard controls, while issues of correctness do not.<sup>16</sup>

Issues with the overall doctrine of one's original religion leave the door open for the dogma of other faiths to address those weaknesses, offering improvements aligned with one's own views. In these cases, alternatives are frequently explored. In comparison, other levels of misgivings – namely those centered on the earthly parts of religion, the institution and the community – lead individuals to discount organized religion altogether. Religious alternatives become less attractive as the level of one's first misgivings become more micro. Issues with religious doctrine provide one with some hope that alternative religions may provide fixes, making theism more acceptable and palatable. In comparison, other first misgivings with religion – institutional, interpersonal, and especially individual necessity – are more easily universalized to other organized religions, rather than merely appearing as a symptom of a religion with a problematic ideology and untrue dogma. Other instances discount the possibility of another organized religion fixing what plagued their original one.

As a caveat and competing explanation, perhaps this study comes to an erroneous conclusion by only polling present-day atheists, those who – though they might have researched alternatives – did not wind up joining and staying within them. An alternative explanation is that when one does seek out alternatives, institutional- and interpersonal-level misgivings are more easily sated than doctrinal-level ones. Obviously, people who eventually find a religion which meets their standards are invisible to this study.

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<sup>16</sup> Available upon request.

While not everyone researched a religious alternative during their doubting phase, as a consequence of living in a pluralistic society like America, all respondents gained familiarity with other religions, even if only passively. The next chapter considers whose doubting was furthered by this inevitable access to information about how other groups live, as well as by the knowledge that religions can change or mutate over time.

## **V. Latitude and Longitude: Challenges to Religion as Timeless and Universal**

Religious beliefs typically do not exist in a vacuum, wholly isolated from competing information. An increasingly pluralistic and interconnected society makes it nearly impossible not to be exposed to competing examples of how other groups practice their religion (or refrain from it entirely). Increased access to information also provides more material to research how peoples' own faiths evolved and mutated over the millennia.

### **Two Axes**

These two axes – looking side-to-side at other options and backwards at the history of one's own religion – are essentially inescapable for modern Americans. While nearly all religious Americans – save for those few in cloistered, homogenous communities, like the Amish and some Hasidic Jews – encounter such competing information, its impact is not uniform. Certainly, many avoid any existential crisis, staying in their birth religions (or else not having such information factor into their reasons for leaving religion). But for some, the knowledge of other religions or changes in their own religion represent a watershed event in their decision to exit religion. This chapter investigates under what conditions change to one's own religion or the existence of alternatives can be particularly poignant in one's exit narrative.

Having been raised to view one's religion as the immutable, universal truth, it can often prove distressing to encounter evidence that undermine these claims. In the interviews there were two general ways in which this occurred.

First, some experienced dilemmas which imperil religion's claims to be immutable. In these instances, greater awareness of how one's religion changed over time causes distress and spurred questioning. If sacraments and edicts or key interpretations of the word of God have

mutated over time, religion's claims to be the timeless truth can be shaken. This family of longitudinal issues – whether focusing on the religious institution or the holy book – appeared in thirty percent of interviews.

While longitudinal issues arise from changes to one's own religion over time, the second family of issues involves grappling with the existence of various other belief systems and their practitioners, which imperil the supposed universality of one's beliefs. Tangible examples of those who believe other religions just as fervently can lead one to scrutinize the supposed exceptionality of his or her faith. To contrast with the previous 'longitude' family, I term these dilemmas 'latitude.' There are four specific issues in the latitude family: empathy with other groups, the correctness of one's own beliefs, the morality of damnation for other faiths, and a perceived lack of consequences for others violating religious decrees. In total, forty-four percent of interviews mentioned some form of latitude.

The distinctions between these two critiques stem from where the doubts arise. Longitudinal issues arise when one looks backwards at how their religion has changed, while latitudinal ones arise when one looks side-to-side, at how other faiths and groups are faring and what they believe. Table 25 shows the incidence of each particular kind of longitude and latitude, as well as the incidence of the combined longitude and latitude families.



**Table 25.** Percentage of Incidence of Each Form of Latitude and Longitude (from Interviews)

	<i>Percentage Mentioning this Form</i>
Institutional Longitude	12%
Scriptural Longitude	22%
Any Form of Longitude	30%
Latitude: Empathy	16%
Latitude: Correctness	32%
Latitude: Morality of Damnation	12%
Latitude: Vicarious Fire-Walking	8%
Any Form of Latitude	44%

As the cross-tabulation below demonstrates, six respondents mentioned issues stemming from both longitude and latitude. The two issues are not mutually exclusive. However, neither are the two families related: the chi-square for the cross tabulation is not marginally significant. Mention of latitude and longitude families are independent of one another.

**Table 26.** Cross-tabulation of Frequency of Latitude and Longitude Mentions (from Interview)

	<i>Mention of Latitude</i>	<i>No Mention of Latitude</i>
Mention of Longitude	6	9
No Mention of Longitude	16	19
	22	28

### **Institutional Longitude**

Twelve percent of respondents – six total – cited learning about the history of their religious institution as a key dilemma and source of doubt. In these cases, discovering how particular church stances arose undermines the inerrant, immutable nature of the beliefs, catalyzing further questioning. Responses referenced shift in church stances, as well as the political wrangling that occurred while determining those stances.

Christine's secular parents allowed her to attend service with the highly religious family of her best friend. There she learned a strict structure about how to behave, yet little concerning the history of the early church. Learning more about how religious codex are assembled proved a key catalyst in her questioning.

And realizing early on that the Catholic church has all of this power and all these ridiculous rules, like fish on Friday. Then I find out why: fish on Fridays is not in the bible, its cause the fishermen were having trouble selling their fish, so they went to the pope and said "can you help us out here" so he set down an edict that Catholics have to eat fish on Friday. It's economics. It's not a religious purpose. Learning those things and items over the years which just bolstered my thing that theism... [Christine trails off]

Brittany told a similar story. She was raised in a devout evangelical family. When she moved out on her own, she started to do further research into Protestantism and the politics and struggles behind the formation of her denomination and others:

Basically what happened is I was suddenly exposed to all these different denominations that had all these different views on issues, whether doctrinal or social or even just hierarchy, how things should be structured. And I ran into a lot of contradictory info. Basically I realized that someone somewhere had to be wrong. They couldn't all be correct. And [I] started really looking into the different denominations and their history, where they formed, where the different schisms were. And trying to trace back what do I actually believe? What should I believe? Where did people get things wrong? What could be right? And so I started tracing back farther and farther and farther.

Brad grew up in a Catholic family, with members of his extended family in the clergy. Though he went to Catholic school, his own research, coupled with taking a religion course at a secular college, uncovered a key secondary misgiving during his doubting process. Of religion, he says:

It's like a long-ass game of telephone that goes back 2000 years. So things are going to be corruptible and the institutionalization of that has made the institution of the church way different than it was when Jesus was around. [...] But I've heard and read about how the early church was persecuted so it's going to have a different character for you. They were very anti-materialist which does not gel with, since the Middle Ages I guess, these ornate churches and all the waste.

## Scriptural Longitude

Eleven of the interviewees – twenty-two percent of the total – cited the history or inconsistency of the holy book as a longitudinal change that helped to further the questioning of their faith. Learning about how their scripture was assembled by human hands and evolved over time to meet particular worldly aims served as a key step in the exit of many.

One was Melissa. She was from a Lutheran family, and her mothers' side included numerous pastors and religious teachers. One of her first tangible misgivings occurred as she was working towards her confirmation, as a teenager:

So going through confirmation, the Dead Sea Scrolls had just become really... they hit the headlines. And people were really working on them a lot. And so I started looking into that and seeing how a religious book gets codified. Was kind of like pulling the curtain out from the Wizard of Oz and going "Wait a second, there's mechanics behind it, there's people who are the architects of the book that we profess to adhere to."

Similar to Melissa, other respondents spoke to historical overlap between their holy text and other mythology, citing evidence of other legends and miracles slowly getting incorporated into the book.

Patrice also spoke about the mutable nature of his holy book, but he instead focused on the nature of God shifting over time. Rather than being changeless and enduring, as one would expect an omnipotent, omniscient being to be, Patrice mentioned that he found the portrayal of God to mutate over the course of the text.

I remember I had this conversation with my friend Matt, it was sort of a joking conversation and we were like "What happened to God between the Old Testament and the New Testament?" It's like he was judge, fire and brimstone, and you turn one page and he loves everyone, like did he go through menopause or something? And, I guess that conversation turned into a series of conversations where we started talking about how religion sort of changed to fit the wills or... you know, the social climate or environment that humanity needs to exist in. And once we feel like something doesn't add up to what we want we just sort of change God to fit the way we want to live.

Both Melissa's and Patrice's reflections speak to different facets of longitudinal changes to holy texts, rather than scripture being immemorial. Melissa and others described the process of construction and political wrangling shaping scripture, which undermines the claim that the texts are divine and timeless. In contrast to the construction, Patrice looked to the content, reaching similar conclusions as Melissa, albeit by focusing on the shifting nature of god.

One might expect the likelihood of longitudinal issues from one's holy book to differ by birth religion. After all, Protestant denominations put greater emphasis on individuals reading and having familiarity with the Bible, which is reflected in the 2014 General Social Survey (Smith et al 2015): forty-seven percent of Protestants describe the bible as the literal word of God, compared to only twenty-eight percent of Catholics. Conceivably, Protestants – by placing more emphasis on biblical inerrancy – will be less able to assimilate evidence about the Bible's human assembly and shifting content into their religious belief system and, as a result, ex-Protestants will be more likely to cite issues of Scriptural longitude in explaining their exit than ex-Catholics. Put simply,

**Hypothesis 2a:** Ex-Protestants will be more likely to cite longitudinal issues stemming from their holy book than ex-Catholics.

However, the data contradict this assumption: twenty-seven percent of former Catholics cite longitudinal issues arising from their holy book, compared to only eighteen percent of former Protestants. The difference is not statistically significant, yet nevertheless points away from higher problems for former Protestants.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the combined longitude variable shows no significant difference across birth religion.

## Variation in General Longitude

Having grown up conceiving of one's religion as timeless, immutable, and perfect, undertaking education and research into how 'the sausage got made' throughout the life of the institution or during the codification of the holy book was a disillusioning experience for some. Longitudinal change in religion offers a fault line that may play a key role in shaking one's faith.

Ebaugh's (1988) work on role exit demonstrates how longitudinal issues can be particularly problematic for the highly religious, albeit in a very particular instance. Her sample of ex-nuns reported reevaluating their decisions in light of the changes made during Vatican II. Although a unique case – and one in which the bulk still retained their belief in theism – this nevertheless highlights the possibility that longitudinal changes are especially problematic for those raised to view religion as the centerpiece of their early lives and identity.

Issues of longitude may be particularly distressing to those who were raised to put higher stress on their religion, seeing it as more of a central pillar of their identity and upbringing. While this is predicted to be true for both childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism, it should be particularly salient for religiosity: having been raised to practice one's religion and believe in its primacy, it will be particularly disillusioning to have the belief that it is timeless and immutable shaken. Those mentioning longitudinal issues with their childhood religion should come from highly religious childhoods, for religious particularism, but particularly religiosity. Thus

**Hypothesis 2b:** Issues of longitude in the interviews will be more prevalent among those raised with higher childhood religious intensity.

However, the data do not support these suppositions. For combined longitude, there is an insignificant amount of difference in both childhood religiosity and childhood religious

particularism. These negligible distinctions mean that individuals from all over the spectrum of childhood religious intensity are comparably susceptible to have doubts spurred by religious change.

### **Introducing ‘Latitude’**

The growth of religious pluralism and access to outside information has the prospect to accelerate exit from organized religion. Simply, the presence of other faiths (or lack of religious belief) may force one to examine the basis for their own belief system. Whereas earlier generations could live in relatively homogenous areas, now there is more interaction with other religions. Additionally, the popularity of the internet increases access to information about other religious practices (and non-theist groups). Having a plethora of information – both in the form of abstract information and tangible personal contacts – can lead to a crisis where one has to reflect on what makes his or her religion truer than others.

To contrast with the aforementioned ‘longitude’ – crises triggered by grappling with the historical change and mutation in one’s own religion – this family of crises will be termed ‘latitude,’ covering crises triggered from grappling with the existence of other, competing religions and ways of living. In the interviews, four specific forms of latitude arose: empathy, correctness, the morality of damnation for other groups, and vicarious fire-walking. Examples of each appear below.

### **Latitude: Empathy**

The first form of latitude deals with making extended contact with other religions – or groups one’s religion portrays as sinful – and learning to empathize with them. In doing so, this can undermine certain tenets of one’s faith, eventually leading to broader skepticism. Sixteen

percent of interviewees – eight total – cited some degree of broader empathy with out-groups in the narratives of their exit from religion. These out-groups were either homosexuals or adherents to other religions.

Brittany experienced increased empathy for and sustained contact with homosexuals, which marked a watershed in her exit from religion. She grew up devoutly evangelical and homeschooled with religious texts. Her parents and pastor raised her to be disapproving of homosexuality, a stance that was challenged upon making LGBT acquaintances after moving away from home:

For example, with LGBT issues, I got to know some LGBT people. And they were nothing like what had been described to me growing up. Having the face-to-face encounter. Being able to put a face, “These policies affect you.” They do affect my friends and the people I know. That was rather significant, as well.

Brittany’s experience was not unique. Several other respondents cited meeting and developing empathy for homosexuals as a pivotal moment. Among those raised in faiths that stress the sinful nature of homosexuality and the portrayal of homosexual as hedonists, familiarity with and empathy for homosexuals can undermine the stereotype and turned their scrutiny back on their church’s moral and political stances.

In contrast, Jill’s empathy was built with members of other Protestant denominations. She was raised devoutly Christian in a tightly-bound, insulated church community which she described as “like a cult, basically,” in hindsight. Throughout her adolescence, she never struggled with her fleeting contact with non-Christians, as she was confident that her faith was superior. It was only when she moved away from home to attend a Christian college that other faiths presented a challenge. While she was easily able to shrug off the stark differences with non-Christians, becoming acquainted and attending prayer groups with Protestants from other denominations proved more problematic:

To me, actually, it was more difficult dealing with or talking to people who were from different branches of Christianity than it was to people who definitely were not Christian. Cause that was more black and white. I think it felt more stretched intellectually or mentally to like “Oh, these people are Christians too and they also believe in Jesus and they’re good people, but they don’t have the same faith,” you know?

She attended prayer groups with other Christian denominations that prayed to the same god in markedly different ways than her and drew notably different conclusions from the same religious texts. While her prayer style was very structured, she characterized her new peers as “more materialistic and free-flowing.” Much like developing relationships with LGBT folk was a key milestone for Brittany, Jill cited the development ties with other Christian denominations as a key step towards turning her focus inward to her own faith.

### **Latitude: Correctness**

Sixteen interviewees mentioned that learning about other faiths or members of other religions caused them to more closely evaluate their own religion and the certainty of their beliefs. In essence, a degree of familiarity with other faiths – or the faithful that believe in other faiths just as vehemently as they believe in their own – led these interviewees to ask the question “How’d I get so lucky as to be raised in the one true religion?” This can spark a prolonged questioning period into what precisely makes one’s own religion, or religion in general, unique. Focus on correctness is the most common form of latitude, cited by nearly a third of interviewees.

Terrence’s contact with other religions forced him to reappraise the correctness of his religion. He was raised evangelical Christian, where “going to church was [his] centerpiece of weekly things.” His mother homeschooled him and his siblings with fundamentalist Christian texts and they occasionally went on field trips or social events with others in the Christian homeschooling community. Terrence recalled going beyond even the rigorous expectations of



his parents, independently reading the Bible nightly. After graduating from a Christian college, he decided to take a year off to be a missionary in India. While attempting to convert Hindus and Muslims, he first had his absolute certainty in his beliefs shaken:

I started to realize slowly that we can't prove any of our beliefs with 100% certainty. This came as a result of a lot of conversations with people. I was witnessing to them, trying to get them saved. Not just Indian people but other foreigners that were there. [...] I would always be wanting to share the Gospel with everyone. So there were other foreigners I talked to who were not Christians. And these were some of the first that I had real serious debates with about what we believed. And I came to realize that we really can't prove all of this stuff. And talking to the Hindus and Muslims, I was used to finding holes in their faith which I could easily do, but what these other people were doing to me I could easily realize "Oh, there's the same holes in mine" and that like for us we had all these arguments, they would only get you part way there or most of the way there. They would always end by saying "In light of these other things, it's the most reasonable decision to trust Christ. It's the best possible explanation." And then it would drift into some subjective things, like stories about relying on our experience of god's presence. The game it made me think of was the game where everyone stands in a circle then sits down in the lap of the person behind them. All of our arguments were resting on other arguments but none of them was founded on anything solid. So I realized if we can't prove it, our subjective experiences are not valid, then how can God possibly send people to hell for not believing it?

These issues of correctness (intertwined with the morality of damnation) were the catalysts behind a four-year period of doubt and existential questioning that culminated in Terrence leaving Christianity.

Others began questioning the correctness of their religion through more abstract avenues. For many respondents, learning about mythology or other forms of religion caused them to question what made theirs unique if people could believe in those other faiths just as steadfastly. Heather illustrated this common sentiment. Raised devoutly Lutheran and attending religious schooling, she started to doubt when she enrolled in a secular college:

Starting college, I was really fascinated with humanities classes and social science and finding out more about other cultures and how other people perceive the world. And finding the holy book that my family and most friends looked to was not necessarily so unique. And a lot of people around the world have very similar understandings how they

came to be here and where they are going after this life. And maybe it wasn't quite so special as I once thought. [...] I feel like at least the brand of Christianity that I was exposed to, you get this warm fuzzy feeling you know something other people only wish they knew. That you somehow live differently. I wouldn't say they hold themselves higher, but they might suppose they do as far as moral standards. Something I was really exposed to was you don't have to be a Christian to be a good person, you don't need any faith whatsoever to be a moral person.

Heather described her philosophy of religion course as "the beginning of the end." It exposed her to other cultures and led her to see that the evidence and philosophical arguments justifying Lutheranism were similar to those she found lacking in other religions. Her experience was similar to those of several others, where learning about other religions through online research or religion classes (particularly secular ones, as will be expanded upon later) leads one to intensely examine why they are so positive that their religion is the one true one.

### **Latitude: Morality of Damnation**

Six of the interviewees, twelve percent, mentioned distress from knowing people belonging to other faiths would be denied salvation, regardless of their acts or character. This form of latitude was only present for those whose childhood faiths stressed a strict dichotomy between their in-group and out-groups. More ecumenical faiths provided a more inclusive view of the afterlife, which protected against this particular dilemma by allowing for the salvation of all. Terrence's aforementioned narrative demonstrates that issues concerning the morality of damnation can be tied to issues of correctness: if one admits that they cannot persuasively sell their faith to non-believers, on what grounds can they condemn others? Diana's first misgivings, presented last chapter, are another case of this: questioning sparked by fear that her mother and friends would be condemned. In spite of the relatively small number of those dealing with the morality of damnation, two poles arose during the interviews, the intensely personal and the purely abstract.

Megan's experience was typical of the intensely personal road to this form of latitude. She was raised Catholic by a Catholic father and a Presbyterian mother. Megan's father frequently traveled for work, so her mother was the one who led prayers before meals and took her to church and CCD. The brunt of socialization fell on Megan's mother, despite not being Catholic. However, when Megan's mother accompanied her to mass, she often got approached by the priest about converting:

And the priest, Father Nolan, he would go up to her almost once a month and say something along the lines of "You're not going to be in heaven with your family unless you were baptized." And it scared the shit out of me as a kid because I really believed in all of that stuff.

Hearing such a strong statement from the priest contrasted sharply with her mom's role as her chief religious socializer, and the paragon she served both religiously and morally.

And I remember the priest saying that and looking at my mom and being like "You are the reason we are such good Catholics and go to church and CCD and all the sacraments" and that just really did not sit right with me. It was very much "If my mom is living the life that they're preaching to live but yet she doesn't want to be baptized, how does that mean that I go to heaven and she doesn't?"

This discrepancy between what it meant to be a good, upstanding person and what it meant to be heaven-bound festered, leading to broader questioning. Megan credited this initial discomfort as "Why [she] stopped being Catholic."

While Megan's intensely personal, emotional bond with her mother led her to question the morality of damnation, Matilda's route was through an abstract example. Matilda was born into a very religious Baptist extended family, the granddaughter of a preacher. She described religion as "important" to her through the fifth grade, at which time it became "really important." She started associating with a pious peer group and attending various religious events and clubs, beyond mere weekly service attendance. She maintained this intensity of both belief and practice

through high school. She could precisely pinpoint the moment of her first misgivings to high school, when her then-boyfriend posed a question:

My boyfriend at the time asked me what made me think I was born into the right religion and I remember thinking about it for a year and because at some point a year later I remember thinking “I don’t believe in god anymore” I was like “Oh my gosh, that was exactly a year ago.” So I remember that. Basically it was if there are people who are – we were taught very strongly predetermination – so looking at that and saying somebody who was born in 1116 BCE in China had no chance of learning about Jesus so they’re going to hell.

Rather than any personal connections to other faiths, the hypothetical thought experiment posed by her then-boyfriend served as a catalyst. It caused her to consider the unfairness inherent in a belief system that stresses both predetermination and the damnation of non-believers.

Having to believe that some are damned by design led her to a prolonged questioning period.

While Megan’s example shows how having other faiths in one’s social network can facilitate questioning about the morality of damnation, Matilda shows it can also occur due to hypothetical ponderings.

### **Latitude: Vicarious Fire-Walking**

Whereas the previous sub-group cited consternation at the prospect that those belonging to other religions would inevitably face punishment in the afterlife, a second subset struggled instead with the very this-worldly punishments that were supposedly to be meted out to other faiths, yet were not. Eight percent of interviewees mentioned latitude in terms of learning that other faiths – or secular individuals – have not reaped what was supposedly coming to them.

Typically, this frame occurs when individuals have been raised in faiths that stress this-worldly consequences for transgressions like sinning, believing in other faiths, or living secularly. Coming upon knowledge of those who transgress and yet are still living well, cracks can start to emerge in the theology that stresses immediate, this-worldly consequences.

Vikram was one such example. He grew up in a devout Hindu family in India. He had a few Christian and Muslim friends growing up, but they were similarly devout in their respective religions. Nobody in his social circle challenged the belief that religion was necessary and omnipresent in daily life. However, moving to America as a pre-teen proved to be a shock to him, with irreligious classmates and neighbors undermining the instantaneous ramifications of karma:

Vikram: Coming here and experiencing a whole new world, with different beliefs and behaviors. It went against... well, maybe not against everything I've been taught. But the biggest thing was not having religion as a part of everyday life here, as most people didn't. At least not the ways I experienced it before. But people were fine. Which is not what I was led to believe. I was always taught that the repercussions of being a bad person or not religious, etcetera, would be felt almost immediately in this life. But nothing seemed to be happening. And frankly it was a more functional society without the religion I was brought up with. It wasn't a sudden realization. It was a gradual permeation, I suppose.

Interviewer: What kind of repercussions? Repercussions for individuals or for society in general?

Vikram: Both. But the individual was stressed a lot. I think in one sense to get kids in line with their behavior. But I know now that's a big part of Hinduism. Karma has very individual and immediate repercussions. Your actions, your beliefs, etcetera, and in my experiences there obviously weren't things like that.

Vikram cited this as the first misgivings he ever had with his religious upbringing, causing him to reappraise his belief in the ramifications of karma in this life and the necessity of religion. His case, while rare, is not unique. A few other respondents who believed in very this-worldly consequences from straying from religion – be it karma, an angry God, or just moral decay – reported similar dilemmas.

While Vikram's appraisal included societal order, Mike's attention was turned to societal innovations. He grew up Catholic in a small town in Michigan which he characterizes as having a "very homogenous" Christian culture. He remained immersed in this culture until he began to

learn about other cultures and religions starting in fifth grade. He recounted that this produced the first misgivings he had with religion:

Mike: The first I can remember is learning about Mayan culture and about how they had created this accurate map that was more accurate than the Gregorian calendar, whatever we use now. [...] And it seemed to me that was the first time I realized that knowledge wasn't handed down from a god-like figure, but it was created by people. So that sparked an interest...

Interviewer: And it was the fact that it occurred outside of Christianity?

Mike: Yeah. So my thought was if god or Jesus was handing out this information why is he only handing it out to this one group of people? That was my thought initially. This group of people was given this knowledge and spread it across the world. But then this Mayan civilization that never interacted with anybody else in that time-period and they had information that is superior, I guess, to the Western thinking.

Discovering the technological superiority of non-Christian cultures starts to unravel what he was taught about Christianity and the necessity of belief in a Christian god. Although his account contrasts with Vikram's in two key ways – it is academic rather than experiential and focused on technology rather than societal order – they represent two different ways in which increased familiarity with other ways of life can undermine religious teachings which stress faith as the sole, unequivocally best way to live.

While the prospect of immediate, this-worldly punishment can often discourage sustained questioning, in some cases it actually facilitates questioning. Noticing evidence to the contrary is just one path through which one's beliefs can be called into question. Studies of ex-Muslims (Cottee 2015) and ex-Hasidic Jews (Davidman 2015) are ripe with examples of individuals experimenting with breaching religious edicts – typically either breaking dietary guidelines or defacing a holy text – in order to ascertain if the supposed punishments will occur.

Latitude that stems from vicarious fire-walking extends this sentiment. Rather than having to personally breach an edict to confirm the lack of this-worldly penalties and further one's doubting, one can rather glean the lack of penalties from observing others. In regards to

various forms of abstinence, Mullaney (2005) terms personal, near-taboo actions to test one's resolve as fire-walking. In comparison, I used the term 'vicarious fire-walking' to denote gleaning a lack of consequences from others.

While sometimes a method of testing one's doubts, this can also occur earlier in the doubting process than personal breaching. Vikram, for instance, cited it as the first misgiving he can recall with Hinduism.

### **Variation in General Latitude**

Twenty-two interviewees mentioned at least one of the forms of latitude, accounting for almost half of the sample. My attention now turns to what factors account for this variation in pertinence of issues of latitude.

Foremost, Tables 27 and 28 demonstrate differences between those mentioning each particular facet and those who did not. For latitude stemming from empathy, correctness, and the morality of damnation, both measures of childhood religious intensity are higher, compared to those who made no mentions. The effects of childhood religious particularism on unease over the morality of damnation is particularly stark: the mean is more than twice as high for those who cite it, compared to those who do not.

**Table 27.** Mean Childhood Religiosity When Latitude Forms Are and Are Not Mentioned (from Interviews)

<i>Latitude</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religiosity When Mentioned</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religiosity When Not Mentioned</i>
Empathy	33.38	24.37
Correctness	32.31	22.70
Morality of Damnation	39.00	24.00
Vicarious Fire-Walking	28.25	25.62

**Table 28.** Mean Childhood Religious Particularism When Latitude Forms Are and Are Not Mentioned (from Interviews)

<i>Latitude</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religious Particularism When Mentioned</i>	<i>Mean Childhood Religious Particularism When Not Mentioned</i>
Empathy	15.63	10.07
Correctness	13.75	9.64
Morality of Damnation	20.50	9.65
Vicarious Fire-Walking	11.00	10.98

Hypothesis tests and binary logistic regressions can ascertain the existence of any persistent effects from childhood religious intensity.

The most obvious potential factor is one's level of childhood religion. Both increased childhood religiosity and increased childhood religious particularism should be associated with greater instances of latitude. In the case of the former, increased salience of religion should make it more distressing to get contact with individuals and familiarity with cases that impugn the uniqueness of one's religion, eventually leading one to turn greater scrutiny towards what particularly makes it correct and infallible. In the case of the latter, childhood religious particularism, increased in-group favoritism and feelings of superiority over other religious faiths should similarly raise one's likelihood of citing latitude concerns. These should be particularly poignant for those concerns over the damnation of non-believers.

Both prongs of childhood religion should increase one's mention of latitude, albeit for different reasons. I test this first via two hypothesis tests, then examine the interplay between the two prongs – where applicable – by considering them in tandem and with controls in binary logistic regression equations.

**Hypothesis 2c:** Issues of latitude in the interviews will be more prevalent among those raised with higher childhood religious intensity.



**Table 29.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Latitude Mention (from Interviews)\*\*

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Latitude Mention	22	32.14	11.63	2.48
No Latitude Mention	27	20.70	11.87	2.28

**Table 30.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Latitude Mention (from Interviews)\*\*\*

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Latitude Mention	22	13.95	6.74	1.44
No Latitude Mention	27	8.56	5.04	.97

When examined in isolation, both childhood religiosity and religious particularism are positively related to mention of at least one of the latitude frames; each is significant at least at the .01 level. Those citing latitude have childhoods rating 11.4 points higher on religiosity and 5.4 points higher on religious particularism.

Nevertheless, given the positive correlation between childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism, binary logistic regression equations will be needed to confirm the greater significance of childhood religious particularism persists – and maintains significance – when both are considered in tandem.

**Table 31.** Binary Regressions Predicting Mention of Latitude (from Interview)

	<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>		<i>+Demographics, Period, &amp; Social Circle</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	.06 (.04)	(6.2%)	.08+ (.05)	(8.1%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.06 (.08)	(6.3%)	.06 (.09)	(5.8%)
White			.23 (.76)	(25.9%)
Male			-.14 (.69)	(-12.8%)
Birth year			-.01 (.08)	(-.7%)
Year Misgivings			-.04 (.08)	(-4.0%)
Heterogeneity of Social Circle at First Misgivings			.33 (.26)	(38.4%)
Constant	-2.43**		-1.45	
N	48		48	
df	2		7	
R <sup>2</sup>	.28		.32	
Chi-square	11.88**		13.21+	

Although the significant chi-square ( $p < .01$ ) indicates considerable explanatory power from utilizing the two measures of childhood religious intensity in the prediction, neither of the two measures is significant when the other is controlled for. The positive impact of childhood religious intensity on the mention of latitude in one's exit narrative seems to stem chiefly from the considerable overlap between the two facets of religious intensity.

Adding demographic, network, and time period controls to the binary regression equation drops the overall chi-square value to marginal significance ( $p < .10$ ). Additionally, none of the controls matter. However, introduction of the controls causes the impact of childhood religiosity to achieve marginal significance. Each additional point in childhood religiosity during one's

upbringing raises their odds of experiencing at least one of the instances of latitude by 8.1%. The influence shared by both measures of childhood religious intensity remains key: a chi-square test testing their inclusion in the equation still shows significance at the .01 level.<sup>18</sup>

*Specifically, the Morality of Damnation*

The above results show a strong combined effect from overall childhood religious intensity, with some effect particular to childhood religiosity. However, one of the four forms of latitude specifically spoke to the other prong: the morality of damnation. For it to be salient to respondents, two factors were typically needed.

First, although there was the rare case of it considered in the abstract, typically one needed a degree of closeness with someone who was not a member of their faith. Secondly, they had to come from a faith that stressed belief was necessary for salvation, implying – if not outright stating – that non-believers were condemned, regardless of righteousness. This second factor is directly measured by childhood religious particularism: elevating one’s faith above others, in terms of condemnation and making one an ethical person.

**Hypothesis 2c:** Issues over the ‘morality of damnation’ in the interviews will be more prevalent among those raised with higher childhood religious particularism.

To test if specific issues dealing with the morality of damnation were specifically tied to childhood religious particularism’s unique effect, I ran a basic binary logistic regression equation. Its results are presented below.

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<sup>18</sup> With a chi-square value of 11.63.

**Table 32.** Binary Regression Predicting Latitude about the Morality of Damnation (from Interview)

	<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	-.06 (.10)	(-6.2%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.48* (.21)	(61.0%)
Constant	-7.33**	
N	48	
df	2	
R <sup>2</sup>	.57	
Chi-square	17.11*	

Far more than general mentions of latitude, latitude stemming from issues of morality has the largest relationship with measures of childhood religious intensity, as evidenced by its Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> of .57 and the chi-square value of 17.11 (significant at the .001 level).

Furthermore, beyond the overlap of the measures of the childhood religious intensity variables, childhood religious particularism has unique impact, which is significant at the .05 level. Each step up the 24-point childhood religious particularism scale is predicted to result in 61% greater odds of citing latitude stemming from morality.

## Discussion

Broadly, while childhood religious intensity can influence distress from latitude, there is no such effect on longitudinal issues. Although about a third of respondents noted distress or questions which focused on the mutable, shifting nature of their religious scripture or institution over time, I found no systematic pattern to who was bothered. Longitudinal issues were no more likely among those who were devout, compared to those raised nominally religious. Both the highly religious and the nominally religious are equally susceptible to experiencing issues of this

nature. Though perhaps a more accurate phrasing might be that both groups are equally inured to misgivings centered around longitudinal issues.

In contrast, mentions of latitudinal issues are more common among those raised with higher levels of childhood religious intensity. Growing up with more stress and intensity placed upon religion – both for guiding one’s life and elevating one’s in-group above others – makes it more distressing to discover and become familiar with alternative faiths and lifestyles. These doubts are driven both by tangible experiences and abstract considerations – knowledge of other faiths gleaned through written sources. What starts as a question of how one got so lucky as to be born into the correct religion soon turns into an inquiry as to what makes one’s religion have a unique claim to truth and salvation.

Childhood religiosity has effects independent of its overlap with childhood religious particularism, accounting for the bulk of the variation in whether latitudinal problems were noted. Grappling with the existence and legitimacy of other faiths – those alternative ways of living and viewing the world – is unnerving for those who are most emotionally invested in their belief systems as guides for personal beliefs and practices. Being confronted with other potential belief systems can be particularly traumatic for the vehement believer, leading them to confront the aphorism that “There but for the grace of god go I.” As shown in Matilda’s first misgivings, these individuals have to confront whether they would be just as vehemently faithful if born into another religion and, if so, whether they are truly certain their present religion is correct.

Meanwhile, latitude specifically stemming from the morality of damnation – in addition to being heightened by overall religious intensity – experiences a unique effect from an upbringing high in religious particularism, a pattern not seen in overall issues of latitude. A prerequisite for struggling with the morality of damnation is belonging to a faith which stresses

the inherent inferiority and flawed nature of other belief systems. This finding verges on tautology. From within such a faith, acquaintance with members of another religion – whether intimately or as an abstract thought experiment – can cause a crisis for one who has been taught that their belief is the only means to salvation. In comparison, faiths that are more ecumenical and accommodating of outsiders ensure that their adherents are less susceptible to these crises. While highly particularistic faiths may limit their members' familiarity with other beliefs, they cannot guarantee with certainty that their members will not gain familiarity with believers in other faiths. Though knowledge and familiarity with other religions might be delayed, when it does eventually occur, it often plays a more pivotal role in one's exit narrative.

Occasionally, as in the case of Megan's and Diana's mixed-religion families, this familiarity with others outside one's religion has always been present. Other times, one builds relationships and familiarity with members of other religions in adolescence or young adulthood, times of self-discovery and a broadening of one's social network upon entering college or the labor force. And sometimes it is one's intellectual curiosity leading them to consider other religious possibilities. Regardless of the particular cause, it is exacerbated by highly particularistic religions, which do not allow for the validity of other faiths. In these circumstances, the omnibenevolence pillar of theodicy can come crashing down, one key misgiving leading one out of their childhood religion. In contrast, those from less particularistic religions are better able to justify the salvation of upstanding members of other faiths, making issues of latitude stemming from the morality of damnation less of a lynchpin in their exit narratives.

These results illustrate the other side of the coin of Putnam and Campbell's (2010) Aunt Susan Principle. While contact with a close, morally upstanding other of another faith in one's

social network can liberalize one's beliefs, raising their appraisal of religious out-groups, this is only half the picture. Individuals in stricter faiths possess less ability to accommodate and adjust to the emotional tension of moral, beloved non-believers. This tension can become powerful cognitive dissonance, between the affection felt for those individuals and the prospect they might not receive salvation. Tolerant, accommodating faiths are abler to *bend*, allowing one the wherewithal to liberalize their opinions of other groups to accommodate this new information. In contrast, those in less flexible faiths may experience difficulty in reconciling their knowledge of outsiders with their religion; while some succeed, others *break* from their religion, exploring alternatives as a way to combat the cognitive dissonance. With no easy resolution to the conflict between one's religion and one's relationship to others, sometimes the turning point of an exit is necessary to reduce the conflict (Ebaugh 1988).

These individual-level findings suggest societal implications. Growing religious pluralism has the potential to challenge those raised as devout believers, forcing self-reflection on a level unseen by the less religious. Additionally, in several cases, the information was not gleaned from sustained conversation and contact with those outside one's faith, but merely through learning about it from a written source. There is an increasing need to extend ideas about contact to virtual platforms which also allow one to learn the intricacies of other faiths. Even in the abstract, in the absence of any intimacy with outsiders, the knowledge of the existence of another way of living or conceiving of the divine proves challenging to some. Particularly given the explosion of internet usage in recent decades, this is a theme which must be comprehensively considered in future studies of atheism and other exits from religion.

However, these fifty interviewees do not point towards any historical trend. No period effects were observed, either for date of birth or date of first misgivings. Earlier generations have equal likelihood of latitude-centered doubts.

Similarly, the religious composition of one's social circle has no impact. Those whose early lives are – for lack of a better term – ‘sheltered’ from other religions find it no more problematic to eventually come into contact with other faiths.

### **The Inoculating Effects of a Religion Class**

Throughout the interviews, respondents commonly mentioned that learning about other religions in childhood or adolescence spurred various forms of latitude-related doubts. Almost exclusively, these catalyzing discoveries occurred in secular settings – such as a world religions unit in public high school social studies or a philosophy of world religion's course in college – or during one's independent research into religion.

Martha was one such example. She never questioned Protestantism throughout her childhood or high school. However, going away to college in the late 1970's and taking medieval history and anthropology courses sparked her questioning: “You're taking anthropology where you're studying other religions and other cultures and sort of see, I think you put yourself, distance from it a bit more and all those things sort of came together.” When a secular religious class was significant enough for the respondent to mention in the interview as in Martha's case, respondents likely mentioned one of the latitude reasons elsewhere in their interview.

Matilda provided further illustration of the stark contrast between learning about other religions in a religious setting, contrasted with a secular one. Recall she was used as an example of latitude stemming from morality, caused by a thought experiment her then-boyfriend posed to



her. Elsewhere in her interview, she also noted how she learned about religion in her public high school. This sharp contrast with the informal ‘lessons’ she received about other religions in her Baptist group, which were strictly utilitarian, aimed towards giving her the wherewithal to witness to outsiders:

I don’t think that I knew anything about a lot of other religions until I took a world religion’s class in high school. But other than that it was “Oh you can know about the Jewish faith and know that they’re wrong” you know? [...] We had sessions where we would learn how to witness to somebody to change – it was a very evangelical church – so we had, we would walk through... do role play on how to witness to somebody.

There were stark differences in the treatment and portrayal of other religions in secular settings compared with religious ones. During the interviews, a pattern emerged concerning the impact of these differing aims. While learning about other religions in a secular setting commonly appeared with mentions of some particular form of latitude, those respondents who volunteered that they learned about other religions in a religious setting – in Sunday school or parochial school, for example – tended to be less likely to cite one of the latitude frames. Only thirteen percent of respondents who learned about other faiths in a class within their religion mentioned issues of latitude, compared to half of those who either had a secular class or independent research. The Chi-Square value for the general latitude mention was 5.40, demonstrating marginal significance ( $p < .10$ ).

These findings highlight that the forum in which one comes across information about other religions matter. The distinction is chiefly a matter of religiously-based religion classes inoculating one against doubts centered on latitude, rather than secular-based religion courses planting the seeds of doubt. Learning about other belief systems in a secular classroom (or through independent research) can cause trepidation and introspection into what particularly makes one’s own religion unique, truer, and more just than the other religions. For some, this

proves to be a key catalyzing event in their doubting and eventual exit from religion. However, learning about other religions in a religious setting does not have the same impact. Those whose religion has a class to teach about other faiths practically never reported instances of doubt stemming from latitude. While learning about other faiths outside of religion can prove problematic for one's faith, encountering them in a religious setting provides a religious framework for understanding their relationships to one's own religion, making their existence and divergence less problematic.

This finding builds onto Wilcox's (2009) proposed explanation for the religious affiliation gap between GBT men and LBT women. As she notes, LBT women are significantly less likely to affiliate with organized religion than GBT men. As one possible explanation, she postulates that the disjunction stems from differences in coming to terms with one's sexual identity: women's mean age for identifying as non-heterosexual is about two years later than men's. Thus, women tend to adopt an LBT identity during an age where young adults' church attendance has dwindled, transitioning independent of religion. In contrast, men's earlier age means they realize they are GBT while still regularly attending services, allowing them to take on more of a 'blended identity,' where their understanding of their sexual identity is more likely to be assimilated into a religious framework.

The effects of learning about religion in a religiously-based class can expand Wilcox's insights outside the bounds of solely issues of identity. Respondents were not adopting a new sexual identity, but learning about other potential religious options around them. For any noteworthy crisis, the framework in which one first encounters and wrestles with it matters: doing so in a religious setting allows for a resolution that is more amicable with religious

teachings and maintaining one's religious identity. However, doing it alone or in a secular setting can lead to results that prove incongruent with one's religion.

Admittedly, these findings will need to be explored more systematically, with a larger sample size in which respondents are specifically probed about whether they took a world religion course, in what setting, and what was the specific impact of the course. Nevertheless, this preliminary finding is a step towards demonstrating that the forum and framework through which one comes upon a potential turning point in their beliefs or identity matters: whether they can draw upon their religious institutions' explanations and frames or whether they must do so on their own.

While these past two chapters considered influences that shook one's faith prior to becoming atheist, I now turn to present-day beliefs, expanding the analyses to include all survey participants, rather than solely interviewees. The next chapter addresses exactly how unshakable contemporary beliefs are: whether exit from theism is unquestionably one-way, or whether respondents allow for a chance – however minute – of changing their minds.

## **VI. Dogmatism: How Set Are My Current Beliefs?**

These next three chapters shift from respondents' doubting period to the present-day, focusing on definitions, stances, and meaning-making. While respondents have left their childhood religions behind, childhood religious intensity remains a central factor in explaining variation. One's religious upbringing may exhibit persistent, residual effect.

### **Residual Review**

A key stage in rejecting theism is the process of 'unlearning' the religious beliefs one has accumulated and internalized throughout his or her upbringing (Smith 2011). These beliefs function as cognitive schema, providing heuristics for many facets of one's life (McIntosh 1995). Sewell (1992) described schemata as transposable, capable of being applied in novel ways to many situations, beyond their originally intended spheres. Religious schemata often extend outside what would conventionally be considered the domain of religion. They can extend into a plethora of topics, reverberating into everything from coping with the death of a loved one (McIntosh 1995) to use of corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat 1993) to pornography opposition (Sherkat and Ellison 1997) to explanations for racial inequality (Emerson and Smith 2000) and beyond. As religious schemata extend almost invariably into other areas of a person's life, they may persist even once the overarching belief system is discarded. How persistent these schemata are may differ according to the importance once assigned to religion.

When one exits a previous role, they discard the previous affiliation and more explicit schemata. However, those which are deeply ingrained or less explicitly connected to the previous role may be more difficult to uproot. Ebaugh (1988) refers to such expectations and self-identity as 'role residual' or 'hangover identity.' The psychological concept of 'dual attitudes' similarly underscores unconscious influence of previous beliefs (Wilson et al 2000).

The prospect of residual has far-reaching implications. Atheists' expectations and stances may still be influenced by their religious upbringing, even after exit. The prospect is greatest in areas not overtly linked to their religious tradition. This has utility to explain differences in dogmatism levels and other variations among atheists.

Previous research has begun to identify religious residuals. Ex-Muslims must grapple with religiously-prescribed attitudes about gender and sexuality (Cottee 2015). Likewise, ex-Hasidic Jews continually wrestle with religious attitudes about self-presentation and diet (Davidman 2014). The interview portion of this study yielded some additional examples.

### **Specific Instances of Conscious Residual**

Twelve of the fifty interviewees volunteered some specific residual that they actively attribute to their previous religious faith. Despite the fact that they were cognizant of the persistent role of their religious upbringing, the schemata persisted. Examples fell into three general categories: thinking of one's previous religion as one's reference group, still feeling guilt associated with religion, and having to tamp down religiously-instilled thought patterns.

#### *Religion as One's Reference Group*

Three respondents cited instances of residual stemming from continued use of their previous religion as their reference group. For instance, Arthur stated that he still considers "Christians as more of an in-group and other religious groups as an out-group, even though I am not Christian myself [...] I can relate more to them, even though I'm not one, myself."

Similarly, Stephanie stated "I still take pieces of Catholicism, it's part of my culture." She compared doing so to secular friends who remain culturally Jewish. When asked to elaborate on what precisely being culturally Catholic entails, she cited the "social justice of the Jesuits,"

instilled by a mission trip to South America, and that she still refrains from eating meat on Fridays during Lent.

### *Guilt*

Mentions of residual guilt appeared in six of the fifty interviews. In these cases, respondents brought up visceral, emotional responses to actions or beliefs which they were presently okay with, at least on an intellectual level.

Although empirical research finds no definitive proof of ‘Catholic guilt,’ half of the six respondents specifically attributed their beliefs to residual ‘Catholic guilt.’ In doing so, they drew from the readily available vocabulary to make sense of intense emotional guilt that they attributed to a source in which they no longer intellectually believe. As Megan explained

I don’t know if you ever stop being a Catholic, because I think the Catholic guilt is something that never leaves you. I feel guilty about shit I have no business feeling guilty about. [...] That intense sense of somebody is always watching and judging you, and you always better do what’s the right thing to do. That always fucked with me as a young person. And I still think about it today. [...] I felt guilty of everything I did. Still today, if I get a weird phone call, “Oh shit what did I do.” Which is ridiculous. But it definitely sort of created a lot of things that now as a mom, I would never want my son to go through. I wouldn’t want him to feel that guilt or people are watching you all the time. That’s creepy. But it’s a good way to keep kids in line. It is symbolically violent in that way.

However, Catholics and ex-Catholics have no monopoly on guilt. Two formerly evangelical respondents similarly reported instances. Heather states

I have what I refer to as a post-Christianity guilt complex about certain things. [...] I guess I associate it more so because I think my specific brand growing up was very group-focused and really focused on humbling yourself before a god and kind of acknowledging how tiny and powerless you were. So I guess it’s something that I feel is strange now to do things for myself or to be proud of my own achievements when I feel almost selfish for no reason. Which I think is something I associate with leaving Christianity.

She traced it back to evangelicalism instilling a collectivist orientation in her, from which she strayed. She was socialized to believe that she should put “God first, then others, then you. You should be last on your priority list. And I think that’s something that I psychologically struggle with now. Like its okay for me to do things for myself.”

Five of the six respondents to specifically mention residual guilt were female. This subsample is too small to confirm gender’s significance, but highlights an area for future research. However, this is consistent with research stressing expectations of a communal orientation for women (e.g. Rudman and Glick 2001) and that which places higher preference on women’s chastity and sexual purity (e.g. Schutz and Roth 2014).

### *Thought Patterns*

The final instance of hangover respondents volunteered entailed falling back into – or having to actively struggle against – religiously-instilled thought patterns. While these patterns did not contain explicit religious dogma, they entailed a way of looking at the world respondents consciously attributed to their previous faith. Eight respondents provided some example of this.

Phoebe grew up in an evangelical church that, though liberal on some economic issues, was very conservative on many social issues. After she left the church, Phoebe was very politically active in the LGBT community. Despite the night-and-day shift on issues of sexuality, she still caught herself shifting her new political outlook onto her older thought pattern:

I had to struggle for a long time with not thinking moralistically, not thinking in terms of right and wrong. And for example, when I left the church initially, I immediately entered a very active community around radical politics that had a lot of the same kind of language that Christianity has in the sense that there was justice and injustice and basically the injustices in society replaces sin in being the evil. So I came from this good, which is god, and this evil, which is all these things, and then I went into this community where the evil are the social injustices. And I was able to very easily map onto that, sort of my psychological framework for understanding the world.

She actively had to move away from a black-and-white conception of the universe to one which allowed for gradations and incremental change. Her thought patterns occasionally drifted into areas of guilt, which she had to consciously wrestle with and tamp down:

But thinking moralistically and also thinking judgmentally on myself, I was definitely brought up to believe I'm inherently sinful and bad. And I wasn't taught it in this vicious way – like you're bad – I was taught "You were lost but now found, you were broken, but redeemed, you were sinful but god has you." But then when you step outside of that system, when you're no longer god's child, what's left? You're broken, sinful, and bad. I don't mentally agree with that. Intellectually I don't. But definitely emotionally that does affect. When I make a mistake, I very quickly jump to "I'm a bad person, I made a mistake." That's very frustrating for some of my partners not raised theist. For them, that's a natural sequence. They don't go from "I made a mistake" to "I'm a bad person." I had to work hard on it. To notice it. To identify it. To recognize when I am doing it. This is what it is and this is where it's coming from.

#### *Analysis of These Specific Mentions*

These interview examples provide the first opportunity to consider the persistent influence of childhood religion on one's present day experiences. To appraise this, I ran hypothesis tests to see if the twelve interviewees who cited some conscious (yet persistent) example of residual from their former religious beliefs differed in some ways from the thirty-eight who did not. My expectation does not distinguish between childhood religiosity and religious particularism, stating

**Hypothesis 3a:** Those with higher childhood religious intensity will be more likely to provide specific examples of residual.

I consider both prongs of childhood religious intensity below.

**Table 33.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religiosity on Residual Mention (from Interviews)\*\*

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Residual Mention	12	32.75	11.80	3.41
No Residual Mention	37	23.59	12.69	2.09



**Table 34.** T-Test for Impact of Childhood Religious Particularism on Residual Mention (from Interviews)\*\*\*

<i>Misgivings</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Residual Mention	11	15.73	6.56	1.98
No Residual Mention	38	9.61	5.74	.93

Despite the small sample size, individuals mentioning residual came from childhoods with significantly greater religious intensity. They were 9.2 points higher on the 48-point childhood religiosity scale and 6.1 points higher on the 24-point childhood religious particularism scale than their counterparts who were not cognizant of residual from their previous religion. The former is significant at a .05 level and the latter is significant at a .01 level. When both are considered in tandem, their combined inclusion is significant, but neither has a significant unique effect, upon controlling for the other.<sup>19</sup> Overall, this provides the first evidence of a persistent, residual impact of atheists' upbringing, as those for whom religion held a more central role – as measured by childhood religious intensity – are more likely to report instances of residual of which they are consciously cognizant. These cases of residual which persist despite respondents' awareness involve subjects which elicit strong feelings: either a sense of belonging with a community or a sense of guilt. As seen in studies of retention, a religiously homogenous social circle and one's reference group can hinder exit. Other instances over these next three chapters involve less obvious cases, differences which are only discernable upon measuring differences based on childhood religious intensity.

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<sup>19</sup> Available upon request.

However, most examples which follow in the proceeding chapters present cases that are not as overtly tied to one's religious upbringing.<sup>20</sup> The first such possibility is dogmatism, one's certainty that their current beliefs will not change.

### **Turning Towards Dogmatism**

I modeled my dogmatism scale on Hunsberger and Altemeyer's (2006) DOG scale. Both measure dogmatism in the abstract – not specifically confined to religious beliefs, but religious beliefs are front and center, given the focus of their study and my own. Hunsberger and Altemeyer tested their DOG scale on multiple groups, fundamentalist Christians and atheists from three unique areas. They found the Christians to rate higher than any of the atheist groups, roughly a quarter of the entire scale (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). While comparing distinct populations, the results suggest a drop-off in dogmatism between religion and atheism.

My sample is unable to longitudinally observe any drop in dogmatism after exiting religion. However, several exit narratives recounted the importance of learning to live with ambiguity and uncertainty as a key prerequisite for leaving religion. While not as universal a step as redefining morality as secularized (Smith 2011), several respondents specifically spoke about a shift from a comprehensive religious worldview – where all phenomena could be explained by their holy book and attributed to a divine design – to one where they were comfortable withholding judgment and remaining open to future developments.

Brittany represented one example. She was homeschooled, her mother drawing heavily from Christian curricula. Upon starting to doubt, she found it necessary to open herself up to the

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<sup>20</sup> One noteworthy exception to this is group affiliation, where several respondents talked about the parallels between belonging to an atheist or secularist organization or board and attending church and other services.

possibility that she had to delay judgment in subjects which were beyond the scope of her knowledge.

Brittany: Rather than saying “Well I’m not sure so it must be god” – which was my old default – but being able to say “I don’t know” and be okay with that. But it really was the sciences and the ethics, philosophy that didn’t need god in order to function. So I suppose you could say it’s Occam’s razor. Don’t add anything extra that doesn’t need to be there. [...]

Interviewer: And did you have any difficulty accustoming yourself to “It’s okay not to know”?

Brittany: Yes, that’s pretty difficult for me. I like knowing things. Haha. Yes, that was very, very difficult. And for a lot of time I did see that as a weakness of atheism. But then coming to the realization that being able to say “I don’t know” could be “I don’t know yet” and it leaves open the possibility to learn in the future. Whereas saying “I don’t know therefore god did it” kind of puts a halt on the necessity to continue learning.

Similarly, Sonya found it necessary to become comfortable with ambiguity during her doubting period. She described testing the waters by using her ‘atheist glasses’ for spans of time. The thought exercise of imagining her life and belief without religion and god allowed her to become acquainted with uncertainty and comfortable with the vertigo that comes along with it. She describes the effects of wearing the ‘glasses:’

When I couldn’t explain [something], because there’s a lot that we can’t explain, I feel comfortable saying that’s a mystery. Mystery is a nice word. It sort of... kind of reminds me of spirituality or wonder, but it doesn’t depend on religion, so whenever I can’t explain things I’m comfortable being “That’s a mystery” and I feel that’s more honest than when my family says “Jesus wanted you to find that battery cause now you have it and can turn on your phone.”

Brittany, Sonya, and others’ exit narratives pointed to a drop in dogmatism and willingness to amend their beliefs upon receiving new information. However, despite these testimonials (and the averages in Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s earlier survey), there nevertheless existed a wide array of dogmatism among atheists. While Brittany and Sonya learned to be open to additional information, others proved quite dogmatic and certain in their present beliefs. The

following analysis investigates which factors may account for the variation in atheists' present-day dogmatism, particularly whether there are impediments to learning to embrace and live with uncertainty upon leaving religion.

### **Variations in Dogmatism and Certainty**

After leaving their original religion, survey respondents took a variety of trajectories which all eventually culminated in atheism. Roughly twenty-eight percent considered themselves to be atheists immediately upon leaving their original religion. Another nine percent formally joined another religion.

Between these two extremes, however, there is more nuance. In recounting their exit narratives, sixty percent of interviewees did some amount of research into joining another religion, though very few formally joined any. The religions researched ranged from Islam to Bahá'í to Mormonism. Seven interviewees had a brief quest phase, researching and entertaining the possibility of joining multiple different religions.

Altogether, there are a variety of paths. Some immediately dove into atheism, while others first dipped their toes into multiple religions. At some point, respondents reached a level of certainty that no religion is satisfactory and there is no argument that can persuade them of the existence of a deity. In recounting acquaintances' futile attempts to persuade her to attend their church, Tracy memorably summarized their attitudes towards her disbelief:

I had somewhat similar experiences with other people, where they just think that if I just pray with them they'll change my mind. I'm afraid of dogs and people are like "If you just meet my dog you'll be okay." It's just the same thing with god.

As encapsulated by Tracy's dog metaphor, individuals have to be certain enough in their disbelief that they can discount the possibility of ever being persuaded into amending some of their most central convictions and returning to theism. However, in the interviews, there were

differing levels of certainty. While a great many were positive that their beliefs could now never be changed by any life event or argument for theism, others' expectations were more tempered. Five interviewees specifically mentioned the potential reversibility of their beliefs. One succinct example is Brad, who states, "Atheism is just a working assumption, for my worldview."

Another case is Kelsey, whose exit narrative was already provided. She was a self-starter, raised by Catholic parents who were not particularly religious. At ten, she became more interested in religion, although the shift was mainly internal: "I don't think that a change was noticeable to most people. It was very private." She prayed and read the bible frequently in her room. She also attended Catholic retreats. Since leaving religion and becoming atheist, she reported some concern at the possibility that she may return to theism later in her life:

Kelsey: There's definitely a little bit of feeling that, since I was raised religious, a fear that maybe I would go back to it. And I really don't want to. And I think that's part of a spending... I spent the first fifteen years of my life believing in something. And it's weird to think that for those first fifteen years I was wrong. And I'm afraid that someday when I'm old I will go back to it and I really don't want to. I guess that's a fear that I have...

Interviewer: That it's so ingrained in you that down the road you might want to?

Kelsey: Yeah. And definitely me right now I really hope not. But... yeah, it's definitely weird because it is taught at such a young age.

Brad and Kelsey demonstrate that some atheists consider it possible that their identity might not be permanent, but rather conceivable it will change again over the course of their lives. This possibility was unwelcome and greeted with concern, as in Kelsey's case where she "really hopes not." Nevertheless, the interviewees who mentioned the prospect serve as one pole on the spectrum of dogmatism, a more cautious stance, compared to those who offered absolute certainty.

## **Residual in Dogmatism and Certainty**

Religious beliefs (or disbeliefs) often are paramount, serving as a foundation upon which more mundane beliefs rest. Almost a century ago, Thouless (1935) noted that respondents rated their belief or disbelief in god as more certain than ordinary, knowable topics. Given the primacy many attach to religion (or atheism), there are advantages to being certain. Those most certain about the existence of god rate higher in emotional stability and life satisfaction, regardless of whether they are certain of god's existence or non-existence (Galen and Kloet 2011). Variation in dogmatism is a prime domain to probe for evidence of residual from one's religious upbringing.

The earlier interview examples of conscious residual outline instances of residual consciously experienced upon leaving one's birth religion. There is a dearth of research investigating more indirect examples, such as the impact of religious upbringing religiosity on current atheistic dogmatism. Even prior to the specific content like gender ideology or dietary customs that Cottee (2015) and Davidman (2014) discuss, the simple strength of one's religious upbringing may resonate into the present day.

Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) offer the conjecture that a deeper and more intense experience with theism may increase the certainty that it is incompatible with oneself, resulting in increased atheist dogmatism. Altemeyer (2012) maintains this hypothesis in a personal correspondence, predicting a weak-to-moderate positive correlation ( $r=.30$ ) between religious emphasis during one's upbringing and dogmatism. The hypothesis still requires formal testing, however.

Although even less literature supports it, the inverse is possible. Higher levels of religiosity during one's upbringing may result in lower levels of atheist dogmatism. Having been a devout believer growing up – only to leave the faith – may allow one to view his or her current

beliefs more tentatively, as a ‘working assumption’ rather than as a certainty. However, this possibility is secondary to a positive relationship between childhood religiosity and present-day dogmatism.

**Hypothesis 3b:** Higher levels of religiosity during one’s upbringing will lead to higher levels of atheist dogmatism.

For this hypothesis, childhood particularism and childhood religiosity are undifferentiated.

## **Methods**

The dependent variable in this analysis is the 40-point dogmatism scale, covered at length in Appendix D. While the questions were phrased to not specifically mention religion, their inclusion in a study on atheism ensures one’s beliefs about religion are of paramount concern. It is treated as an interval-ratio variable, allowing for use in a linear regression equation. The two main independent variables of interest are childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism. Beyond these two focal points, later equations also include race, gender, birth year, year declaring atheism, affiliation with a group or message board, and economic and social political views. All have been covered at length in Appendix D.

The general hypothesis was evaluated using a series of five linear regression equations. The first and second consider the effects of childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism by themselves. The third combines them into a single equation, to account for the overlap between the two. The fourth adds pertinent demographic variables, as controls. These include the cohort effects of both being born and declaring one’s atheism. The final equation also controls for other views or affiliations which may overlap with dogmatism, political views and affiliation with an atheist or secular organization or message board.

## Results

**Table 35.** Multiple Regressions Predicting Dogmatism (from Survey)

	<i>Childhood Religiosity</i>	<i>Childhood Religious Particularism</i>	<i>Combined Childhood Religion</i>	<i>Including Demographics &amp; Cohort</i>	<i>Including Politics &amp; Affiliation</i>
Constant	17.00*** (.88)	15.38*** (.82)	16.27*** (.89)	22.08*** (2.56)	29.01*** (3.45)
Childhood Religiosity	.00 (.03)		-.08+ (.04)	-.11* (.04)	-.12** (.05)
Childhood Particularism		.14* (.06)	.24** (.09)	.28*** (.09)	.29*** (.09)
White				-.64 (.89)	-.80 (.95)
Male				-3.10*** (.79)	-3.70*** (.84)
Birth year				-.00 (.07)	-.03 (.07)
Year atheist				-.07 (.07)	-.03 (.09)
Affiliation					.63 (1.07)
Socially liberal					-1.30* (.65)
Economically liberal					-.89+ (.48)
Constant	17.00*** (.88)	15.38*** (.82)	16.27*** (.89)	22.08*** (2.56)	29.01*** (3.45)
N	195	195	194	192	173
R <sup>2</sup>	.000	.03*	.04*	.12***	.19***
RMSE	5.67	5.67	5.53	5.36	5.30

As seen in the first model, there is absolutely no effect of childhood religiosity when it is used as the sole variable predicting present day dogmatism.

In contrast, childhood religious particularism is statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) as the sole predictor of present day dogmatism. By itself, it explains about three percent of the total variation in dogmatism. Its effects are positive: a one-point rise on the childhood religious particularism scale predicts a .14-point rise in dogmatism. Its standardized coefficient is .17 or,



put most practically, moving from the minimum to the maximum in the childhood religious particularism scale is expected to result in a 3.5 unit rise on the dogmatism scale.

Combining both measures of one's religious upbringing into a single model accounts for four percent of the total variation in the dogmatism scale. The high degree of positive correlation between the measures of one's religious upbringing creates a suppressor effect on a variable that is accounted for when including the other in the analysis. Upon controlling for childhood religious particularism, childhood religiosity has a marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ), negative impact on present day dogmatism. For each one unit rise on the childhood religiosity scale, there is expected to be a .08 unit drop on the dogmatism scale. Its standardized coefficient is  $-.18$ ; moving from the bottom to the top of the childhood religiosity scale predicts a 3.8 unit drop in present day dogmatism, controlling for childhood religious particularism. Similarly, the impact of childhood religious particularism grows, to now being significant at a .01 level. Every one unit change on the scale predicts a .24 unit rise in present day dogmatism. Its standardized coefficient is  $.29$ ; moving from the minimum value of the scale to its maximum value predicts a 5.9 unit rise on the dogmatism scale, controlling for childhood religiosity.

Accounting for demographics greatly increases the overall predictive power, accounting for twelve percent of the total variation. Controlling for demographics allows for modest rises in both religious upbringing variables, which had been suppressed to this point. Childhood religiosity is now significant at a .05 level, with a one-unit rise predicted to cause a .11 unit drop on the dogmatism scale. It has a standardized coefficient of  $-.25$  and moving from the low of the scale to the maximum causes a drop of 5.1 units of the dogmatism scale. Likewise, the effects of childhood religious particularism grow, achieving significance at a .001 level. Every unit rise on the childhood religious particularism scale is predicted to lead to a .28 unit rise on dogmatism. Its

standardized coefficient is .34 and moving the length of the childhood religious particularism scale predicts a 6.8 unit rise on the dogmatism scale.

There is no effect of cohort, either of one's birth, nor declaring one's atheism. Similarly, race has no effect. The only demographic variable which is significant (at a .001 level) is gender. Males are predicted to be 3.1 units less dogmatic.

The final regression equation adds political ideology and secular group affiliation to the prediction equation. Now nineteen percent of the total variation in respondent's present day dogmatism is explained. Once again, adding controls does not sap the explanatory power of the two main variables of interest. Controlling for religious particularism, demographics, and politics, a one unit rise in childhood religiosity is predicted to lead to a .12 unit fall on the dogmatism scale (with a standardized coefficient of -.28). Controlling for religiosity, demographics, and politics, a one unit rise in childhood religious particularism is predicted to lead to a .29 unit rise on the dogmatism scale (with a standardized coefficient of .34). Including the measures of religious intensity in this final model explains seven percent of the total variation in dogmatism.

Of the other variables, gender is still significant, with males predicted to be 3.7 units lower on the dogmatism scale. Being affiliated with an atheist or secularist organization or message board has no impact. However, political views matter. The five category social liberalism scale is significant ( $p < .05$ ), with each step towards liberalism resulting in a predicted 1.3 unit drop in dogmatism. The five category economic liberalism scale is marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ), where each step towards liberalism is predicted to result in a .89 unit drop on the dogmatism scale. The two forms of political views are correlated ( $r = .48$ ), but each still an independent effect; generally, liberals are less dogmatic.

## Discussion

Overall, the effects of one's childhood religion are nuanced, with the two prongs having unique – and often contrasting – effects. Together, they account for seven percent of the variation in dogmatism (when other factors are controlled); this amount is not enormous, but nevertheless represents a significant, persistent influence from atheists' religious upbringings. Childhood religious particularism is the larger of the two, judging by its standardized coefficient and significance when the sole predictor in the equation. Its effect persists independent of any of the controls. It behaves as predicted by the hypothesis and Altemeyer's correspondence (2012), both of which were aimed at the umbrella concept of childhood 'religious emphasis,' rather than specifying either of the two prongs which comprise it.

Those who grew up with lower views of other religious groups maintain the strict dichotomy between their own beliefs and others, even after overhauling their belief system upon exit. They remain steadfast in their new beliefs, seeing little chance of amending them in the future. This is evidence that stances learned in religion can hangover a sharp differentiation between one's birth religion and others, to apply to one's present-day beliefs and competing options.

Meanwhile, childhood religiosity behaves contrary to initial expectations. While it has no effect when it is the only measure considered, controlling for childhood religious particularism isolates its unique contributions. Comparing two individuals who received identical messages concerning their faith's acceptance of outside groups, the individual with greater religiosity in his or her upbringing is expected to be less dogmatic in the present day. Being so personally invested in a religion, only to eventually exit, sensitizes one to the tentative nature of his or her present beliefs.

Kelsey was a perfect example. Recall the summary of her biography. She was a self-starter in religion at about ten, praying and reading the bible privately. She ranked above average in childhood religiosity, yet below average in childhood religious particularism. As she summarized, believing so fervently in her pre-teens and early teens, only to eventually leave, makes it conceivable that her beliefs may again change. The predisposition for religious faith might be deeply ingrained. Her explanation contained two strands: cognizance that even one's most central beliefs can drastically change and the possibility that an affinity for Catholicism cannot ever be completely uprooted.

Consciously-recognized instances of residual mentioned in the interview are raised by either measure of childhood centrality, when each is tried in isolation. For the specific residual of dogmatism, being raised with a strong distinction between one's in-group and out-groups carries over, even upon switching reference groups. One keeps a strict distinction, stressing certainty in the superiority and ultimate correctness of their present answers to major, existential questions. When one controls for religious particularism's impact on dogmatism, having been deeply invested in a belief system only to exit leads one to consider the tentative nature of their present beliefs.

Gender was included in the measure as a demographic control, rather than a particular variable of interest, yet it yielded interesting results. The finding that males were notably less dogmatic – about a tenth of the way lower on the scale – is initially surprising. Research into gender differences in certainty demonstrate that males are more likely to be overconfident about generic responses than females (Lundeberg, Fox, and Punócohař 1994). However, concerning dogmatism among atheists, the results point in the contrary direction.

One possible explanation traces back to the additional stigma and censure females can face for being atheists (Schutz and Roth 2014). Due to the identity being particularly embattled for females, those who decide to formally declare their atheism may be especially certain in their present beliefs. Results from the interviews testify to this: 36% of women cited some specific instance of stigma during their interviews, compared to only 14% of male interviewees.

Finally, liberal individuals are less dogmatic than conservative individuals. This inclusion in the equation has a negligible impact on the effects of childhood religion. Surprisingly, affiliation has no impact on dogmatism. Participating regularly on a group or message board full of like-minded peers does not result in greater certainty surrounding those beliefs.

### **Overlap with Other Variables**

These findings illuminate the relationship between religious upbringing and the symbolic boundaries around atheism. As will be discussed in a later chapter, dogmatism is a key variable mitigating the effects of childhood religious intensity on the amounts of symbolic boundaries one erects around atheism.

Furthermore, the dogmatism scale has considerable overlap with respondents' personal beliefs about the potential existence of a god or higher power. Recall that the dogmatism scale dealt with the unshakeable nature of their present beliefs, making no explicit reference to religion.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, dogmatism is related to one's certainty of the non-existence of god. The next section catalogues how respondents differ in their epistemological stance regarding the non-existence of a deity, showing the relationship between their particular stance and dogmatism.

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<sup>21</sup> However, being included in a study about atheism ensured that respondents viewed the ten questions as pertaining chiefly to their religious disbelief.

## Differences in Epistemological Stance

All respondents self-identified as atheist. However, there is no consensus about the epistemological beliefs required to be a genuine atheist. Even among researchers and authors of atheism, there is disagreement. In part, the upcoming symbolic boundaries chapter considers certainty of god's non-existence as one of the seven requirements atheists may demand of their peers.

Some atheist literature centers on a lenient definition, describing it merely as the lack of belief in a god or gods (e.g. Cliteur 2009). Often this is termed as negative atheism. One of the most prominent contemporary atheists, Richard Dawkins (2006), would fall into this camp. He conceptualizes belief as a spectrum of how probable one sees the existence of god, ranging from one (complete certainty of a deity's existence) to seven (complete certainty a deity does not exist). In interviews, Dawkins places himself just shy of the pole of seven.

Meanwhile, many dictionary definitions (e.g. Merriam Webster and Cambridge) use a stricter, positive atheist definition: the complete certainty that a god or gods do not exist. In her publications, Madalyn Murray O'Hair would often define atheism in this way, stressing that an atheist must completely reject the possibility of a god or gods (Schaffner 2012).

Even among authors and high-profile atheist figures, there is a controversy in defining atheism. Survey and interview responses revealed similar variability among respondents, with some stressing certainty that a god or gods do not exist and others offering less than utter certainty.

When asked what account they would give a believer who was curious why they were atheist, several interviewees stated that they would respondent with a question of their own,

asking the other party why he or she did not believe in the Greek gods, Islam, or some other belief system other than their own. This common tactic appeals to the argument that atheists merely believe in one fewer god than theists do. This strategy endorses a definition of negative atheism, implicitly defining atheism as merely the lack of belief in all gods. The theist, in contrast, is only one god away from the belief system of the atheist. As a debate tactic, it is generally paired with less combative and argumentative approaches, as it designs to build a common foundation before the stances of the two interlocutors diverge.

Survey participants identified themselves as having one of four epistemological stances about the existence of a deity. First were the *positive atheists*, completely certain of the non-existence of any deity. This category represents the strictest definition. Three groups fell outside of it. Those who were epistemologically *hard agnostics* stated that they did not think it was possible for humans to ever definitively know whether or not god exists. Those whose beliefs made them *soft agnostics* limited the above statement to themselves, stating that they personally did not know whether or not a god or gods exist. Finally, those who were epistemologically *apathetic* simply were unconcerned with whether or not a deity exists.

All four of these groups were united by considering themselves to be atheist. The following vignettes provide examples of interviewees that fell into each of the four groups.

#### *Epistemologically Positive Atheist*

Positive atheists were the single most numerous epistemological group, comprising forty-four percent of all valid survey responses. Representing the dictionary-definition of atheist – and never really having to defend themselves as a genuine atheist – their explanations were numerous, but generally terse. In comparison, those who were not positive atheists devoted

considerable interview time to explaining their stances and justifying their application of the ‘atheist’ label, demonstrating awareness of the contested nature of their claims.

Unlike the majority of positive atheists, Regina offered her reasoning at length. Her justification proved memorable and unique, unseen in any of the other forty-nine interviews. She reasoned that, as the non-existence of anything is unprovable, atheism entails a degree of faith, whereas agnosticism does not. She thus defined atheism as a religion, whereas agnosticism appears to be more of a stance about how knowable god or gods are. As Regina saw it, ‘religion’ is defined by belief in something that cannot be conclusively proven:

I think atheism is a religion. I believe being agnostic is non-religious. But I think atheists... You have to believe that there is no god. Agnostic you don’t really know; you need proof in either direction. There is no proof that god does not exist. There’s just a lack of evidence that he does. You really have to believe that he doesn’t exist. So I count that as religion.

Most interesting about Regina’s delineation is its resemblance to tactics used by the Religious Right to oppose and attempt to diminish the teaching of evolution and secular morality in classrooms, by equivocating them with religious faith. Regina was cognizant that this stance differs from the majority of rank-and-file atheists, pointing to it as the key way she differs from the bulk of her peers:

And the way that I definitely know I differ from other atheists is the fact that I do think of atheism as a religion. I don’t think a lot of atheists think that we have to have faith to be atheists. But I definitely think that you have to have faith to be atheist: faith in the lack of god, as opposed to faith in a god.

Again, Regina is distinct as far as the interview sample is concerned. While others are similarly certain that a god or gods do not exist, most just simply stress the impossibility of a deity, rather than explicitly portraying atheism as tantamount to religion. She was alone in attempting to resolve how to prove a negative in this manner.



### *Epistemologically Hard Agnostic*

Like Regina, Trent similarly talked about the impossibility of definitely proving a negative like the non-existence of a deity. While Regina solved this impasse by stressing that atheism is a faith (and that she is among its faithful), Trent took a different route. As it is impossible to definitely prove the existence of a negative, all atheists are necessarily agnostic by definition, according to Trent.

Trent: Well, I mean, basically I think to an extent every atheist is agnostic. Because you just can't know if there's a god. I mean it's infallible.

Interviewer: Would you want to elaborate a bit, on how it's truly unknowable in the end?

Trent: Yeah. The claim that if I said I have an invisible dinosaur in my backyard. You can't see him or feel him. Only I can. If no one's looking. That's an infallible statement. No one can say that surely doesn't exist. That's basically god. Because we don't really know his attributes. People have different points of view of what god is. The Christian god on the other hand, you can basically say he's untrue. Because of different historical events that never happened: the flood and stuff like that. That are attributed to him.

Trent and Regina both used broad brush strokes to address the lines between atheism and agnosticism, but they painted starkly different pictures: Trent framed atheists as a subgroup within the broader category of agnostics, while Regina employed atheism as a religious category, distinct from the areligious, epistemological category of 'agnostic.'

Finally, Trent's final three sentences provide insight on how atheists can exhibit remarkable certainty that their beliefs will not change – in other words, high levels of dogmatism. Trent – and other atheists – can be certain about the non-existence of the gods of world religions, because those deities have miracles and historical events attached to their names, which can be falsified by scientific investigation or the lack of corroborating empirical evidence. In contrast, when Trent talked about being unable to definitively prove the non-existence of a

deity, he spoke about a deity in the abstract sense: the Deist conception of god, which has no specific worldly effects to investigate.

### *Epistemologically Soft Agnostic*

After leaving religion, Lionel initially considered himself to be agnostic, before self-identifying as atheist. When pressed for any additional argument or event which precipitated this shift, Lionel could not point to any precise watershed. Instead, he stated:

At that point it was maybe a switch in the label I would use. But it wasn't that I had a huge switch in my belief then. Hopefully this is okay for my eligibility [in the study<sup>22</sup>]. Technically I wouldn't even quite call myself an atheist today, just because I don't put too much stock in my ability to be sure in such a fundamental thing. I just think they're plenty of things with the universe that *I'm not capable of understanding* [italics added]. And its ultimate cause in nature is probably the biggest. But that said I think that the possibility of there being a god is so extremely unlikely that for all intents and purposes I'm an atheist.

Lionel's reasoning was not unique among the interviews. Several other cases mention being personally unsure to some degree, with multiple people actually offering a figure for their certainty of god's non-existence: 99 point some-amount-of-nines-repeating. Lionel and these other respondents essentially 'rounded up' to consider themselves atheists. I explore some of these cases two chapters later, in the discussion of symbolic boundaries.

Lionel's stance is distinguished from Trent's by the scope of uncertainty: whereas Trent does not consider it possible for humans to ever be certain of the non-existence of god, Lionel's response is more measured, limiting it to himself.

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<sup>22</sup> It does not impact his eligibility. Self-identification as atheist was the deciding factor in whether or not a potential respondent could participate, rather than any screening questions about epistemology or specific beliefs.

## *Epistemologically Apathetic*

Patrice started from a point similar to Trent, laying the foundation for explaining his lack of complete certainty with a metaphor. While also not a positive atheist, he fell into a different category than Trent: epistemologically apathetic.

Patrice: And even though I don't believe in god, I don't believe god exists, I don't know there's no higher power, obviously. I don't believe one exists and I don't believe if it did exist – hypothetically speaking – I don't believe it would care anything about what's going on here. But I can't know for sure. And I know that theoretically that's supposed to be agnostic. But I... I don't believe in the god in the same way that I don't believe that the moon is made of cheese. I don't believe in it but it's not like an ambiguous "I don't believe in it," *I don't believe in it because there's no reason to* [italics added]. So I identify as atheist even though the more atheist purists would call me 'agnostic.'

Interviewer: Functionally atheist as opposed to epistemologically atheist?

Patrice: Yeah. That's a good way to put it. Functionally atheist, that's a good way to put it.

Patrice diverged from Trent – besides speaking of lunar cheese, rather than invisible dinosaurs – in how he handled this inability to prove a negative. Trent concluded that it is beyond the realm of human ability to do so. In contrast, Patrice did not care about the proposition, opting to live his life as functionally atheist and put the prospect out of his mind.

Furthermore, Patrice's assertion that "there's no reason to" believe in a god that would not "care about what's going on here" demonstrates that, similar to Trent, he conceptualized such a deity as one which is wholly removed and uninterested in human affairs. Elsewhere in his interview he stated that the idea that "the omnipotent creator of the universe would even care about these [human] things seems like the height of human hubris." Often, negative atheists are conceptualizing of a Deist god, wholly removed from human activity, while they feel completely confident stating with absolute certainty that more specific conceptions of god – such as the Abrahamic god – do not exist.

The “functionalist atheist” label accurately summarized Patrice’s decision to live his life without concern about a god or religious dogma. Other respondents drew on similar terminology, such as Glenn, who stated “I guess I live my life as a de facto atheist. I don’t live my life in a way that I believe there’s going to be any kind of retribution by a deity.” Underscoring that one’s actions are identical to positive atheists is one key avenue which negative atheists used to legitimize their application of the ‘atheist’ label.

Elsewhere during the interview, Patrice explained how actively searching for a religion baffles him. As he summarized, a faith should be something that finds someone and deeply resonates with them, rather than an obligation.

I know I understand some people need religion, but finding religion is a lot like finding love in a sense. It’s not something that you look for. It’s weird if you hear someone say “I’m looking for love.” That person’s nuts. When people say “I’m looking for religion,” it sounds equally nuts to me. [...] It’s supposed to be something real, intimate to you, you don’t do it just because you feel like you have to.

Patrice did not actively search out a definitive refutation of a deity, instead being comfortable to live his life without one and not squabble over whether a Deist god exists.

Finally, both Lionel and Patrice mentioned that they are aware that some atheists may impugn their claims to be genuine atheists, since they are not absolutely certain of the non-existence of a god or gods. This controversy, where some atheists may not respect other claimants, is an underexplored area in the study of atheism. It will be continued as part of the symbolic boundaries chapter.

### **The Frequency of Epistemological Stances**

As shown below, approximately forty-four percent of all surveyed are strict positive atheists when it comes to their own personal views. Meanwhile, only fourteen percent of the

sample required atheists to be sure of the non-existence of any deity.<sup>23</sup> A majority of those who describe their own beliefs as positive atheists did not require absolute certainty from fellow atheists.

Those who were not absolutely certain in their beliefs were split between multiple stances. The first implies a porous relationship between atheism and agnosticism for all. Twenty-five percent doubt human cognition can ever truly know whether a god or gods exist. Sources for this stance can vary. Some cite a scientific viewpoint leaving one perpetually open to considering additional data, while others cite philosophy and the inability to ever conclusively prove something's non-existence. I labeled these individuals' epistemological views as 'hard agnosticism', precluding the possibility of human perception ever being able to prove the existence of a god or gods.

Slightly fewer people were also unsure, but limited the assertion to only their own, present knowledge. This sixteen percent were only personally unsure, making no larger claims about the epistemological abilities of others. I label their epistemological orientation as 'soft agnosticism.'

Finally, despite detracting from the otherwise ordinal nature of the responses, an option allowed for respondents who were apathetic towards the existence of a deity. Fifteen percent selected this option, describing themselves as completely unconcerned with whether god or a higher power exists.

Twenty-nine total respondents are not included in the analysis, due to offering their own unique response to the survey question which could not be easily assimilated into any of the

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<sup>23</sup> To be explored in depth in the subsequent symbolic boundaries chapter.

provided categories. Additionally, one respondent stated that she believed in a god or a higher power (despite nevertheless identifying as atheist). Unfortunately, she was not randomly selected for the interview portion, so her particular explanation remains unknown. Due to the size of this subsample being one, I left the respondent who believed in god or a higher power out of the analysis.

The table below summarizes respondents' stances.

**Table 36.** Frequency of Epistemological Stances (from Survey)

<i>Epistemological Stance</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Positive Atheist	75	43.9%
Hard Agnostic	42	24.6%
Soft Agnostic	28	16.4%
Apathetic	26	15.2%

#### **Predictors of Epistemological Stances**

Foremost, I analyzed the results by looking at whether dogmatism alone has any significant impact across the four epistemological categories. Once again, it borders on tautology to state that those who are most dogmatic – simply defined as the certainty that one's own beliefs are impervious to change – will be more likely to state that they are certain that a god or higher power cannot exist. However, empirical results are necessary to confirm this relationship.

**Hypothesis 3c:** Those with higher levels of dogmatism will be more likely to be positive atheists.

**Table 37.** Mean Dogmatism by Epistemological Stance (from Survey)\*\*

<i>Epistemological Stance</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>
Positive Atheist	73	19.14	5.93	.69
Hard Agnostic	42	17.00	5.10	.79
Soft Agnostic	28	15.18	6.23	1.18
Apathetic	25	15.68	5.11	1.02

The mean dogmatism levels vary between groups, with positive atheists being the most dogmatic. Hard agnostics are roughly two units on the forty-point scale less dogmatic. Finally, soft agnostics and the epistemologically apathetic are the least dogmatic, rating about 3.5 total points lower than the positive atheists. The three ordinal categories line up in order of descending dogmatism, with the apathetic being most alike those who are epistemologically soft agnostic.

An Analysis of Variance for these results produces an F-ratio of 4.55, which is significant at the .01 level. The differences between the four groups are significant, minus other controls.

I broke the epistemological data into a simple dichotomy, whether or not respondents' beliefs qualified them as positive atheists. This serves two purposes. First, I can consider the direct impact of childhood religious intensity, as well as whether it is mitigated by present-day dogmatism. Secondly, this also allows for controlling by demographic variables. I ran three binary logistic regression equations. The first considers just the two measures of childhood religious intensity. The second step adds demographic variables, period, and affiliation, to see if controlling for those impacts childhood religious intensity. The final step adds dogmatism, to see if its already noteworthy effects have any impact on childhood religious intensity or any of the other variables.

**Table 38.** Binary Regressions Predicting Positive Atheism (from Interview)

	<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>		<i>+Demographics and Affiliation</i>		<i>+Present-Day Dogmatism</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	-.04+ (.02)	(-3.5%)	-.04* (.02)	(-4.3%)	-.03 (.02)	(-2.7%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.06+ (.04)	(6.0%)	.05 (.04)	(4.6%)	.00 (.04)	(.4%)
White			.78+ (.41)	(118.0%)	1.00* (.43)	(170.4%)
Male			-.24 (.34)	(21.7%)	.12 (.37)	(13.1%)
Birth year			-.05+ (.03)	(-4.8%)	-.06* (.03)	(-5.6%)
Year Atheist			.03 (.03)	(3.2%)	.05 (.03)	(4.6%)
Affiliated atheist Dogmatism			.67 (.44)	(94.4%)	.44 (.46) .13*** (.04)	(55.8%) (14.2%)
Constant	-.10		.50		-2.32+	
N	170		165		163	
df	2		7		8	
R <sup>2</sup>	.03		.12		.23	
Chi-square	4.11		14.83*		30.09***	

In the first equation, both measures are marginally significant, with each behaving similarly to their effects on dogmatism. Each additional point on the childhood religiosity scale lowers one's odds of being a positive atheist by 3.5%, controlling for childhood religious particularism. Meanwhile, each additional step up the childhood religious particularism scale raises one's odds of being a positive atheist six percent, controlling for childhood religiosity.

The equation including demographic, period, and affiliation controls is statistically significant. More importantly, a test of the impact of including the two measures of childhood religious intensity in this step yields a chi-square of 5.15, which is marginally significant.



Including childhood religious intensity adds to the predictive power of the equation, at least prior to dogmatism's addition. Childhood religious particularism now has an insignificant impact, shrinking under the inclusion of the controls. However, childhood religiosity is now significant at a .05 level, with each additional point on the childhood religiosity scale making one 4.3% less likely to be a positive atheist, controlling for the other variables.

Gender, the year one becomes atheist, and affiliation with an organization or message board have no effect on whether one is a positive atheist. Whites have marginally greater odds of being positive atheists, showing 118% greater odds than people of color. These effects grow to 170% when dogmatism is considered as well. Those born later are marginally less likely to be positive atheists, each year later one was born results in a 4.8 percent drop in their odds of being a positive atheist. The inclusion of dogmatism causes the odds to grow very subtly, to a 5.6% drop per additional year, but now these rate as statistically significant at a .05 level.

Including dogmatism greatly increases the explanatory power of the equation, with it now being significant at a .001 level. Each step up the 40-point dogmatism scale increases one's odds of being a positive atheist by 14.2% ( $p < .001$ ). Importantly, controlling for dogmatism drops the effects of childhood religiosity below significant. Their impact was indirect, operating through dogmatism.

## **Discussion**

The regression results confirm the results seen in the ANOVA. Respondents who are more dogmatic – more certain that their present views cannot be shaken – are more likely to be positive atheists, even when considering controls for other measures.

Also important, childhood religiosity has a negative effect on being a positive atheist. The effect is mitigated by one's present-day dogmatism. Those raised with higher levels of childhood religiosity experience a residual effect of lower dogmatism, which manifests itself in lower odds of being a positive atheist.

Atheists who were born earlier are more likely to identify as positive atheists. There are two potential explanations for this finding, one from stigma and one from attrition. Foremost, coming of age in earlier decades, when the stigmatization of non-belief was even greater and atheism was an even more embattled identity, meant that only those who were absolutely certain and steadfast in their beliefs decided to self-identify as atheist. An argument from attrition would focus on the lifecycle. While those with certainty of the non-existence of god continue as atheists into their old age, perhaps those who are epistemologically agnostic wind up discarding the 'atheist' label at a particular life event, such as marriage, the birth of a child, or old age. It is a question of whether some never claim to be atheist or whether some report being atheist, only to eventually drop the label. However, those mentioning stigmatization and/or disparagement of disbelief during their interviews were no more likely to be positive atheists than those who did not. This provides indirect evidence in favor of an explanation stressing life course and retention, over one of stigmatization. Ultimately, a longitudinal study will be required to satisfactorily disentangle the two explanations. A third explanation – that certainty grows with greater time away from religion – can be discounted, due to the insignificance of respondents' date becoming atheist.

I was initially surprised by the higher likelihood of White respondents to be positive atheists. However, digging deeper, an interesting interplay between gender, race, and

epistemological beliefs about god arose. The following cross-tab shows the differences in belief across the four categories caused by the intersection of race and gender.<sup>24</sup>

**Table 39.** Epistemological Belief by Race and Gender (from Survey)\*

<i>Epistemological Stance</i>	<i>Woman of Color</i>	<i>Man of Color</i>	<i>White Woman</i>	<i>White Man</i>
Positive Atheist	30%	33.3%	49.2%	46.4%
Hard Agnostic	30%	38.1%	19.7%	23.2%
Soft Agnostic	15%	9.5%	8.2%	26.1%
Apathetic	25%	19%	23%	4.3%

The cross-tabulation has a chi-square of 20.67, which is significant at a .05 level, confirming differences based on the combination of race and gender. Nearly half of white men and women in this sample are epistemologically positive atheists. In contrast, only roughly a third of men and women of color are. While people of color are less likely than Whites to be positive atheists, they are decidedly more likely to be epistemologically hard agnostics. The racial distinction reduces to a decision about whether one thinks the question of god is definitively beyond all human ability to prove, or whether one can state with certainty that a god or gods do not exist.

The second discrepancy differentiates White males from both people of color and White women. While very few White males (4.3%) are apathetic about the existence of a god or gods, far more women and people of color are (between a fifth and a quarter). Rather, White men are over-represented in being soft agnostic, compared to gender and/or racial minorities.

<sup>24</sup> As measured in the White-non-White and Male-Female Binary that was necessary, due to sample size.

Thus, two distinctions emerged. Whites are more likely to be positive atheists, while people of color are more likely to be hard agnostics. Future research can use a wider sample – beyond self-identified atheists – to ascertain whether this is indeed due to Whites being overrepresented as positive atheists or whether people of color are more likely to apply the ‘bridge-burning’ (Galen 2009) label of ‘atheist,’ even without absolute certainty. Twin minority statuses in race and religion – and the stigmas they entail – would suggest that the latter possibility is unlikely. People of color are probably not more likely to ‘round up’ and apply an atheist label. However, future research is needed.

Secondly, White women and people of color have far more representation among the epistemologically apathetic, while White men instead belong to the soft agnostic group. Ostensibly, this is a matter of privilege, where those in minority positions – either racial or gender – place more stress on the byproducts of believing in a god. However, future research is again needed to tie the role of demographics, power, and privilege to epistemological stances about the (non)existence of a god or gods.

In addition to the interesting demographic effects, this chapter demonstrated the persistent – though modest – impact of religious upbringing, which was capable of impacting present-day dogmatism and, through that, epistemological stance. It also introduced a distinction between childhood religious intensity, where childhood religious particularism translates into greater contemporary certainty and childhood religiosity entails more measured present-day beliefs.

This chapter focused on internal measures, variables concerning certainty and epistemological stance only elicited under questioning. In contrast, the following chapter

considers how respondents live their lives, external measures considering how they act (or do not act) on their disbelief: affiliation and the engagement of religion in the public sphere.

## **VII. Affiliation and Aims: Outward Manifestations of Internal Beliefs**

Numerous previous studies of atheists (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Chalfant 2011, Smith 2011, Smith 2013, LeDrew 2013, Schutz and Roth 2014, etc.) drew their samples either predominantly or exclusively through atheist organizations. With a relatively small, hard-to-reach population like atheists, these sampling techniques are convenient. However, they reach only a small subset of atheists: in this study, only a fifth of atheists belonged to an atheist/secularist organization or message board. The rest were unaffiliated, and thus invisible and unreachable for many studies. This could prove problematic, impugning the generalizability of earlier studies if there are systematic differences between atheists who choose to belong to an organization or message board and those who remain unaffiliated.

Comparably little is known about who opts to join an atheist or secularist organization or message board and who does not, aside from inferring differences by contrasting studies of organizations with the general population of atheists. One recent exception is Langston et al's survey (2015), which found secular non-affiliates to be notably less confrontational towards religion than those with past or present group membership. Their subsample of secular non-affiliates explained their decision as a matter of saliency: their identity as atheists was not important enough to prioritize group membership.

In order to appraise the generalizability of these earlier studies – as well as to directly investigate which atheists decide to join organizations or message boards – I test several potential explanations in this chapter. These tests are supplemented by testimonials from interviewees concerning why they choose to affiliate – or why they personally find organizations or message boards unnecessary.

After this initial analysis, I turn my attention to whether affiliation – or a plethora of other predictors – can influence how atheists want to engage religion. This second portion considers atheists’ primary frame for how they should challenge religion in the public sphere.

### **Expectations: Zealotry**

Zealotry and organizational membership are closely intertwined, to the point that causality cannot be neatly determined. As public concerns drive respondents to join organizations, many organizations discuss such issues to keep members informed, rouse them from apathy, and insert themselves into public debate.

Both historical and contemporary examples abound. The Society of Separationists focused on engaging religion in the public sphere. It began by combating state support for religion, in issues ranging from school prayer to religion’s tax exempt status. It later expanded its scope to include engaging religion in the media and other venues: getting atheist texts into schools and libraries and procuring airtime for its founder, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, to serve as a counterpoint to religious figures and viewpoints. The organization expected members to police the encroachment of religion into public affairs at their local level, filing lawsuits when necessary (Schaffner 2012). Thus, the first nationally-visible atheist organization in America rested on the zealotry of its members, to personally confront religion in the public sphere and to provide the central organization with the wherewithal to do so.

The rural Pennsylvania atheist group that Ritchey (2009) observed serves as a more contemporary example, albeit one with a more modest scope of organizational aims. The group emphasized sharpening their debate skills to question the religious in venues such as radio call-in programs. Similar to the American Atheists, the group focused on injecting their disbelief into the public sphere, though in ways more conducive to its rural, small-scale operation. Outside of a

strictly organizational setting, research contrasting affiliates and non-affiliates found non-affiliates to be more willing to accommodate religion (Langston et al 2015).

I expect that zealotry and organizational membership are positively related, with the affiliated being markedly more zealous on issues concerning atheism and religion. However, given the common factors influencing both affiliation and zealotry, it is likely that some of the influence of political zealotry on affiliation lessens once controls are added to the equation.

**Hypothesis 4a:** Zealotry will be positively related to affiliation with organizations or message boards.

However, the interviews provided reason to curb this expectation. Many respondents opted to join meetups or campus organizations, rather than groups with grander policy agendas. While these groups occasionally engage with religious groups and open themselves up for debate in a public arena, the biggest draw group members listed was the community and social group provided, rather than initiating change or confrontation with theists.

### **Expectations: Dogmatism**

Respondents' present-day dogmatism may also link with their decisions whether or not to affiliate with an organization or message board. However, similar to the case of zealotry, cause and effect is murky.

Research focusing on religious individuals finds that those who most closely identify with their religious group tend to have the highest levels of dogmatism (Altemeyer 2002). This finding is not surprising: immersion and investment in a group leads to the expectation that one's stances will not change. Among the non-religious, a positive relationship between identity salience and dogmatism also exists (Gurney et al 2013).



The interviews furnish some indirect evidence of a link: among the thirty-nine unaffiliated interviewees, roughly a fifth justified their decision not to affiliate by explaining that group membership would make atheism too central an identity for their tastes. Phoebe explained her decision not to affiliate by stating

I think it's not something I feel the need to seek support about. And there are other aspects of my life and my identity that sort of take precedence. And so maybe if I tried I would find out that I'd get something from that. But without knowing about it, without having tried it, I don't feel I'm lacking something by not having a community around my lack of faith.

Phoebe's explanation echoes previous survey research, where lack of saliency is the second most popular explanation given by secular individuals for not affiliating with an organization (Langston et al 2015).

While no survey question measured the salience of an atheist identity for respondents, given identity salience's positive relationship with both group membership and present-day dogmatism, I can reasonably predict

**Hypothesis 4b:** Dogmatism will be positively related to affiliation with organizations or message boards.

### **Expectations: Childhood Religion**

Those who were raised with high religiosity – conditioned towards having a community of peers to reinforce their belief system – may be more likely to search out like-minded others in an atheist organization or message board. This suggests residual: a drive towards membership in a community of shared belief, persisting even after those beliefs change. Although no longer theist, one might be predisposed to seek out likeminded individuals for the collective effervescence of feeling part of a greater whole.

Many interviewees were cognizant of the parallels between atheist organizations and their religious upbringing. Regina came from a moderately religious Russian Orthodox upbringing and succinctly described it as “I feel like being a part of an atheist group is the same thing as being a part of a church or synagogue.” She consciously cited the similarities between an atheist group and religious service as the reason not to affiliate. Such respondents raised the possibility that – like endorsing a deontological moral system – the parallels between religion and atheist group memberships were so overt that respondents were consciously aware of it and able to reject it outright. There are examples of this from those with both strongly religious upbringings, as well as the only nominally religious.

At one end of the spectrum is Sonya. She was raised devoutly Methodist, describing her young self as an “extreme religious fundamentalist.” When asked to elaborate on why she does not affiliate, she explained

It just reminds me of church. And I don’t know how... I find that one of the big problems I have with religious people and atheists is that if we surround ourselves only with people who are just like us – there are times to do that – but I don’t want that to be the foundation of our life. I think that peace and change in the world is only really possible when we interact with others and when we come up against people that fundamentally disagree with and see how we live and know we need our own spaces too, to shore up our power, but I get enough of that from books and I have a best friend who’s an atheist, so... I don’t really need more.

While Jhumpa’s childhood was as secular as Sonya’s was fundamentalist, she similarly cited the similarity of atheist and religious organizations. She was raised nominally Hindu, although her father and the bulk of her extended family were ardently secular. Her decision not to affiliate also traces back to secular organizations’ inherent similarity to organized religion. Furthermore, atheism’s lack of salience is also present in her explanation:

It actually never occurred to me. [...] When I was not an atheist, my religious identity was not that important to me. And I guess, as an atheist, I do claim myself to be an atheist but it’s not an identity that’s very central to me in terms of associating with other people.

I do not feel like I need to be part of an atheist group. To me that almost becomes like religion. For me it's distancing myself from religion. And I don't feel the need to be a part of an atheist group.

In both cases – one at each extreme of childhood religious intensity – Sonya and Jhumpa cited atheist groups' similarity with religion in explaining their choice not to affiliate. In total, eleven respondents cited this perceived similarity in explaining their exit, the single most popular justification out of a litany of reasons why organizations were unnecessary. For many, framing affiliation with atheist organizations as approximating religion draws from shared symbolic vocabulary to legitimate their decision to stand apart from any formal atheist community.

Mentioned by over a quarter of non-affiliated interviewees, the parallels between religion and an atheist organization are fairly evident. Beyond these conscious, explicit mentions tying one's upbringing to their choice about whether to affiliate, it remains to be seen whether there is more of a subconscious pull towards affiliation for those raised highly religious.

**Hypothesis 4c:** Higher levels of religious intensity during one's upbringing will lead to greater likelihood of belonging to an atheist organization or message board.

#### **Expectations: Length of Doubting Period**

In addition to being a measure of the centrality of one's previous religious identity, one's childhood religious intensity is also an indicator of how traumatic and difficult it might be for one to leave religion. According to Ebaugh (1988), roles that are more central tend to have longer doubting and experimentation periods, as extricating oneself from the role can be more difficult and traumatic. They may require multiple exits or time reformulating definitions, due to overlap with other roles (e.g. a good child or a good citizen). Previous research demonstrates that more religiosity translates into a longer overall doubting period (Fitzgerald 2003).

These longer, more difficult and draining doubting periods may make one more likely to join an organization or message board. Of the interviewees, three specifically mentioned their

motivation for joining their atheist group was that it functioned as a support group, helping them to acclimate and deal with their disbelief. One such example was Vanessa, who started her interview by noting

I feel like I have to preface everything with I'm Mexican and in the Mexican culture religion is a huge part, whether or not you really believe in it. Just giving blessings to your children before they walk out the door. So that's the kind of stuff. More cultural things.

She was raised devoutly Catholic, attending church weekly and going to parochial schools. Now that she no longer believes, she attends an atheist group that focuses on the role of belief for Latinos/as, to discuss the unique tribulations with her non-believing peers:

I'm part of a Latino atheist group. And part of the group is not just atheists but people who identify as Latino and discuss how prevalent [religion] is in the culture and how conflicting that is as an atheist and how that puts you in a lot of awkward situations [...] I brought my husband to the last meeting, just this past Saturday and he's like "Oh, we're going to church?" Shut up, it's not church. It's almost like a support group.

As she summarized, the group is more attuned to the unique role Catholicism usually plays for Latinos/as, and focusing around the ethnic identity allows members to commiserate more effectively.

Stan also discussed how atheist groups can serve as support groups. Raised moderately Lutheran, his organization represented a venue where he can speak without worrying about angering or offending theists.

I kind of liked the camaraderie of having a group of like-minded people, even if they're not completely like-minded. The idea of a safe space, whereas, you could say in the general population at least there's a large bias towards religion. In general, most people are religious and it's nice to have a 'safe space.' [...] And then this like camaraderie in being able to talk with people and feel comfortable.

For both Vanessa and Stan, one of the key draws of atheist organizations and message boards can be to serve as a support group of sorts. As prolonged doubting periods tend to involve greater existential questioning and internal questioning, I predict that

**Hypothesis 4d:** A longer doubting period will lead to greater likelihood of belonging to an atheist organization or message board.

Doubting period is one of the proposed mechanisms mediating the impact of childhood religious intensity on odds of affiliation. Childhood religious intensity's impact on length of doubting period (Fitzgerald 2003) means that the unique impact of each will shrink upon controlling for the other. Specifically, childhood religious particularism is positively related to length of one's doubting period<sup>25</sup>.

### **Expectations: Political Ideology**

Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014) postulate that the growth of religious 'nones' (including but not limited to atheists) stems partly from a reaction to the burgeoning influence of the Religious Right. Liberals and moderates symbolically disaffiliate as a statement against the politicization of some religious organizations.

Even if this disavowal of the Religious Right does not actively facilitate one's exit, the choice of some atheists to affiliate may still be a response to this intersection of religion and politics. There is evidence of this correlation between affiliated atheists and liberalism. Ritchey (2009) interviewed members and analyzed the rhetoric of a rural atheist club, finding their membership to be politically active, typically on the liberal side of the spectrum. However, studies of organizational culture cannot empirically demonstrate alone whether affiliated atheists are more liberal than unaffiliated ones.

I predict that liberal atheists are more likely to join atheist and secular organizations or boards, as a response to the creeping influence of religion into conservative politics. Given that the current focus of the Religious Right is chiefly on abortion and LGBT issues, social issues

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<sup>25</sup>With a Pearson's correlation coefficient of .21.

will have a bigger impact, though being liberal on economic issues may also influence membership. Admittedly, cause and effect may prove difficult to disentangle, as joining a secular organization with a liberal slant may, in turn, impact one's political views. Regardless, this has potential to highlight another area in which the affiliated diverge from the overall atheist population.

As a caveat, among interviewees, political aims were not the most commonly cited reason for joining organizations or message boards. Only two mentioned political appeal. More commonly cited was the desire for community or healthy debate of ideas, mentioned eleven and six times, respectively. Political aims often took a backseat to more social or intellectual pursuits.

This does not preclude the possibility of politics being a more minor, yet still relevant draw. Mark was one of the rare interviewees who affiliated “to kind of fight the religious or political agendas that exclude us or leave us out.” He elaborated, explaining that he does not care so much about symbolic issues, such as Christmas trees or Christmas pageants in public schools. Instead, “it’s more the stem cell stuff, the politicizing of Roe v. Wade, the idea that every life is sacred but, you know, science funding getting cut because [of] belief in 6000-year-old earth. It’s that kind of things that bother me.” The issues Mark specifically cited puts him on the liberal side of the spectrum on political issues, serving as an illustration for the fifth hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 4e:** Liberal respondents will be more likely to belong to an atheist organization.

As a small corollary to this hypothesis, much of the contemporary issues for the Religious Right focus on abortion or reproductive health. It is conceivable that females will be more likely to affiliate. However, the noted marginalization and harassment of women in atheist groups (Schutz and Roth 2014) may repel some.

## **Expectations: Social Circle**

There are two competing explanations for the role of one's social circle in facilitating membership in organizations or message boards. The contrasting arguments stem from differing assumptions about means for learning about organizations and motivations for joining them.

The first centers on the social capital perspective, which states that those with more social connections are more cognizant of potential organizations to join (Wilson and Musick 1997). General explanations which center on recruitment into organizations (e.g. Snow et al 1980) can be adapted to atheism to highlight that having more non-theists in one's social circle increases the number of individuals to potentially facilitate membership. In short, one's social network can heighten organizational involvement. This can be particularly salient for older individuals (Tang 2006).

Information from the survey provides modest support for this explanation. Of the twenty-eight respondents who were members of atheist or secularist organizations, nine were introduced to at least one of the organizations through someone they knew. Similarly, of the twenty-one respondents who regularly participate on atheist or secularist message boards, six were introduced to at least one through someone they knew.

As recruitment is an avenue into organizations or message boards, those with more non-theists in their social networks may have more opportunity to learn about potential options. The hypothesis in this particular direction can be succinctly summarized as

**Hypothesis 4f1:** Those who have more religiously heterogeneous networks at their first misgivings and more of the non-religious in their present-day networks will be more likely to be recruited and, thus, have higher likelihood of organizational membership.

However, recruitment alone does not entirely explain affiliation. As affiliated atheists mentioned in the interviews, organizations can offer the potential for healthy debate, further

education into disbelief and secular systems, action towards political ends, and the reaffirmation of beliefs. Other explanations spoke to organizations as a form of social mingling, the reaffirmation of being around like-minded others, and – the top cited explanation of all – a source of community. This second set of motivations centers around the human aspect that organizations and message boards offer: connection with fellow non-believers and collective effervescence from feeling oneself part of a broader community. Particularly for a stigmatized and marginalized identity like atheism, a group of peers can be important. Those who lack this in their social networks, because they are fairly homogeneously religious, will be more motivated to seek out and join organizations and message boards for this. In contrast, those who know a variety of non-theists will not have this strong pull towards organizations; instead, debate and politics will be the sole prong piquing their interest. Expressed formally:

**Hypothesis 4f2:** Those who have more religiously heterogeneous networks at their first misgivings (and more of the non-religious in their present-day networks) will not have to search out additional sources of belonging with fellow non-theists, reducing their likelihood of organizational membership.

These two facets of organizational membership – recruitment and belonging – pull individuals in differing directions. Recruitment argues that those who know more disbelievers early in their identification as atheist will be more likely to be recruited and affiliate, while belonging argues that those who know few disbelieving peers will affiliate in order to meet people to whom they can relate.

### **Expectations: The Content of One's First Misgivings**

One key finding from examining Society of Separationists/American Atheists literature is that – although atheists may share a common cognitive orientation – it remains difficult for organizations to utilize an identity based on abstinence from a belief as a rallying cry (Schaffner 2012). Roughly half of each Society of Separationist/American Atheist newsletter was devoted



to ‘religion in the news,’ a laundry list of how religion still impacts one’s life, even after exiting. Church infringement into politics and hypocrisy by church leaders was constantly mentioned in order to motivate members to action.

In addition to highlighting organizational strategies to attract and retain members, this may assist explanations of who joins organizations. Moral misgivings prime one to consider organized religion and the religious as more of a political threat to oneself. In contrast, those initially spurred by doctrinal, cosmological misgivings about the existence of God – or other issues of correctness – will lack the sense of threat that provides the impetus to coalesce around atheism as a central pillar of one’s identity and join an organization or message board.

**Hypothesis 4g:** First misgivings stemming from moral issues will make one more likely to join an atheist organization.

I collected information about misgivings during the interviews. Thus, there were only fifty total responses. Their inclusion in the larger binary logistic regression models would discount three quarters of the survey sample. To bypass this, hypotheses dealing with misgivings will be investigated on their own.

Only seventeen percent of respondents whose first misgivings included a component questioning the morality of religion wound up participating in organizations or message boards. This is lower than the twenty-nine percent citing misgivings questioning religion’s correctness and the twenty-five percent citing misgivings about religion’s necessity for themselves. With a sample size of only fifty respondents, none of these differences are statistically significant.

Similarly, there is no significant impact of the content of one’s misgivings on present-day zealotry. Those who mention a moral component to their first misgivings rate 1.1 points higher on the twenty-point zealotry scale than those who do not, but this is not marginally significant.

Contrary to expectations, the content of one's first misgivings exert no influence over their present-day zealotry, nor their decisions to affiliate. Next, I turn to whether the levels of one's misgivings matter.

### **Expectations: The Level of One's First Misgivings**

As religious organizations pose a more centralized and coordinated threat than individuals, those whose first misgivings stemmed from institutional sources will be most politically and organizationally motivated. Isolated instances of misguided religious individuals – such as a zealot on a soapbox on a street corner – elicit more derision than fear; religious organizations are more concerning.

**Hypothesis 4h:** First misgivings arising at the institutional level will make one more likely to join an atheist organization.

Surprisingly, the results are in a direction contrary to the hypothesis. Only six percent of individuals whose first misgivings stem from the institutional level now belong to an organization or message board. In contrast, thirty-one percent of individuals without an institutional basis for their first misgivings choose to affiliate. The Pearson Chi-Square of 4.10 is significant at a .05 alpha level. These results are contrary to the predictions.

Moral and institutional-level misgivings result in the lowest levels of affiliation (although only the latter is statistically significant). Rather than providing a sense of urgency which may lead to mobilization, moral and institutional-level misgivings are associated with apathy towards organizational affiliation, if anything. These surprising findings suggest that the continuing impact of one's first misgivings may be a fruitful avenue for future research, albeit one demanding reconsideration.

## Methods

Aside from the earlier investigations into the impact of one's misgivings, I consider the causes of affiliation with a series of binary logistic regression models predicting whether one belongs to an atheist or secularist organization and/or message board.

There are nine total regressions. The first tests the effects of present-day zealotry by itself, while the second tests present-day dogmatism. The next three consider the two measures of childhood religious intensity – one for each in isolation, then one which considers both in tandem. The sixth will consider overall length of the doubting period, the span between one's first misgivings and declaration of being atheist. The seventh considers the role of one's political ideology – both on social and economic issues. The eighth considers the role of one's social circle, both the level of religious heterogeneity upon having misgivings and the current number of non-religious in their present-day social circle. The final model contains all variables from the subsequent regression equations, as well as controls for demographics (dummy variables for race and gender) and cohort (year born and year becoming atheist). Binary logistic regression equations are presented in succession, due to the sheer number of equations. All variables included in this analysis have already been covered in the methods section.

## Results

**Table 40.** Binary Regression Predicting Affiliation Using Zealotry (from Survey)

<i>Zealotry</i>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Zealotry	.26*** (.06)	(29.5%)
Constant	-4.07***	
N	194	
df	1	
R <sup>2</sup>	.21	
Chi-square	27.52***	

Present-day zealotry is significant at a .001 alpha level, absent other controls. Each additional step up the 20-point zealotry scale makes one 29.5% more likely to affiliate with an organization or message board. In other terms, affiliated atheists have a mean present-day zealotry score of 12.2, compared to a mean score of only 8.5 for the unaffiliated. Prior to controlling for any other factors, there is a large, positive relationship between affiliation and zealotry.

**Table 41.** Binary Regression Predicting Affiliation Using Dogmatism (from Survey)

<i>Dogmatism</i>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Dogmatism	.03 (.03)	(2.9%)
Constant	-1.90***	
N	193	
df	1	
R <sup>2</sup>	.01	
Chi-square	.81	

There is no significant effect from dogmatism on whether one opts to affiliate, when including the measure without any controls.

**Table 42.** Binary Regressions Predicting Affiliation Using Childhood Religious Intensity (from Survey)

	<i>Childhood Religiosity</i>		<i>Childhood Religious Particularism</i>		<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Childhood Religiosity	.04* (.02)	(3.8%)			.02 (.02)	(2.1%)
Childhood Religious Particularism			.07** (.03)	(7.7%)	.04 (.04)	(4.5%)
Constant	-2.40***		-2.32***		-2.51***	
N	196		195		194	
df	1		1		2	
R <sup>2</sup>	.05		.06		.07	
Chi-square	6.60*		7.42**		8.25*	

Considering each measure of childhood religious intensity apart from the other (and any other controls), both forms have a statistically significant, positive relationship with one's chances of choosing to affiliate with an organization or message board. Each point higher on the 48-point childhood religiosity scale makes one 3.8% more likely to belong to a group or message board. Each point higher on the 24-point religious particularism scale makes one 7.7% more likely to choose to affiliate with an organization or message board.

However, the regression equation which considers both measures simultaneously reveals the substantial overlap between the two prongs of childhood religious intensity. Although the Chi-Square is still significant at a .05 level, neither childhood religiosity or childhood religious particularism has a significant impact. Neither prong has a large enough unique effect to register significance.

**Table 43.** Binary Regression Predicting Affiliation Using Length of Doubting Period (from Survey)

	<i>Length of Doubting Period</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Length from Misgivings to Atheism	.08* (.03)	(7.7%)
Constant	-1.79***	
N	191	
df	1	
R <sup>2</sup>	.04	
Chi-square	5.07*	

The length of one's doubting period, when considered in isolation, has a significant impact on whether or not one affiliates. Each year longer one takes while questioning and debating the merits of theism cause them to have 7.7% higher odds of affiliating once they reach the conclusion to exit theism. As length of doubting period tends to correspond with more difficulty and existential questioning associated with an exit, this provides initial evidence that greater tribulations in questioning make one more likely to search out an organization or message board as a reinforcing and supportive community.

**Table 44.** Binary Regression Predicting Affiliation Using Political Ideology (from Survey)

<i>Political Ideology</i>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Social Liberalism	.24 (.33)	(26.9%)
Economic Liberalism	.15 (.23)	(16.6%)
Constant	-2.71*	
N	180	
df	2	
R <sup>2</sup>	.02	
Chi-square	1.85	

Neither of the measures of political ideology have any significant impact on deciding whether or not to affiliate. Given the correlation between opinions on economic and social issues, I ran two other binary logistic regression equations, each including only one of the two political measures. Even when considered apart from the other prong of political ideology, neither of the two measures had any impact.

**Table 45.** Binary Regression Predicting Affiliation Using Social Circle (from Survey)

<i>Social Circle</i>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Heterogeneity of Social Circle at First Misgivings	-.37* (.15)	(-31.0%)
Amount of Non-Religious in Present-Day Social Circle	.14 (.15)	(15.5%)
Constant	-1.42*	
N	197	
df	2	
R <sup>2</sup>	.06	
Chi-square	7.51*	

The binary logistic regression equations testing the impact of social circle contain variables from two distinct time periods: the heterogeneity of one's network upon having first misgivings and the present-day proportion of their social network who are non-religious. However, only the heterogeneity of one's social circle when they first began having misgivings is statistically significant. For each additional step towards heterogeneity on the six-category ordinal scale, one is 31% less likely to affiliate with an organization or message board.



**Table 46.** Full Binary Regression Predicting Affiliation, Including Controls (from Survey)

<i>Full with Controls</i>		
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Zealotry	.32*** (.08)	(37.1%)
Dogmatism	-.03 (.04)	(-3.3%)
Childhood Religiosity	.04 (.03)	(3.9%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	-.04 (.05)	(-3.6%)
Length from Misgivings to Atheism	.03 (.06)	(2.5%)
Social Liberalism	.11 (.40)	(11.7%)
Economic Liberalism	-.02 (.29)	(-2.3%)
Heterogeneity of Social Circle at First Misgivings	-.34+ (.20)	(-28.4%)
Amount of Non-Religious in Present-Day Social Circle	.08 (.21)	(8.4%)
White	-.52 (.55)	(-40.6%)
Male	.24 (.51)	(27.3%)
Birth Year	-.03 (.06)	(-2.5%)
Year Atheist	-.02 (.06)	(-2.3%)
Constant	-2.37	
N	171	
df	13	
R <sup>2</sup>	.34	
Chi-square	39.78***	

Finally, I considered all the independent variables from the previous analyses simultaneously, along with controls for demographics and cohort. Altogether, the thirteen variables have a statistically significant ( $p < .001$ ) impact on decision to affiliate.

None of the controls – race, gender, birth year, or year becoming atheist – has any significant impact of the decision to affiliate. Likewise, the two measures of political ideology still lack a significant impact. With other causes controlled for, length of doubting period slips below marginal significance, demonstrating no unique effects. Similarly, present-day dogmatism still is not significant.

Neither measure of childhood religious intensity has a unique effect here, similar to the equation where they were considered in concert, but without any control variables. However, unlike that earlier, truncated regression, as long as the full set of other variables remain controlled for, neither measure of childhood religious intensity has any impact when the other is omitted. Nor does the omission of both measures hinder the explanatory power of the overall equation.<sup>26</sup> The umbrella impact of childhood religious intensity is due to the correlation it shares with other independent variables, rather than anything unique to one's religious upbringing. Due to the overlap with zealotry, I included Appendix E, which explores which factors influence zealotry. Combined, two measures of childhood religious intensity explain a tenth of the variation on the zealotry scale. However, the effect they appear to have on decision to affiliate is indirect, operating through their association with zealotry. This is especially true for childhood religious particularism, which shows a substantial, positive impact on zealotry.

The impact of the heterogeneity of one's social circle at their first misgivings is marginally significant. Similar to the simpler model, each step towards heterogeneity along the six-category ordinal scale makes one 28.4% less likely to affiliate. The impact of one's present-day network remains insignificant. Finally, one's current social network still has no impact on

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<sup>26</sup> Outputs available upon request.

affiliation.

Present-day zealotry retains its large effect on one's decision whether or not to affiliate; its impact is significant at a .001 alpha-level. Controlling for other factors actually causes its coefficient to rise, suggesting a minor suppression effect from the other considered variables. Now, for each one-unit rise on the 20-point zealotry scale, one's odds of belonging to an organization or message board go up 37.1%.

## **Discussion**

The regression results underscore the justifications for joining (or abstaining from joining) groups seen in the interviews.

The motivations of affiliated respondents were rarely to further liberal policies. During the interviews, politics and policy were relatively rare explanations for respondents' decisions to affiliate. In those few mentions, it was mainly a means to stay abreast and informed on national and local level issues involving religion, rather than being an instrument for direct action. The binary logistic regression provides more confirmation that those atheists who choose to affiliate were not motivated primarily by politics. Despite the rise of the Religious Right, liberal atheists are no more likely to affiliate than their more conservative counterparts. This proves true even on social issues, despite recent religiously-tinged political controversies centering on issues of contraception, abortion, and same-sex marriage.

A quantitative analysis of the interviews provides further evidence against chiefly political mobilizations. Those with moral first misgivings are no more likely to affiliate and those with institutional-level first misgivings are actually less likely to join organizations or message board. If policy issues and a backlash to the Religious Right were the salient force behind

affiliation, misgivings from moral concerns and at the institutional-level would serve to prime one for later organizational membership. The results ran contrary to this explanation, however. One potential explanation for these unexpected results stems from respondents' reasons for joining their organizations or message board. It was rarely an issue of politics. Instead, more popular motivations included furthering education about what it means to be atheist and learning about the debate with theists. Six interviewees cited their desire to further their education. Stan was one. His mention of organizations serving as a support group was provided earlier. He also explained his group membership and activity on message boards as

It's cool to be out as an atheist here and talking about that and on the like discussion board side I definitely like hearing multiple sides to an argument and I like keeping up with what people are actual saying and I feel like that strengthens my view in that I know what the current views of Christians are. So I know that I still don't agree with them or I think they're unfounded.

Rather than fighting religious organizations and engaging religious individuals, learning more about the atheist-theist debate was a key motivator. It is not surprising, then, that those whose first misgivings oriented them towards abstract, doctrinal issues found more interest in affiliating than those with institutional misgivings.<sup>27</sup>

A longer doubting period increases likelihood of joining organizations when considered by itself, but its effects evaporate upon controlling for other potential causes, indicating no direct impact. As length of doubting period is an indicator of the difficulties and tribulations in considering exit from a role, this provides evidence that those who are more needing of a reinforcing support group are not more likely to affiliate with an organization or message board.

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<sup>27</sup> A competing possibility: institutional-level misgivings lead one to view all communities based around religious (dis)belief skeptically, not just the religious. As a carryover from their doubting period they may be less likely to desire affiliation with groups based around any shared belief.

Although Vanessa and two other affiliated interviewees mentioned their organizations operated as a de facto support group, this does not appear to be one of the principal motivations; those with longer, more difficult exits are no more likely to affiliate. The ‘support group’ rhetoric may be less about one’s own psychic scars from pulling themselves out of religion than it is about how to exist as an active, yet atheist, member of a highly religious family or community. In support, the interviews found the affiliated were no more likely to volunteer internal or interpersonal difficulties during their doubting and exit process than their unaffiliated counterparts.

Although general religious intensity initially increases one’s likelihood of belonging to an organization or message board, the results disappear upon controlling for zealotry. There is a dearth of support for the hypothesis that religious teachings lead some to a community of like-minded peers. Any supposed effect is indirect, working through zealotry.

Dogmatism’s effects, which hinge on its connection to identity salience, are similarly insignificant. There is no evidence that those who are more certain in their particular beliefs are any more likely to affiliate.

However, the effects of one’s social circle persist, even after controlling for other, confounding factors. A more diverse, heterogeneous social circle when one starts to have their first misgivings (typically in their early teens) makes one less likely to opt to affiliate. Those who join organizations or message boards tend to hail from homogeneous, closed social circles while growing up, knowing few people outside their faith. These results remain significant even after controlling for childhood religious particularism, which an ANOVA shows to have a significant

relationships with the level of heterogeneity of one's social circle<sup>28</sup> demonstrating that social circle's effects are not due to being raised with an ideology which elevates one's in-group above others and often leads to a relatively cloistered existence. Rather, the effects of one's social circle are due to actually experiencing a dearth of diversity in one's social network and how that influences one to seek out some form of community. One has to join an organization for social and community-based motivations. Secondly, one's present-day social circle exerts no such impact, demonstrating that (a) any differences wind up being amended by the present-day, through contact with other non-religious individuals one gains through their participation, and (b) a more homogeneously religious social circle at time of first misgivings does not lead one to search out a more homogeneously non-theist social circle, merely to take steps to assuage the imbalance, one option of which is belonging to a group. The popularity of such groups among those coming from religiously homogeneous social circles explains the lack of correlation between social group composition at first misgivings and its present day composition. Affiliation with organizations are one avenue through which atheists who were once socially isolated can amend the composition of their social circle. Future research can go farther towards confirming these assertions, by looking longitudinally at the effects of joining an organization or message board, starting from the time of entry.

By far the largest determinant of affiliation is one's level of zealotry regarding religion. The more zealous are more likely to affiliate, an effect which modestly grows upon controlling for other potential causes. Of all the hypotheses, this was the most expected to yield statistical support. Affiliation with an organization or message board offers an opportunity to push back

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<sup>28</sup>F=2.52 (p<.05).

against religion in both public and private concerns. Again, the causal relationship is impossible to fully disentangle, given the study design that surveys affiliated respondents only after they have attended meetings or participated in message board discussions for a period of time. A longitudinal study will be required in the future to disentangle cause from effect. Almost certainly the highly zealous are more likely to join organizations or message boards *and* organizational (and message board) rhetoric, in turn, further heightens one's levels of zealotry. However, given the large segment of affiliated respondents who participate in wholly apolitical groups, it is likely that the difference is not entirely attributable to the latter explanation of group rhetoric.

These results parallel studies which demonstrate positive correlation between participation in church activities and political participation (e.g. Driskell et al 2008). However, in such cases, religious participation is presumed to be the cause. In contrast to a church, participation in an atheist organization or board is wholly voluntary – no requirements and lower social desirability pressures – making it likely the affiliation is the effect, rather than the cause.

The persistent, sizable difference between affiliated and unaffiliated atheists in zealotry highlights one key way in which studies sampling exclusively through organizations may lack the requisite generalizability. They likely overemphasize the disdain towards religion and mobilization towards collective and individual action in which the average, rank-and-file atheist engages. Many studies may inadvertently exaggerate the combativeness of atheists, furthering the 'angry atheist' stereotype. Subsequent studies should pay special attention to avoiding sampling through organizations, in order to avoid unrepresentative conclusions.

Finally, none of the controls had any significant impact on affiliation. Although White males may dominate visible leadership positions in organizations (Schultz and Roth 2014), there

is no difference in affiliation by race and gender. One avenue for racial minorities who wish to affiliate is to join an atheist or skeptics group centered around racial identity. Black and Latino interviewees found such groups around the Chicagoland area, speaking highly about how the groups provided a forum to address their unique intersection of racial and religious identities. In a large, diverse city such as Chicago, there is a sufficient pool of atheists of color so secular organizations based on race could gain traction and draw members. A follow-up study could determine whether the insignificance of race on affiliation persist in less diverse areas, which might not be able to support atheist organizations specifically based on race and ethnicity.

Neither of the cohort measures had any significant impact either. There was no impact from the time period when one became atheist. Length of time could conceivably have had an impact if more recent atheists were attending in order to further their education about skeptical retorts to religious arguments or for greater socialization into what precisely being an atheist entails. However, there was no evidence supporting this possibility.

Given the preponderance of campus-based atheist and skeptic organizations, it would have been reasonable to expect that younger atheists would be more likely to affiliate. This was not the case. Perhaps the lack of association with birth year is a more recent development, as the popularity of the internet makes information about groups and access to them less of a barrier. For example, one can participate wholly in online communities or learn about gatherings through Meetup.com or similar online social forums. However, the aims of affiliation change with age. Older respondents – past their undergraduate years – often emphasized the social and communal aspects. For instance, Denise, in her thirties, had just moved for work:

But also I just moved to Chicago so I wanted to meet people and I feel more comfortable – it would just be nice to have friends I know off the bat are atheists. So I don't have to worry about saying the kind of things where I might offend people who are of faith.



While analyses premised on the social capital perspective have found social network to be particularly salient for recruiting older respondents into organizations (Tang 2006), interviewees' explanations dispute this: desire to bolster one's social network motivates older affiliates.

In contrast, college-aged atheists – in their late teens and early twenties – often characterized their attendance of meetings or perusal of message boards as further education: learning about new arguments against religion and becoming acquainted with the stances of their fellow atheists. For some, this even entails learning about and delineating stances with which one does not agree. As Rosa described it:

It helps me keep me grounded, in a sense. Because by following the people in [her online board], it's interesting to see how they can be just as full as shit as the people on the religious side. [...] I don't want to be that kind of a fundamentalist atheist. I want to be more understanding than that.

Throughout the interviews, there was a clear divide in how respondents characterized their motivations for affiliating. For older individuals, the draw was chiefly community. The mean birth year of those who justified their attendance by mentioning community was 1981. For younger interviewees, further education about what atheism entails and its refutations of theistic arguments were paramount. Those that mentioned further education as a goal of affiliation had a mean birth year of 1990, an almost decade-long difference between these two motivations.<sup>29</sup> Those earlier in the lifecycle put more emphasis on learning exactly what atheism does and does not entail, while older individuals focused more on belonging to a larger whole. Explicitly political motivations were comparably scarce. Very few interviewees belonged to any organizations chiefly for political reasons and, if they did, organizations' political aims were

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<sup>29</sup>The motivations were not mutually exclusive: three interviewees mentioned both community and further education in explaining their decision to affiliate.

generally narrow in scope: campus-level events or policies.

Finally, much zealotry and public action occurred outside of organizations or message boards. Without any formal affiliation, social media provides another venue for atheists to be politically secular, interjecting their beliefs into discussions. Facebook and other venues provide the opportunity to freelance, outside of any organization structure. Some do so as a supplement to participating in organizations, while others avoid organizations altogether. Matilda described her (unaffiliated) activism on social media platforms:

More recently it came up with my cousin who just started college. He commented on something on one of my Facebook posts... or I commented... I don't know, I think it was on his page, I think we were going back and forth. So I explained it to him over Facebook. [...] The reason I'm so public and outspoken on Facebook and Twitter, or whatever, is because I want to enact change.

### **From Groups to Aims**

The first half of this chapter dealt with atheists as an in-group: whether or not respondents opted to belong to a collective based primarily around the identity, either face-to-face or virtually. Now I turn to the issue of the out-group: how respondents want to engage religion in the public sphere.

As with other identities centered upon rejection, atheism is not constructed in a vacuum. It is largely defined through how prominent and rank-and-file atheists engage religion and contrast their beliefs and aims with those of the religious. One central facet is how atheists differ from the religious on issues in the public sphere.

In the sparse attempts to study atheists, they are too frequently taken as a “phenomenon that is both rare and unorganized” (Bainbridge 2007: 258). Although there are examples considering atheist organizations at either the local level (e.g. Ritchey 2009) or the national level (Cimino and Smith 2011), more attention must be paid to the stances of individual atheists, in

how they define the political goals and struggles of atheism and secularism, vis-à-vis organized religion. Doing so can also ascertain which frames and arguments used by highly visible figures and organizations resonate into the general population of this supposedly ‘unorganized’ phenomenon.

Beyond the heretofore unexamined work of merely cataloguing atheists’ various political and social aims, this analysis investigates two potential sources of variation that highlight differences between groups and atheists. First, while several studies have considered the rhetorical devices employed and aims of atheist organizations or message boards (e.g. Ritchey 2009, Chalfant 2011), there is a lack of focus concerning to what extent the frames and aims employed by atheist and secularist organizations has diffused into the general, unaffiliated population of atheists. Secondly, more work is needed to determine trends in the focus of atheism and secularism in the public sphere. These can address the impacts of the ‘New Atheist’ authors a decade ago and the internet’s popularity as a source of communication and socialization into a new identity. Addressing the potential for variations in how atheists construct and define the public good can point to future developments, as the authority and availability of New Atheist authors grows.

### **Conceptualizing the Public Good**

Rhys Williams’s (1995) typology is a useful starting point with which to classify the resources atheists draw upon in delineating the public good, vis-à-vis religion. As he notes, religion and morality have traditionally informed one another, leading to three distinct strands of rhetoric for conceptualizing the public good. Despite minor issues in adapting a typology developed from religion to the non-religious, it is nevertheless useful in considering the broad options available to atheists in delineating their aims.

### *Covenantal Aims*

The first of Williams's (1995) three models is the covenantal model, which portrays humanity as a moral community that must ensure its social relations are in accordance with some transcendental authority. Typically, this authority is God or some gods. Here, human nature is portrayed as fundamentally flawed, salvageable only through appealing to some divine, external authority. Obviously, the Covenantal Model's focus on a supernatural, transcendent authority makes it ill-suited to apply to those employed by atheists. It is far more the realm of deeply religious groups, such as evangelicals. However, it deserves mention, if only as contrast with Williams's other two models.

### *Contractual Aims*

While Williams's (1995) covenantal model focuses on duty to a transcendent authority, the contractual model focuses on rights owed to fellow people. It portrays humans as essentially blank slates, who enter into a social contract with one another. This societal agreement is the source of social order. The contract must be upheld and individuals ought to ensure that they and the government guarantee these liberties fairly and equitably. The contractual model stems from a secular, worldly source, allowing for its deployment by atheist organizations and individuals. The debates over gay marriage is one contemporary example of a religiously-tinged controversy where the contractual model is utilized.

### *Stewardship Aims*

Williams's (1995) third conception of the public good is the stewardship model. Like the Covenantal Model, it is also based on duty. However, in a departure from duty to a transcendent, divine authority, it instead stresses communal duty to some natural, future accord. Its focus is

upon maintenance and upkeep, to ensure future goods. This model is frequently employed in topics such as wildlife conservation and government solvency. In succinctly summarizing his three models of the public good, Williams (1999:7) states “the covenant emphasizes the individual’s duties to the collective, while contractual thinking focuses on the individual’s rights that are protected from communal infringement; in contrast, stewardship rhetoric is a language of collective duties.”

### *Symbolic Aims*

Of Williams’s three concepts of the public good, two are applicable to those utilized by atheists: contractual and stewardship. To these two, I add a third potential option for atheists: symbolic aims. The option specifically focused on dispelling the notion that belief in god was universal, but had no evident political implication. Symbolic aims entail those which do not directly address religion in public policy or legal realms. Rather than yielding tangible policy changes, these are purely abstract goals. While the symbolic aims do not directly engage religion in the political sphere, they are not necessarily empty rhetoric nor a watered-down stance towards religion. They may represent an attempt to lay the foundation for future gains in a way that makes it more palatable to theists. Or they may smooth social interactions, carrying the potential to fight stigmatization in the long-term.

Rosa’s New Year’s resolution illustrates the utility of symbolically contesting religion’s ubiquity. She decided – from that point forward – to be open about her lack of belief. When pressed about the impetus behind this resolution, Rosa explained

I figured out there’s really nothing to be ashamed of. I figured out there’s this social stigma about people that are atheist and I said “You know what? The best way to change this and to kind of change people’s misconceptions about atheists and atheism is to identify myself as an atheist, so they can see that I’m not a bad person and I’m not going to rape you, murder you, and all of those bad things.” So I came out as an atheist.

While not engaging religion in policy matters, Rosa's newfound openness nevertheless represents the opportunity to chip away at stereotypes and misconceptions about non-believers.

As identity research continues to examine the interplay between collective action and individual identity (Cerulo 1997), starting with key atheists and secularist groups offers a starting point to thinking about differences among individual, rank-and-file atheists.

### **Developments over Time**

Change over time represents one key area to investigate in considering constructions of the public good. These may occur both during the time period in which one was raised and the time period in which one formally disavowed theism, undertaking some degree of socialization into what it entails to be atheist. For both, it is fruitful to consider the tenor and aims of highly visible atheists, both in the fledgling days of the atheist movement and in present times. This is particularly critical due to the dearth of literature on individual, rank-and-file atheists, particularly those who are not affiliated with any organization or message board.

#### *Early Public Atheists*

The first atheist to gain considerable prominence in modern American public discourse was Madalyn Murray O'Hair, "who stood almost alone in her willingness to call herself atheist" (Jacoby 2004: 313-4). Thrust into the national spotlight for her role in the pivotal Supreme Court case of *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963) – which pronounced state-sponsored reading of the Bible in public schools as unconstitutional – she was able to parlay her celebrity into many public appearances, becoming the de facto voice of the Atheist/secularist movement in 1960s and 1970s America (Seaman 2005).

As a charismatic spokeswoman, media outlets used O’Hair almost exclusively when looking to present an atheist viewpoint on a program (Morris and Staggenborg 2004). She was able to use this as a stepping stone for founding the Society of Separationists in 1963, which premised itself exclusively on fighting for a strict separation of church and state. Its primary focal point was on tax exemption and state aid for churches. O’Hair’s sustained prominence serves as a case study for trends in the aims of atheists.

My own previous archival research (Schaffner 2012) documented how the Society of Separationists incrementally expanded its scope beyond merely fixating on issues of church taxation. The culmination of this decade-long transition occurred on January 1, 1977, when the Society of Separationists was formally subsumed by the American Atheists, O’Hair’s other organization.

Over the decade that the Society of Separationists/American Atheists existed, there was a sharp pivot in the aims of the articles of their publications (Schaffner 2012). Originally, O’Hair continued her focus from *Abington Township School District v. Schempp* (1963), fixating narrowly on issues of taxation and other topics focused on a contractual conception of the public good. As O’Hair defined it, separation of church and state did not merely guarantee the right to belief and freedom of religion, but also “the right to *dis*belief” and “freedom *from* religion.” To underscore these claims, she expended considerable effort highlighting the Deism of various founding fathers; Thomas Jefferson in particular was stressed, as O’Hair timed the annual convention to fall on his birthday. This in particular demonstrates O’Hair’s attention to laying claim to the founding fathers in order to justify a comprehensive conception of Constitutional rights.

These abstract attempts to tie the Founding Fathers to Deism and non-Theism translated to tangible contract-focused policy goals. Almost all of O’Hair’s and the organizations’ political rhetoric during the 1960s focused on issues of rights. There are myriad examples, some of which include removing “under god” from the pledge of allegiance; removing oaths to god from public offices and trials; removing prayer from public schools; prohibiting creationism from being taught in public schools; and removing religious symbols from public lands. The *Society of Separationists* and the *American Atheists* portrayed the Constitution as guaranteeing citizens the right to be free from any government support of religion which could be construed as tacit endorsement of theism. The publications presented any religious efforts that they felt infringed upon these agreements. This contractual model of the public good extended to a plethora of topics. In response to Catholic efforts to ban contraceptives and abortion, the publications stressed citizen’s rights to privacy and bodily autonomy.

The first several years of her movement exclusively employed a contractual conception of the public good, but in later years, O’Hair and the organizations began to expand their scope beyond solely fixating on rights and a contractual model of the public good. A July 1970 issue served as a watershed, introducing a general stewardship script into the atheist repertoire. It stated that atheism is premised on the belief that all life is sacred and the planet must be *preserved* (emphasis added). This article added preservation to atheist’s goals, expanding the scope of public issues in which O’Hair and the publications would inject themselves. In seeking contrast from what it portrayed as religion’s focus on the afterlife diminishing the value of this life, the July 1970 article details Catholic interests escalated the Vietnam War and how religious other-worldliness leads to disregard for environmental concerns. Atheist involvement in both the anti-war and environmental movements were touted as protecting the world for future



generations from both the ills of full-scale war and pollution. The connection between religion and war became a reoccurring theme, as evidenced by a November 1975 article imagining a faithful president's belief in an afterlife making Mutually Assured Destruction an ineffective deterrent.

Similarly, the support for contraceptives and abortion was extended beyond a rights-based argument. The publication increasingly framed birth control as necessary to combat overpopulation resulting from many religions' myopic emphasis on fertility. Other efforts were made to clean up communities, under the justification that the religious treat this world as temporary and fleeting. Goals associated with stasis increasingly became portrayed as an aim of atheism.

These observations may constitute a single, idiosyncratic instance. However, the case of the American Atheists organization may instead represent a broader – and continuing – historical shift: away from contractual aims, towards stewardship aims. If the latter, it is necessary to evaluate whether these shifts resonate beyond organizations, becoming adopted by the general population of atheists.

### *Contemporary Public Atheists*

There is little research specifically looking at frames utilized by contemporary atheist figures, but tangential evidence suggests that the shift away from a strict contractual conception of the public good continues unabated. While the first highly visible atheists like O'Hair initially focused their efforts on the separation of church and state and defending against what they perceived as infringements on the rights of non-theists, atheists in recent decades further the shift seen in the case study of O'Hair.

In contrast to O'Hair, the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most visible atheists come from scientific backgrounds. Of the "Four Horsemen of New Atheism" – Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens – two come from scientific backgrounds: Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist and Harris is a neuroscientist. Their texts often put strong emphasis on the scientific justification for atheism, contrasting atheism with the short-sighted, supernatural emphasis of religion. Emphasis on scientific progress makes stewardship an increasingly utilized frame in arguing against religion.

Contemporary atheists increasingly stress achieving legitimacy through tying atheism to scientific progress (Nabors 2009). The emerging 'New Atheists' tout close ties between disbelief and science (Stenger 2009). Cragun (2015) distills three principle criteria from the New Atheist movement: a rejection of the supernatural, reliance on science, and criticism of religion. These first two criteria highlight an increased emphasis on science among 'New Atheists,' where atheism becomes increasingly contrasted with organized religion's lack of rational empiricism.

Generally, this represents a shift away from issues of oppression and defense of rights, towards a broader interest in issues which overlap with scientific concerns. The move away from purely focusing on issues of oppression suggests that contractual issues increasingly take a backseat to concerns stemming from science, focusing on progress and upkeep for future generations. These concerns and definitions presented in this discourse have the potential to extend to and influence even those who are not active in an atheist or secularist community (Smith 2013b). However, their effects might not be as comprehensive as for affiliated atheists: secular non-affiliates are less likely than group members to describe science and religion as wholly incompatible (Langston et al 2015).

## Hypotheses

While most of the scant focus has been devoted to either authors or organizations, I expect that these findings have diffused into the general population of rank-and-file atheists.

Therefore, I predict that

**Hypothesis 4i:** Those born later will be more likely to stress stewardship aims, over contractual and symbolic aims.

**Hypothesis 4j:** Those who became atheists later will be more likely to stress stewardship aims, over contractual and symbolic aims.

There is a substantial correlation between one's birth year and the year they first considered themselves to be atheist. When both independent variables are simultaneously considered, it is likely that the year one became atheist will be the more consequential factor, as one's conception of the public good is learned through this subsequent socialization into atheism, drawing on New Atheist authors and other resources and discussions.

As organizations are consistently shown to play a key role in promulgating exactly what it means to be atheist for their members, atheists that opt to affiliate with an organization or message board may more closely follow the strategies and definitions employed in organizations. In contrast, the unaffiliated only encounter these definitions when they matriculate into the general population of atheists.

As the above examples demonstrate, the political aims of organizations (as well as high-profile atheists) tend to be contractual and/or stewardship. Following from this, those who are active in organizations or message boards should more frequently stress the contractual or stewardship aims, rather than the purely symbolic.

However, interview findings stress that expectations should be tempered. Rather than joining for political aims, most affiliated respondents described their motivations for joining as

being either social or for further education and healthy debate. While politics are not the primary motivation, I nevertheless expect that

**Hypothesis 4k:** Affiliated atheists will be less likely to cite symbolic aims, compared to stewardship or contractual aims.

The earlier portion of this chapter highlighted how those who seek out and join atheist or secularist organizations or message boards tend to be far more zealous than the unaffiliated. On the 20-point present-day zealotry scale, the affiliated rank 3.7 points higher. Given that high zealotry around atheism leads many to seek out organizations and message board – as well as zealous individuals’ desire to translate their disbelief into the public sphere – I expect that

**Hypothesis 4l:** Highly zealous atheists will be less likely to cite symbolic aims, compared to stewardship or contractual aims.

These last two hypotheses deal with zealotry and affiliation, two characteristics which correlate in the atheist population. When both are considered in tandem, the overlap with each other will mute the isolated impact of each. However, given that organizations (as well as high-profile atheists) serve as a key source of potential socialization when considering leaving theism, I predict that the effects of affiliation rate higher than those of zealotry, in a full model.

## **Methods**

I asked respondents “There is some disagreement about what are the most important projects facing atheists in America today. Rank the following from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).” The five potential responses were “countering religion’s short-sighted disregard of the future,” “dispelling the assumption that everyone believes in God,” “protecting civil liberties from religious encroachment,” “stopping religious groups and individuals from standing in the way of human progress,” and “ending tax-exempt status for churches.” The purpose of this question was to ascertain which issue respondents rated as their top concern (and which

conception of the public good was considered the most critical). Thus, their top response is used for all subsequent analyses. For the purposes of the binary logistic regression equation, the dependent variable was made into three dummy variables, each of which is coded as one when a respondent endorsed that particular conception of the public good and zero when he or she did not. As the question was posed to respondents, the dependent variable is a zero-sum game: support for one of the three options necessarily means a lack of support for the other two.

Table 47 shows the responses to the five options respondents were able to list as their top issue concerning religion. The most common response was “Protecting civil liberties from religion”, which was cited by 39.5% of respondents. A close second was “Stopping religious groups and people from standing in the way of human progress”, which was the top rated of 37.9% of respondents. “Dispelling the assumptions that everyone believes in god” received 13.8% support.

**Table 47:** Percentage of Incidence for Each Top Project Concerning Religion (from Survey)

<i>Top Project</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Countering Religion’s Short-Sighted Disregard for the Future	3.6%
Dispelling Assumptions That Everyone Believes in God	13.8%
Protecting Civil Liberties From Religion	39.5%
Stopping Religious Groups & People From Standing in the Way of Human Progress	37.9%
Ending Tax-Exempt Status for Churches	5.1%

The second contractual option of “Ending tax exempt status for churches” and the second stewardship option of “Countering religion’s shortsighted disregard of the future” were by far the least chosen responses, yielding only 5.1% and 3.6% of the total responses, respectively. It is not surprising that each received far less support than the respective counterpart for its particular strand of the public good. Issues of church taxation have taken a backseat to issues of

contraceptive and abortion access, in recent federal policy debates (e.g. the Hobby Lobby contraception debate). And “countering religion’s shortsighted disregard of the future,” in hindsight, is a weaker and less comprehensive way of stating the general stewardship sentiment that was more strongly embodied with “stopping religious groups and people from standing in the way of human progress.”

**Table 48:** Percentage of Incidence for Each Top Project Concerning Religion (from Survey)

<i>Top Project</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Contractual	44.6%
Stewardship	41.5%
Symbolic	13.8%

Table 48 shows the respondents’ top issue concerning religion when the responses are collapsed into three categories, based on which conception of the public good they entail. The contractual category includes the options of “protecting civil liberties from religion” and “ending tax-exempt status for churches.” The stewardship category includes the options of “countering religion’s short-sighted disregard for the future” and “stopping religious groups and people from standing in the way of human progress.” Finally, “dispelling assumptions that everyone believes in god” is by itself in the symbolic category.

Contractual- and stewardship-based conceptions show comparable support, with 44.6% and 41.5% of the top ratings, respectively. Symbolic issues lag behind with only 13.8% of the mentions. However, this might not represent as large of a deficit as it might originally appear. Recall that the symbolic conception only had one possible response, whereas the contractual- and stewardship-based conceptions each had two options apiece.

### *Other Variables*

Prior to the full analysis, I ran an ANOVA for both birth year and year becoming atheist, to appraise differences across either of the three conceptions of the public good.

Next I ran three binary logistic regression models, one for each of the three dummy variables for the conceptions of the public good. Each model included the four main independent variables of interest: birth year, year becoming atheist, affiliation, and zealotry. Also included as independent variables in the binary logistic regression were dummy variables for gender and race; the childhood religiosity and religious particularism scales; the present-day dogmatism scale; and scales measuring economic and social liberalism. To ensure no potential difference was overlooked, I estimated multinomial logistic regressions – with each of the three dependent variable categories serving as the reference group. These findings are used as supplements and are available upon request.

### **Results**

The table below shows the differences in mean values of birth year and year becoming atheist, across the three conceptions of the public good.

**Table 49:** Mean Values of Birth Year and Year Turning Atheist by Support for Each Conception of the Public Good (from Survey)

<i>Top Project</i>	<i>Mean Birth Year**</i>	<i>Mean Year Atheist</i>
Contractual	1984.0	2004.8
Stewardship	1988.4	2007.0
Symbolic	1985.2	2005.1

As seen in Table 49, those who support the contractual conception of the public good vis-à-vis religion were born earlier, while those stressing stewardship aims were born most recently. There is roughly a four-and-a-half-year difference between these two extremes. An analysis of

variance for the differences in between the three groups in terms of birth year yields an F-ratio of 4.84; the differences are significant at a .01 level.

At first glance, the differences between means in the year becoming atheist echo those seen for birth year: it is earliest for those stressing contractual aims and latest those with stewardship aims. However, the differences between the two extremes is not statistically significant. An analysis of variance for this example yields an F-ratio of 1.81, signifying no significant differences across the three conceptions of the public good.

The ANOVAs demonstrate that – absent other considerations – the birth years of respondents differ across what they rate as the biggest project facing atheists. However, the year which one became atheist does not. Given that one's birth year and year becoming atheist are correlated, a full binary logistic regression equation investigates whether these findings persist, upon controlling for other variables.



**Table 50.** Binary Regressions Predicting Support for Each Conception of the Public Good (from Survey)

	<i>Contractual</i>		<i>Stewardship</i>		<i>Symbolic</i>	
	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Mult. Odds</u>
Birth Year	-.07* (.03)	(-6.3%)	.09** (.03)	(9.7%)	-.03 (.04)	(-3.1%)
Year Atheist	.04 (.03)	(4.2%)	-.04 (.04)	(-4.3%)	-.00 (.05)	(-.1%)
White	.68+ (.41)	(98.2%)	-.45 (.40)	(-36.2%)	-.41 (.60)	(-33.6%)
Male	-.80* (.37)	(-55.1%)	1.42*** (.40)	(315.4%)	-1.47* (.63)	(-76.9%)
Childhood Religiosity	-.01 (.02)	(-.7%)	.03 (.02)	(3.0%)	-.04 (.03)	(-4.2%)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.01 (.04)	(1.2%)	-.03 (.04)	(-3.1%)	.03 (.07)	(2.6%)
Affiliation	-.37 (.47)	(-31.1%)	.48 (.48)	(61.3%)	-.32 (.93)	(-27.0%)
Dogmatism	-.08* (.03)	(-7.4%)	.04 (.04)	(4.2%)	.09 (.05)	(9.0%)
Zealotry	.04 (.05)	(4.4%)	.04 (.05)	(3.6%)	-.17* (.08)	(-15.7%)
Social Liberalism	.33 (.30)	(39.7%)	.35 (.30)	(42.3%)	-1.26** (.44)	(-71.7%)
Economic Liberalism	-.20 (.20)	(-18.0%)	.11 (.21)	(11.5%)	.20 (.33)	(21.5%)
Constant	1.15		-6.10**		4.81+	
N	169		169		169	
df	11		11		11	
R <sup>2</sup>	.16		.23		.35	
Chi-square	21.25*		30.96***		36.31***	

The Chi-Square for each of the three models are significant. The model predicting the symbolic aims has the largest Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup> and chi-square – .346 and 36.31, respectively – indicating the greatest amount of predictive power of the three. Although it is the only variable

where time-period has no impact, the large effects of one's zealotry and political views on social issues (the only one of the three where politics matters) makes it the easiest of the three to predict.

### *Contractual Aims*

When both periods are considered in tandem, the year becoming atheist has no significant impact on endorsement of a contractual conception of the public good. However, the effects of one's birth year persevere. For each year later one was born, their odds of endorsing a contractual model of the public good drop by 6.3%; this is significant at the .05 level.

The results suggest White respondents are marginally ( $p < .10$ ) more supportive of the contractual model. However, these findings are hindered by the relatively small sample size of non-Whites, which results in a large coefficient, with only marginal significance. And males are significantly ( $p < .05$ ) less supportive. Males experience a drop of 55.2% in their odds of endorsing contractual aims. Finally, those who are more dogmatic tend to be significantly less supportive of the contractual model. Moving one unit up the forty-point dogmatism scale results in a 7.4% drop in one's odds of supporting a contract-centered policy. Childhood religion, political beliefs, and affiliation never achieve even marginal significance.

### *Stewardship Aims*

Support for the stewardship aims follows the same pattern: one's year becoming atheist does not matter, but his or her birth year does. Controlling for when one disavows theism, each later year for birth leads to an increase of 9.7% in the odds of him or her supporting the stewardship conception; this is significant at the .01 level. While race does not matter, the impact of respondents' gender is significant at a .001 level. Males see a 315.4% increase to their odds of

supporting the stewardship conception, compared to non-males who are otherwise equal. None of the other variables impact one's odds of endorsing a stewardship conception; these included childhood religion, affiliation, political beliefs, and present-day beliefs.

### *Symbolic Aims*

The symbolic aims are unique in that there is no effect of either of the eras, when both are considered in concert. While race does not matter, gender does (at a .05 level). Being male decreases one's odds of support by 76.9%. Present-day zealotry is significant at a .05 level; for each one-unit increase on the twenty-point zealotry scale, one's odds of support drop 15.7%. The symbolic aims are the only of the three where political leanings have any impact. Each step up the five-point social liberalism scale results in a 71.7% decrease in odds of support ( $p < .01$ ). Childhood religion and affiliation for an atheist or secularist organization or message board have no impact.

### **Discussion**

Given the impact of birth year – and how it offers far more explanatory power than the year one became atheist – I provide one further illustration of its effect. The following cross-tab shows the percentage of respondents who label each of the three strategies the top project vis-à-vis religion, across three birth cohorts.

**Table 51:** Respondents' Support for the Three Projects, by Birth Cohort (from Survey)

<i>Top Project</i>	<i>Pre-1975</i>	<i>1975-1989</i>	<i>1990 and after</i>
Contractual	70%	48.1%	36.5%
Stewardship	15%	35.4%	52.1%
Symbolic	15%	16.5%	11.5%

As Table 51 demonstrates, support for contractual aims consistently drop towards later birth cohorts. Those born earlier are far more likely to cite struggles over rights as the largest concerns facing atheists. In sharp contrast, support for stewardship aims consistently grows in later birth cohorts. Those born in the past quarter century are far more likely to endorse issues revolving around stewardship. Any pattern for symbolic issues is less clear than the other two, but there is a slight drop off of support in the most recent birth cohort.<sup>30</sup>

These findings both contradict and conform to initial predictions. They contradict initial predictions in that the year one became atheist is the more important of the two. Contrary to expectations that socialization into the atheist identity – typically occurring in early adulthood – was key in determining one’s main issue concerning religion, it appears that initial socialization plays a far greater role. When one grew up, and the tenor of that particular debate over religion in politics, sets their understanding of what the primary issue is.

However, the general trends over time follow the hypothesized pattern, even if they follow it for the birth year variable, rather than the year one declares his or her atheism. Those born earlier see the primary struggles around rights-based issues, compared to stewardship-based issues. Stewardship issues are broader in scope (need not being even tangentially attached to religion in policy debates) and offer a chance for atheism to closer tie itself to – and gain legitimacy from – scientific progress and conservationism. However, such a broad and abstract scope also makes it more difficult to distill specific policies.

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<sup>30</sup> A binary logistic regression isolating stewardship and symbolic differences lends credence to this: more recent cohorts have marginally better odds of supporting stewardship issues over symbolic ones. There is no significant difference between odds in supporting contractual versus symbolic, however.

Respondents' gender was one control which wound up providing unexpected significance. Provided below, in Table 52, are the percentages of males and females who cited each of the three conceptions as the most important on the list. While this format ignores the impact of any of the control variables, it makes it easier to visualize the impact of gender. And, as seen earlier, none of the controls blunt the significance of gender on the top project respondents choose.

**Table 52:** Respondents' Support for the Three Projects, by Gender (from Survey)

<i>Top Project</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Contractual	37.4%	53.4%
Stewardship	53.3%	27.3%
Symbolic	9.3%	19.3%

As seen in Table 52, absent any controls, men are about twice as likely to cite stewardship concerns. Women are about twice as likely to cite symbolic concerns and about a third more likely to cite contractual concerns.

The increased mention of contractual concerns stems from which rights are front and center in current debates. The past few years saw religiously-tinged arguments in Congress and the Supreme Court in the areas of abortion, contraception, and gay marriage. The former two are particularly salient to women, rousing opposition around self-interest, rather than just another abstract example of religious groups' intrusion into individual's personal lives. Unsurprisingly, interviewees underscore this: thirty-nine percent of female respondents mentioned the sexism inherent in many organized religions in their exit narratives. In contrast, only eighteen percent of male respondents did.

Another explanation for heightened stewardship among males – aside from merely a lack of urgency about issues of rights – stems from differences in how the two genders view the

relationship between science and religion. As previous research showed males are slightly more likely to view science and religion as wholly incompatible, privileging science over religion (Baker 2012b), this could also account for males stressing stewardship aims, in order to protect scientific progress from being inhibited by religious beliefs.

The purely symbolic issues – dispelling the notion that everyone believes in god – are attributable to the increased sanctions and stigma women face for lack of belief in a god or gods (Schutz and Roth 2014). Thus, greater visibility for atheists can dispel the notion of non-belief as a rarity or aberration, making it more mainstream and decreasing the enhanced stigma faced by female atheists. By this explanation, dispelling theism as universal starts to erode the stigma of disbelief.

The finding that economic political beliefs have absolutely no impact on one's definition of atheism's biggest issues is itself interesting. I anticipated that contractual issues would be mentioned more by the economically conservative, given that individuals and companies have to shoulder the burden from churches' tax-exempt status. This was not the case, however. The descriptive statistics for the five options respondents demonstrate that church taxation has faded as a major issue for atheists – certainly since Madalyn Murray O'Hair's era. Very few respondents of any political stripe mentioned it. Another possible explanation is that the threat of revoking a church's tax exempt status acts as a cudgel, stopping churches from overtly endorsing candidates: removing it would open the floodgates for *more* religious intrusion into politics and the public sphere.

In contrast, social political beliefs matter. Those who are socially conservative are more likely to cite symbolic issues as the most important one's facing atheists. This is likely a matter of lower support for contractual and stewardship issues inflating support for symbolic issues. It is

a zero-sum game. As Hout and Fischer (2002, 2014) and others (e.g. Putnam and Campbell 2010) have demonstrated, the past few decades have seen tighter ties between religion and conservative politics, causing liberals and moderates to increasingly disengage from organized religion (though not necessarily to become atheists). As a result, socially liberal atheists may be more likely to stress contractual and stewardship issues, to counter the most vocal religious group's conservatism on issues ranging from homosexuality to contraception to environmentalism. For socially conservative atheists, however, these policy issues are not pressing or threatening. Although they dispute the premises that such churches' political stances rest upon, as the adage goes "Even a broken clock is right twice a day," allowing more leeway to focus on symbolic issues.

Lower levels of present-day zealotry are associated with increased mention of symbolic issues. The reasoning behind this is similar to why the social conservatives are more supportive: if one does not feel an urgent call to a contractual or stewardship issue that has some public policy implications, he or she will feel more comfortable endorsing a purely symbolic aim.

In the three full binary logistic regressions, affiliation with an atheist or secularist organization or message board has no impact. However, this is slightly misleading: considered in a vacuum, the affiliation diminishes one's likelihood of citing symbolic boundaries ( $p < .05$ ). Only 7% of affiliated atheists rate it their top concern with religion, compared with 22% of the unaffiliated. However, controlling for zealotry causes this association to evaporate. Those who are more zealous about their disbelief both are more likely to belong to a group or message board *and* less likely to cite symbolic issues. There is no unique effect from belonging to an organization.

The finding that Whites are more likely to endorse contractual aims than are people of color is initially surprising. This is contrary to the expectation that experiencing the intersection of being a racial and religious minority might make one more amenable to protecting against religious encroachment into one's rights. But the results show the opposite to be true, perhaps because (a) the experience of being a racial minority dwarfs whatever bias one experiences from being an atheist and (b) it is possible for one to just 'pass' as theist, making atheism the far less urgent of the two overlapping minority identities.

The highly dogmatic are less likely to support the contractual model. At first glance, this finding is rather surprising. However, it can be attributed to the other two options – stewardship and the symbolic – being unattractive to the less dogmatic. Symbolic issues are those based wholly around and strictly benefit the identity itself, without reverberating into more general areas. Thus, the less dogmatic, being less certain about the ironclad infallibility of their current belief system, may shy away from aims which solely benefit an identity to which they have less attachment. Meanwhile, stewardship aims have broader and more long-term goals; they are not simply addressed by any single law. Once again, these might be less attractive to those who have lower certainty in their current beliefs. Contractual aims fight intrusion from the Religious Right and are benign enough that they attract support from less dogmatic atheists, in addition to being amenable to even liberal theists.

The results of the binary logistic regression models demonstrate a shift in the aims of atheists, away from an emphasis on rights and towards greater focus on stewardship. These findings coincide with my study (Schaffner 2012) of Madalyn Murray O'Hair's Society of Separationists and American Atheists organizations. They also suggest that efforts of atheists to gain legitimacy through closer association with scientific progress (Nabors 2009) – in addition to



the emergence of high-profile authors from science backgrounds – forged closer ties between disbelief and issues of maintenance and human progress.

The fifty in-depth interviews support these ties between stress on science and a stewardship-centered agenda. Fifty-seven percent of those mentioning an incompatibility between religion and science stress stewardship aims, compared to only thirty-three percent of those who do not. While limited to the interviewees, this suggests that stewardship aims rest on an understanding of science that stresses its fundamental incompatibility with organized religion.

The results diminish the role of socialization into the atheist identity. Rather than the year one becomes atheist, the year of one's birth plays a far bigger role in determining aims. In lieu of later socialization into a non-religious identity, one's original socialization imparts on them religion's role and conflicts – and, later, how it should be combatted. Furthermore, affiliation with an organization or message board does not matter – at least once zealotry is controlled. These findings demonstrate the continued interplay with religion in defining atheist identity and aims, which extends back to one's initial socialization and upbringing in a religious identity.

Additionally, belonging and being active in an atheist organization or message board has no impact, upon controlling for zealotry. Previous studies, by focusing on the readily obtainable sub-group of affiliated atheists, have led to an overemphasis of the role's organizations play in socializing atheists and highlighting the political aims of atheism and secularism.

Self-interest plays a role – as do current events in influencing salient topics – as evidenced by the increased mention of contractual aims by women, in light of the contraception debates. Additionally, socially conservative atheists' ability to simply endorse symbolic aims demonstrates their ability to not feel threatened when acceptable causes are championed, even if for unacceptably religious motivations.

## Limitations

The major limitation of this analysis is that it occurs after one begins to affiliate with an organization or message board, already attending meetings or participating in online discussions for a sustained period of time. This methodology allows for the identification of key ways in which affiliated atheists contrast with unaffiliated ones, namely zealotry. However, it is ill-suited to determine the precise nature of the causal relations. Do the highly zealous decide to seek out organizations at a far greater rate than less politically zealous atheists? Or is it membership in an organization and prolonged exposure to its message that causes affiliated atheists to be more zealous? While likely a combination of the two rather than an either/or proposition, this will require a future study to satisfactorily answer: a panel-study that follows new atheists through the decision whether or not to affiliate.

Another shortcoming of collecting data for each respondent just once: it is impossible to fully extricate the effects of one's generation from those of age. A competing explanation might be that self-interest causes younger atheists to cite stewardship, to maintain and enhance their quality of life for decades to come. This is less supported by previous studies, but a longitudinal study would be necessary in the future to either definitely dispel or find support for the possibility.

Finally, the results merely constitute a snapshot, rather than a prolonged look at individuals' choices to affiliate. The question did not ask about previous membership. However, the lack of significance from the 'year becoming atheist' variable assuages concerns: if people dropped out of organizations and boards frequently, those who have been atheist longer would have more opportunity to do so and show lower levels of affiliation. Only eleven percent of Langston, Hammer, and Cragun's (2015) survey participants reported having previously been an

organization member, but leaving. Most who joined an organization remain active.

While this chapter considered, in part, whether or not respondents belonged to an atheist/secularist peer group, the next probes who exactly they consider to be their peers. Polling respondents on their symbolic boundaries around atheism accounts for both who they consider to be fellow atheists, as well as providing indirect evidence of how respondents define atheism.

### **VIII. Symbolic Boundaries: Who Qualifies as Atheist?**

Atheism, in its barest definition, is merely a lack of belief in a god, “the denial of the claims of theism” (Cliteur 2009: 5). However simple this definition might be, atheism has had additional expectations and beliefs attached to it. These come from both atheist and religious public figures and organizations.

Prior to the mid-twentieth century, atheists’ opportunities for a public platform were sporadic and limited. As a result, definitions of atheism came from those on the outside. Religious leaders and organizations would treat it as a foil for everything that god-fearing individuals are not, from hedonistic to nihilistic to devil worshipping.

This theme continued into recent years, with George H.W. Bush (1987) considering atheists to be neither citizens, nor patriots. Recent work confirms that a large swath of America subscribes to these assumptions about atheism, with atheists consistently rated as untrustworthy and unfit for public office (e.g. Edgell et al 2006, Barb 2011).

Although atheist philosophers published in previous centuries, stigma and backlash ensured their reach was limited and many even had to publish under pseudonyms (Cliteur 2009). In the second half of the twentieth century, however, a growing non-religious population in America and increasingly popular atheist authors made it more feasible for atheists to play a role in defining exactly what the boundaries of atheism are.

Commonly, individuals and groups with identities based upon abstinence from an action or thought – whether sex, eating meat, or belief in god – will erect a protective layer around their abstinence, also limiting behaviors that are only tangential to what they are avoiding (Mullaney 2005). This can be particularly important for a belief, where it is hard to appraise the truthfulness

of someone's claim based solely on his or her description. Instead, others may appraise actions and beliefs that either confirm or impugn one's claims. Most stigmatized identities have some outward signs to distinguish oneself (Goffman 1963). However, atheism is rather distinctive in that it lacks tangible ways for in-group members to police the boundaries of the identity, save for taking claimants at their word. For atheists, symbolic boundaries provide a litmus test for other claimants, beyond their sheer belief in God or a higher power.

Symbolic boundaries represent conceptual distinctions separating groups, used to categorize people, places, and things (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Differences between one's own group and other groups heighten, to delineate proper and improper actions and beliefs for in-group members.

Some scholarship details the basic arguments and definitions of 'New Atheist' publications and authors (e.g. Cimino and Smith 2011). Others catalog works and dilemmas in defining atheism within atheist and secularist organizations (e.g. Guenther et al 2013, Smith 2013b). There remains very limited research into the definitions of individual atheists, particularly unaffiliated ones. Attention must shift from the creation of boundaries to the minutiae of what those boundaries entail.

Smith (2011) found that atheism is an identity primarily concerned with what one does and does not reject. This finding led him to apply Colomy's (2007) concept of the "not-self" to atheism, where one designates particular thoughts, actions, roles, or relationships that are contrary to one's true sense of self. The atheist identity rests on the foundation of defining what one is not: the rejection of theism and related beliefs and actions. However, one significant gap in the small but burgeoning literature on atheism is the lack of knowledge about what precisely

atheists reject, aside from theism. Thus, it is necessary to probe the symbolic boundaries erected around atheism.

### **Topics for Symbolic Boundaries**

This chapter attempts to fill in the boundaries and expectations of atheism, by asking exactly what cases hinder someone from being seen as a legitimate atheist by peers. The survey asked seven questions concerning symbolic boundaries, which deal with four subjects for symbolic boundaries around atheism: negative atheism, anti-supernaturalism, spirituality, and passing. In all four areas, interviewees volunteered that they belonged to categories that the strictest definitions of atheism omitted. I present some comments here, to underscore the variation.

#### *Negative Atheism*

By the simplest formulations, atheism is just the lack of a belief in god (Cliteur 2009, Krueger 1998). This has been termed negative atheism, along with other labels, such as ‘weak atheism.’

However, dating back to when Thomas Huxley coined the term ‘agnosticism’ in 1869, some have seen it necessary to differentiate atheism from agnosticism by giving it a narrower definition of actively denying that there are gods (Krueger 1998). This stance is often termed either positive atheism or strong atheism, to contrast it with the former form. It is the one employed in most contemporary dictionaries. Cliteur (2009) reviews a considerable mass of literature that employs this stricter definition, though it contrasts with his particular use.

Even among central figures in the Atheist movement, ambiguity remains. Prominent nineteenth century atheist Charles Bradlaugh was decisively a negative atheist (Cliteur 2009).

Richard Dawkins – perhaps the most widely read and recognized of the New Atheist authors – proposes a spectrum of theistic certainty with seven milestones, ranging from complete certainty of the existence of a deity to complete certainty of the non-existence of a deity (Dawkins 2006). Dawkins, who is often seen as the de facto face of the New Atheist movement and perhaps the most visible of contemporary atheist figures, places himself one notch below complete certainty of a deity's non-existence (milestone seven). In interviews, Dawkins has rated himself a 6 and a 6.9. In both cases, even perhaps the most well-known contemporary atheist falls before the stricter, yet widely employed definition. Much like the discrepancy that simmers even among New Atheist figureheads, the survey question into this topic netted a great deal of variability, ranging from people who definitely considered all debatable cases to be atheist, to those who would deny them the label.

In contrast, some sources take a stricter approach to the split between negative and positive atheists. My own analysis of the first decade of publications by the American Atheists found that they often stressed positive atheism, deriding the claims of everyone short of absolute certainty (Schaffner 2012).

As mentioned earlier, while the positive atheist stance received the plurality of support, it did not achieve an outright majority of survey respondents. Several interviewees reported considering themselves atheist despite not having absolutely certainty that a god did not exist. They reported being 99% sure – often going to several decimal places – a god or gods did not exist, but left the door open for their own fallibility. Several stated that the very vehicle that supported their arrival at an atheist identity – a strong scientific, empirical outlook – also prevented them from considering themselves atheists in the stricter, positive sense.

Leslie was one of these ninety-nine percenters. She ascribes her lack of absolute certainty to her background as a social scientist:

Now I'll say I'm 99.9% certain there is no god. I'm a scientist so I'll never say I'm 100% because it hasn't been wholly disproven. No scientist will say with 100% certainty.

Charles is a biology student who also considers his stance tentative:

I will admit right now that I could be wrong, I have no problem being wrong if science can prove me. [...] I'm 99.99999999-infinity, you know. [...] Science once thought that the earth was flat and everyone knew it. Science once thought there was no such thing as germs and we found out. Science never knew about air for a long time. What does science not know now?

While Leslie and Charles draw on their science backgrounds to justify the iota of uncertainty that persists, Patrice's memorable lunar cheese analogy draws on a more philosophical argument, to the same end. He is keenly aware that this epistemological position might invalidate his claims to purists.

But I can't know for sure. And I know that theoretically that's supposed to be agnostic. But I... I don't believe in the god in the same way that I don't believe that the moon is made of cheese. I don't believe in it but it's not like an ambiguous "I don't believe in it," I don't believe in it because there's no reason to. So I identify as atheist even though the more atheist purists would call me agnostic.

Regardless of whether their justification was more scientific or philosophical, several interviewees explained that their beliefs stopped them from definitively ruling out the existence of a deity. This substantial portion of interviewees are essentially epistemologically agnostic, yet functionally atheists: living their lives as though there was no god, while convinced that humanity could never definitively prove such a thing.

### *Anti-Supernaturalism*

While at first highly visible American Atheists fixated on the separation of church and state and safeguarding the rights of non-theists (Schaffner 2012), recent decades have seen more efforts among atheists on gaining legitimacy and greater acceptance for atheism by tying atheism



to science (Nabors 2009). The scientific backgrounds of many prominent New Atheist authors undergirds this stance.

Physicist and theologian Alister McGrath (2004) considers atheism to entail a rationalist view of the universe, assuming humans are empirically able to discover its complete and inner workings. This is one example, among several, which tie atheism to scientific empiricism. Other sources have similarly tied atheism to an anti-supernaturalism that extends beyond merely a deity (Wildman et al 2012). Such a stance precludes several areas that lack scientific legitimacy: pseudo-scientific beliefs – such as auras, astrology, crystal healing, etc. – and speculation about the afterlife (which are distinct from those about an omnipotent deity). Converse (2003) explicitly defines atheism as the lack of belief in anything supernatural, expanding the weaker definition of lack of belief in any god or gods.

Other empirical work finds considerable variation amongst individual atheists over whether religion and science are incompatible, with 51% agreeing and 40% disagreeing (Baker 2012a). However, relative to all other religions and non-theist groups, atheists were still the most likely to endorse the notion of an epistemic conflict between religion and science.

Three specific survey questions polled respondents about their stances about whether there is room for supernatural, unverifiable beliefs in atheism. These three topics varied on two factors, incorporation into pre-existing belief systems and claims about the existence of an afterlife.

The first of the three dealt with belief in astrology, specifically the significance of zodiac signs. This belief is often incorporated into a preexisting belief system – Greco-Roman culture (and Chinese culture) – but makes no claim whatsoever about the existence of an afterlife.

The second question that probed supernaturalism deals with ghosts. In sharp contrast to astrology, belief in ghosts does make claims about the existence of an afterlife, but legends about ghosts are so diffuse as to not endorse any particular belief system (Melton 2000).

The final questions asked whether someone who believed in reincarnation could reasonably consider himself or herself to be an atheist. This aligns with a larger belief system – Hinduism – and it makes a claim about the existence of life after death.

Although the survey yielded a couple respondents who stated that they personally believed in either ghosts or astrology, none volunteered the information in their face-to-face interviews. Perhaps the topic never quite fit with the flow of the conversation, or perhaps it was due to cognizance that holding such supernatural beliefs remains controversial amongst atheists in America.

However, a few interviewees did voluntarily speak of the limits and shortcomings of science and rational empiricism. Neither specifically discounted the role of science, only impugning its supposed objectivity – in the case of Megan – or its ability to answer all questions related to human existence – in the case of Denise.

Megan volunteered that she did not think science could exist in a perfectly objective, value-neutral vacuum. She remained cognizant that this stance set her in opposition with most of the other atheists she knows.

Science as doctrine to me, is almost as questionable as bible as doctrine. Because the idea that science is value neutral and objective and exists in this vacuum outside of society, I think is very problematic. I would say that when it comes to difference, one of the biggest differences that I feel to other atheists, is this idea of science as doctrine and that science is neutral and objective, I don't buy that at all. I think I believe in science. Evolution makes sense. If you look at a chimp and you don't see yourself I don't know what to tell you. [...] I got into a lot of that, for sure. It makes the most sense to me. But I also don't think we should take science as an objective doctrine. That's harmful.

Denise discussed the limits of science. She recognizes this distinguishes her from other atheists, as well. Denise approached the topic from a more philosophical vantage point, arguing that some topics are simply beyond the purview of science.

And I think a lot of atheists really like to pride themselves in being reason-centric. But at the same time I think a lot of things cannot be resolved by reason. I think a lot of things in the world don't make sense. And are not going to make sense. Don't have a black and white answer. And that doesn't mean there's something spiritual behind it, but it's kind of the messiness of the world. [...] I don't know if I can talk in specifics. But I think if reason could solve things it would have by now. There's not a lack of reason in the world. Even though there's a lot of craziness. I don't know. I just don't believe that... logic and reason... they have their end points. You can only know so much. There's always going to be all those other questions. There's always going to be just that. And I think people of faith are maybe trying to answer those questions with their faith and if it makes them feel good, fine, but I think a thing with atheists is they don't they are too persistent on "No it has to be factual or truth or detectable." You know? They have to be able to prove it blah blah that they don't just accept "Well hey, if it feels good, let's do it, or something." I'm not saying that that's the right thing to do. But I think where I differ is I can respect faith in that way.

### *Spirituality*

As nebulous as the concept of atheism may be, 'spirituality' is even more ill-defined. Most lay definitions associate spirituality with some sort of supernatural mysticism, assumed to denote experiencing a power outside of oneself, typically a god or higher power. As a result, many consider it to fall under the purview of religion or New Age mysticism. Ecklund and Long (2011) sort the available literature into two camps: half treating spirituality as merely watered down religion for one's individual benefit and half treating spirituality as a way for individuals to connect with the transcendent outside of the limits of organized religion. This second approach allows for the possibility of a sense of spirituality that permits a disbelief in the concept of a god. Nevertheless, Americans often presume a tie between spirituality and theism (Marler and Hadaway 2002, Watson and Morris 2005).

However, this is not always the case. Some atheist authors argue that spirituality is completely compatible with atheism (e.g. Comte-Sponville 2008, Harris 2014). They treat it as areligious, dealing with a transcendence of the self. Similarly, two of Nancy Ammerman's (2013) four spiritual packages are compatible with atheism.

Caldwell-Harris et al (2011) demonstrate that atheists lag far behind Christians and Buddhists in reporting spiritual experiences or feeling spiritual. However, when stripped to its most basic component – a sense of wonderment and feeling something greater than oneself – 71% of their atheist sample is spiritual in some regards. They conclude that around a third of atheists consider themselves to be spiritual in a psychological or experiential sense, but are turned off by the sacred and mystical implications of the label. Furthermore, in Ecklund and Long's (2011) study of academics, twenty-two percent of self-described atheists reported being spiritual. They constructed atheist spirituality as separate from theism, achieved through a transcendent connection to either nature or the larger human community.

Several interviewees mentioned experiences that could qualify as spiritual solely for the purpose of reframing earlier religious experiences. Mentioning – in passing – the awe they had experienced during service or prayer from wholly secular sources was instrumental in reframing the religious wonder they had previously felt, and now had to assimilate into their current belief system. One such example is Phoebe, who described the moment she realized she was no longer a theist as a clean break with religion, but noted it was almost revelatory in nature.

And I remember the moment and I can't tell you why it happened then, but it was a realization that "I don't actually believe this anymore. I don't actually think this is true." It was a very liberating moment. It was a weight lifted off of me, cleared out of my mind. Kind of like how people would describe a conversion experience: suddenly they felt this lightness or powerful affective experience. I definitely had that. And one of the things I remember feeling was suddenly my thoughts were entirely my own. Up until that point I belonged wholly to god. I was his. Everything I did was in his service. Even the things I

was thinking had to be approved or had to be things that wouldn't sadden god. And it was this thinking that I control my thoughts. They are mine and I can do with them what I will. Haha. And that was a really big shift.

However, a few respondents applied the spiritual label to their experiences more directly, without the motivation to reframe. Rosa mentioned recent experiences that she would label as spiritual. However, she was ever-cognizant of the presumed connection between spirituality and religion, taking pains to spell out exactly what she means by 'spiritual.'

You can be spiritual in a sense of nature and... But 'spiritual,' it's a word that kind of implies spirit. [...] It's kind of a loaded term, so it kind of depends on the person. I could say [I feel] 'spiritual' when I go camping, you know? And I sit in there and contemplate a sunset and take it all in and it just completely overwhelms me because everything is so beautiful when I'm in that moment.

Rosa's stance is reminiscent of Ammerman's (2013) Extra-Theistic Package, stressing a naturalistic sort of transcendence with something larger than oneself. In comparison, Stan provides an example of Ethical Spirituality, feeling in harmony with the whole of humanity through leading a virtuous and moral life:

I think I might differ [from other atheists] in that I still do see some things as more like an ethereal concept, like some more spiritual concept, I guess. Like altruism in people or an overall goodness in people. Where there may not be hard evidence for it, but that's like part of my philosophy, I guess.

### *Passing*

Atheism is unique from most identities premised on abstaining from something. Typically, identities based around what one does not do – such as abstinence from sex, particular foods, or technology – require high-control, but are typically low cost to practitioners (Mullaney 2005). Atheism inverts this relationship. An identity based around internal beliefs requires very little self-discipline to uphold. However, as religion still functions as a moral status symbol in America (Barb 2011), the cost of disclosing one's identity can invite discrimination and wind up being expensive socially, financially, emotionally, and even physically (Cragun et al 2012).

Atheism, though a stigmatized identity (Edgell et al 2006, Barb 2011), is one that can be easily hidden. Given what Smith (2011) has termed the ubiquity of religion in American life, interlocutors presume theism as a default, until given evidence to the contrary. Thus, individuals can typically ‘pass’ as theists by not actively dispelling the assumption of religion (Goffman 1963). Doing so can allow them to avoid the stigma of being an atheist, but also obscures one’s internal beliefs to non-believing peers.

The survey included questions measuring two different types of passing. The first type was passing by omission, merely not being out to anyone in one’s life. The second type was actively passing, calling oneself an atheist but still participated in religion, attending religious services.

While Patrice was not one to dispute the claims of individuals who opt to pass by omission, his recollection of deciding to openly apply the label illuminates why some might stress passing as problematic. In his recollection, sharing one’s application of the ‘atheist’ label imbues it with a particular social significance.

When you're thinking something in your head, I guess, its subject to your own self-criticism and your own constantly evolving, thought process. And I guess that makes it subject to change at any moment. I guess in the sense that exists in your head and only in your head. But when you tell someone else, when you self-declare with a definitive statement, then it becomes a part of you that other people know and becomes a label that other people assign to you. So when I told [his friend] Mark I’m an atheist it’s like, okay, me determining that this changes enough that I can declare to another person that this is who I am.

During their interviews, many respondents said that they had disclosed their identity to those closest to them, but withheld it from mere acquaintances, for the fear of coming off as an abrasive, ‘evangelical’ atheist. Many respondents passed selectively, but few did so universally.

One of the only interviewees to essentially completely pass was Sonya. Prior to the interview officially beginning (and being audiotaped), she asked me about my own religious background. After I disclosed that I am, in fact, an atheist, she agreed to participate in the interview. She explained that if I was religious she was prepared to walk out of the interview: she was ‘out’ to practically no one concerning her identity. Her decision to do this stemmed from her experience leaving her original church as a young adult – still deeply religious at this time, just unaffiliated. Most of the members completely cut contact with her and she lost her main source of income, informal babysitting and dog walking arrangements with people she knew through the church. Thus, she was concerned about revealing the atheism facet of her identity, even for a scientific study. Sonya was unique in this regard among my respondents, probably because the study’s methodology nevertheless required her to see a recruitment flyer and reach out to me with an email, which put the onus on her to actively identify herself as atheist.

Selective passing was far more common. Many respondents reported withholding the fact that they were atheists from certain members of their family. When asked what prompted their decisions, they diverged from Sonya’s absolutist passing. Rather than fearing sanctions and repercussions, they just wanted to spare that family member the distress they would experience fretting about them. Martha is one such case, feeling that she already put enough stress on her elderly mother by coming out of the closet. To ‘come out’ as atheist would just put more unneeded stress on her:

All my close friends would know [I’m an atheist]. Family members would know that. But my mother maybe not. It’s hard enough being the mother of a lesbian, so I don’t know if I really talked to her about it. And she’s very old now.

Terrence is another example. Raised in an extremely religious, evangelical Christian family, he worries what disclosing his atheist identity to his mother would do to her sense of accomplishment and self-worth:

It would be very upsetting for my parents. Especially since, for one thing since they home-schooled us, my mom especially, since she was a stay at home mom, her whole life was wrapped up in us, training us to be godly. She'd have trouble finding what was the meaning and point of her life apart from us, so that's not healthy for her. I don't like all that pressure being her whole meaning for living. I'm exaggerating a little. She's so wrapped up in us. That would be devastating for her.

Several respondents also passed by occasionally attending church with their families. In these cases, it was often because they still lived at home and did not want to cause unnecessary drama. However, Diana volunteered that she went to church once a year, of her own volition. Although she no longer believes in a god, she still enjoys basking in the collective effervescence of their Christmas activity. She is able to disentangle this feeling of community with humanity from the Christian messages:

I still go to the Christmas service. [...] And the way services go at Hope Presbyterian is they light candles. [...] Everybody gets this tiny little candle and plastic cup and then everybody spreads – in the entire crowd it's like 200 people in this auditorium – and then you take your candle and you light the next person's candle and they light the next person's candle. And you're sitting at the top. You can watch the light grow. It's a very moving display of humanity, I suppose. And I really like seeing that. And I'm willing to sit through the rest of the pageantry of the Christmas celebrations and stuff.

These examples illustrate the substantial gray area around what constitutes a 'genuine' atheist. Obtaining a sample where self-identification is the criterion for inclusion ensured considerable variation in views, where some respondents might impugn the authenticity of other respondents' claims to be atheist.



## **Research into Differences among Atheists**

Smith (2011) notes that new atheists do not step into a ‘ready-made’ identity, with a specific list of behaviors expected of them. While Protestantism and Catholicism both have a comprehensive list of related beliefs and behaviors, an ex-theist steps into an identity defined, at least in theory, solely by negation. Figures in the New Atheist movements or organizations may put forth their definitions and frames of atheism (LeDrew 2013). However, atheists have leeway about which of the diffuse sources influence them, if any. It is up to the new atheist to construct additional expectations for the identity, such as a strong emphasis on scientific empiricism. Nevertheless, ideas about atheism – specifically the symbolic boundaries around it – may differ due to one’s religious upbringing, structural location, or affiliation with atheist organizations or message boards.

Cragun (2015) distills Stenger’s (2009) writings on the New Atheist movement down to three principle criteria: a rejection of the supernatural, reliance on science, and criticism of religion. The first two criteria deal with the application of a strict, pro-science, anti-supernaturalism mindset to atheism. The final criterion, a strong criticism of religion, may extend to rejection of any activity often construed as a tacit endorsement of religion, such as passing as theist or attending services on occasion. In several areas, New Atheists, as defined by Stenger (2009), apply stricter standards to themselves. They may extend these expectations to all atheists.

Cragun (2015) uses a two-step cluster analysis to separate atheists in the Religious Landscape Survey into New Atheists and others. His analysis found that New Atheists were more likely to be older, male, White, liberal, and highly educated, compared to other atheists. These characteristics provide a good benchmark. However, there is still opportunity for work that (a) deals with specific criteria individually, rather than as a single measure, and (b) looks at

the definitions and boundaries people give atheism, rather than their particular beliefs and stances.

### *Gender and Race*

Compared to both women and people of color, White men can more easily bear the sanctions and penalties associated with openly disbelieving. Extending this, I expect respondents in privileged positions (particularly privileged race and gender identities) to place greater emphasis on not passing as theist. In contrast, atheists with minority identities may be more amenable to atheists who opt to pass in particular, as well as accepting anyone else willing to invite stigma and scrutiny by claiming to be atheist.

Schutz and Roth's (2014) work in updating Miller and Hoffman's (1995) risk hypothesis, discussed earlier, implies particular areas where females' boundaries may be lower than males. The authors amend the risk hypothesis: while the risk of damnation appears insignificant, there is greater social emphasis on women's sexual purity and family responsibilities, which means greater sanctions and scrutiny should they leave religion.

Schutz and Roth's (2014) sample confirms this: female respondents are more likely to report stigmatization and pressure stemming from leaving religion than are male respondents. As a strategy to cope with the increased stigma of atheism, females are more selective in disclosure of their atheist identity, while their male portion is more open about their atheist beliefs and confrontational regarding religious topics. Additionally, the female portion of their sample was more likely to report using additional descriptors – rather than just 'atheist' – to describe themselves.

Some interviewees offer support. For instance, there is Matilda, whose extended family had strong Southern Baptist ties, though her parents' attendance tapered off during her childhood. In the fifth grade, she became involved with a group of friends who were far more religious and it became a much larger part of her life, going to services and other church-sponsored events regularly. Essentially, she was a self-starter, exceeding her parents' levels of religiosity and religious participation. Regardless, when she began having misgivings and stopped going to church events, her parents were disappointed. This led to a prolonged period of several years before eventually disclosing her atheism to her parents. In her words

I figure that it's sort of a first-child/sexist thing. But – this is going to sound like I'm complaining – but literally everything that I was barred from doing my brother got to do. So this is in the same vein. Okay, you have to be the perfect little Christian girl. [...] I don't know why they did that. It probably had a lot to do with my mom's respect for reputation. But that's all I can really figure.

Although her parents participated sparingly, they still expected higher levels of participation out of her, their first-born daughter. They were worried how their daughter's – and their own – reputation would be sullied when she left the church. This illustrates Schutz and Roth's amendment, the risk for females in leaving religion and declaring atheism is real, but it is social rather than eternal.

Sonya also highlights the increased sanctions female atheists face. She was apprehensive about even participating in the interview and wanted assurances of my motives before starting the face-to-face portion. During our interview, she recounted the penalties she experienced merely disengaging from her church as a young adult. Members suddenly viewed her as unacceptable for the informal care work – such as babysitting and dog walking – she had performed for them. The presumed close ties between religion and morality (see Edgell et al 2006, Barb 2011) violates gender assumptions for women, occasionally having economic

ramifications. This is one more reason to expect women to have fewer demands for being openly atheist and more open to atheists who still attend services.

Given the fact that females face greater stigma and sanctions for being openly atheist, I predict they would be more accepting of claims to atheism. There is less previous research for race, but results will probably follow the same pattern.

**Hypothesis 5a:** Males will have higher symbolic boundaries.

**Hypothesis 5b:** Whites will have higher symbolic boundaries.

#### *Birth Cohort and Atheism Cohort*

Respondents learn about what divides religion and irreligion from the larger social climate in which they grow up. Older respondents grew up in a time when the contrast between belief and disbelief was sharper, with fewer (and less visible) options like spiritual-but-not-religious to muddy the waters (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Coming of age during the Cold War meant a sharp dichotomy between God-fearing Americans and ‘godless’ Soviets.

**Hypothesis 5c:** Those born earlier will have higher symbolic boundaries.

The date when one declared atheism matters for two reasons, cohort and timespan since adopting the new identity. First, those who became atheists in later years will have had greater saturation with prescriptions about what it means to be an atheist, from the New Atheist authors that emerged a decade ago and the ever-proliferating number of local atheist and secular groups in which to participate (Guenther et al 2013). In particular, the New Atheist Movement stresses an inherent conflict between scientific materialism and religion (Cimino and Smith 2011). This makes the three anti-supernaturalism questions particularly salient.

Thornton and Nardi's (1975) sequence for role acquisition, shows why span since becoming an atheist also matters. Appreciation of the variability within a role occurs later in the process, whereas earlier in the process, individuals adhere to a stricter definition. Therefore, those who had the least time elapse since adopting the atheist role should draw the sharpest symbolic boundaries. Several of the interviewees tacitly supported this, when they contrasted their combative, 'angry atheist' phase to their current, mellow outlook. For example, Melissa summarizes her 'angry atheist' phase:

For a long time I considered myself a gadfly. I'd ask niggling questions. I would try to undermine people's faith. And then I realized I was doing the same thing to them that they were doing to me. That I was being forceful with my belief system. And I don't like to do that to anyone.

**Hypothesis 5d:** Those who have most recently begun to identify as 'atheist' will have the most symbolic boundaries around the identity.

### *Childhood Religion*

Atheists' religious upbringing may play a role in their level of symbolic boundaries as an atheist adult. Their early socialization will teach them about the lines between religion and irreligion. A strict division between religion and irreligion may carry over, even after one leaves the faith in which they were raised. Beyond that, it may also influence the length and intensity of anticipatory socialization into becoming an atheist.

Those raised in highly religious households tend to take a longer period of time to unlearn religious teachings, particularly in areas like morality and religious explanations for phenomena (e.g. creationism) (Smith 2011). Unlearning and reframing one's previous belief system stands as an important part of exit, be it from religion or otherwise (Ebaugh 1988). Those raised less religiously will have previous experience with secular morality and scientific

empiricism to supplement the religion of their upbringing. Having previous knowledge of scientific empiricism while still a theist, they may not come to see it so closely tied to atheism.

Individuals from devoutly religious upbringings will learn stricter lines between their birth religion and other faiths and lack thereof. They will also have to go through a more prolonged period of anticipatory socialization and purposefully adopt these views upon leaving theism. Having encountered them only once they begin their exit from religion may lead to them associating these stances as stipulations for being a ‘genuine’ atheist.

**Hypothesis 5e:** High childhood religious intensity will result in higher symbolic boundaries.

#### *Affiliated Atheism*

Though atheism is generally a leaderless phenomenon, atheist and secularist organizations have the opportunity to define atheist identity. Recent decades have seen atheist organizations and writers move to comprehensively tie secularism to science (Cimino and Smith 2011, Smith 2011). Atheist organizations and figures do their best to promulgate expectations for atheists, turning it into a ready-made identity. As atheist organizations maintain a unique positioning to promulgate additional expectations, such as wholesale support of scientific empiricism and lack of religious attendance, those belonging to atheist organizations may have a stricter litmus test for claiming an atheist identity.

Recent work by Smith (2013) and Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp (2013) focuses on contemporary organizations. Both reported that one key method for atheist organizations to build collective identity among their members is to present a polarized picture of religion and atheism (Guenther et al 2013). They pit the religious worldview against atheists’ “naturalistic and

scientific worldviews and humanistic ethics” (Smith 2013b: 85). Analysis of message boards found discourse employed a similar polarity between atheism and religion (Chalfant 2011).

Such a strategy explicitly ties religion to science and leaves little room for any stances that might appear contrary to science, such as spirituality, pseudo-science, or speculation about the afterlife. As one of the primary sources of this atheist identity building, atheists active in organizations or message boards may have higher symbolic boundaries around atheism. Previous research shows non-affiliates to be more inclusive (Langston et al 2015).

However, the organizations’ and message boards’ drive to forge collective identity around atheism while contrasting it with religion is tempered by practical concerns, the need to cast a wide net to attract members. Regardless of whether an organization’s or board’s aims is more political or social, they require a critical mass of members to be engaged.

Many of my respondents came from campus groups or meet-up groups. They reported their motivations for affiliation were primarily social, aiming to meet new people with whom they share at least one trait. Other respondents participated in college organizations or secular student alliances, where actions were on a smaller-scale.

Although these findings from the interview portion should temper expectations, it is worth addressing whether affiliated atheists are more exclusionary in their use of symbolic boundaries around atheism. When affiliated interviewees described their reasons for joining their organization, several said that it was because they enjoyed the debate that occurred at their meetings. Rather than a source of consensus, the proceedings at meetings seemed to entail taking sides and respectfully disagreeing. Atheist organizations may be a way to avoid homophily and meeting a wide array of other atheists.

While affiliation with an organization or message board is important, the arguments pull in two opposite directions. There is no singular hypothesis for the effects of affiliation.

### **Symbolic Boundary Scale and Its Descriptive Statistics**

The survey portion posed seven questions that probed respondents' symbolic boundaries around atheism. All seven questions began "Some people consider anyone who doesn't believe in God to be an atheist while others have more demanding criteria. Would you consider someone to be an atheist if he or she..."

1. Believes in astrology (the significance of zodiac signs)?
2. Still attends church regularly with his or her family?
3. Has never proclaimed their atheism to any friends or family members?
4. Believes ghosts exist?
5. Believes there's no way to ever definitively know whether or not God exists?
6. Believes in reincarnation?
7. Considers himself or herself to be 'spiritual?'

Each question had four responses offered:

- This applies to me and I consider myself an atheist
- I would consider this person to be an atheist
- I would be hesitant about considering this person to be an atheist.
- I would not consider this person to be an atheist

This portion is concerned with boundaries around an atheist identity, so the first two categories combine for the purposes of analysis. The "This applies to me" option was offered primarily so respondents did not feel like the survey was insinuating that their claim to atheism was suspect.



Question five dealt with the negative versus positive atheism debate. A more specific title for this variable would be negative atheist, the hypothetical atheist does not believe it is within the ability of humans to prove the (non)existence of god definitively.

Questions one, four, and six all deal with some forms of belief that run contrary to scientific empiricism. Questions four and six are presumably the strictest boundary markers, as both imply some sort of existence following death. Although atheism deals most specifically with lack of belief in gods, many also associate it with a lack of belief in the afterlife. Question one addressed pseudo-science, focusing on astrology. Together, they measure the symbolic boundaries that preclude supernaturalism.

Questions two and three are both measures of passing. Question three measures passing by omission, not disclosing one's atheist identity and letting others assume that one is a theist. Question three deals with a more active form of passing, purposefully engaging in religious activities that obscure one's atheist beliefs.

Question seven deals with the general 'spiritual' label. As aforementioned, spirituality is a very fuzzy concept with many definitions. Many have a subtext of religious mysticism, so I expected a decently large number of respondents who reject the claims of someone who is spiritual.

The responses of all seven variables appear below in Table 53. In Table 54, I show the mean of each (acceptance coded as zero, hesitancy as one, and rejection as two), reordering them from highest mean to lowest.

**Table 53.** Opinions of Seven Disputed Claims to Atheism (from Survey)

	<i>Accept</i>	<i>Hesitant</i>	<i>Reject</i>
Negative Atheist	65.5%	21.0%	13.5%
Astrology	23.4%	47.3%	29.4%
Ghosts	31.5%	49.0%	19.5%
Reincarnation	23.1%	38.2%	38.7%
Spiritual	32.8%	43.4%	23.7%
Passing by Omission	79.5%	17.0%	3.5%
Attendance	49.5%	38.0%	12.5%

**Table 54.** Mean Values for Seven Symbolic Boundaries Measures (from Survey)

	<i>Mean</i>
Reincarnation	1.16
Astrology	1.06
Spiritual	.91
Ghosts	.88
Attendance	.63
Negative Atheist	.48
Passing by Omission	.24

In order to separate the seven measures into distinct tiers, I ordered them by mean response and then gave each two adjacent variables a paired differences t-test to ascertain if the differences between any two responses were at least marginally significant.

The highest symbolic boundaries are around reincarnation. On average, respondents are hesitant and leaning towards rejecting the claims of someone who says they are atheist, yet believes in reincarnation. Of all the anti-supernaturalism boundaries, reincarnation both makes claims about the afterlife and is part of a preexisting belief structure.

The next tier is astrology. It is mildly surprising the two highest boundaries share the common thread of association with existing belief structures.<sup>31</sup> They are fixtures in certain religions (e.g. reincarnation in Hinduism) or cultures (e.g. astrology in early Greco-Roman culture and Chinese culture). People who hold either belief have an uphill battle to acceptance by respondents. Both questions' means indicate the average atheist would be more than hesitant about a peer that held either belief yet still claimed atheism.

Slightly more acceptable, with mean values just more accepted than hesitancy, is a tier containing both belief in ghosts and claims to spirituality. These share a belief in the supernatural with the more questionable claims, beyond what scientific inquiry can substantiate. However, they diverge due to a lack of attachment to a particular belief system. Belief in ghosts spans numerous cultures and religions, in some form or another, while spiritual experiences encompass a vast variety of religious and 'New Age' experiences, even in their narrower definition. There are also completely areligious contexts for spirituality (Ecklund and Long 2011).

Actively passing, by attending religious services, is in the next tier. Service attendance may impugn one's claims to an identity that is – in its purest form – completely internal and not able to be outwardly confirmed.

Negative atheism is in the next tier, situated between hesitancy and outright acceptance. About two thirds of respondents would accept the claim of someone who is a negative atheist and only 13.5% so stridently cling to the positive atheist definition that they would reject it outright. Broadly speaking, these results indicate many consider atheism to lack a specific and definitive rejection of gods.

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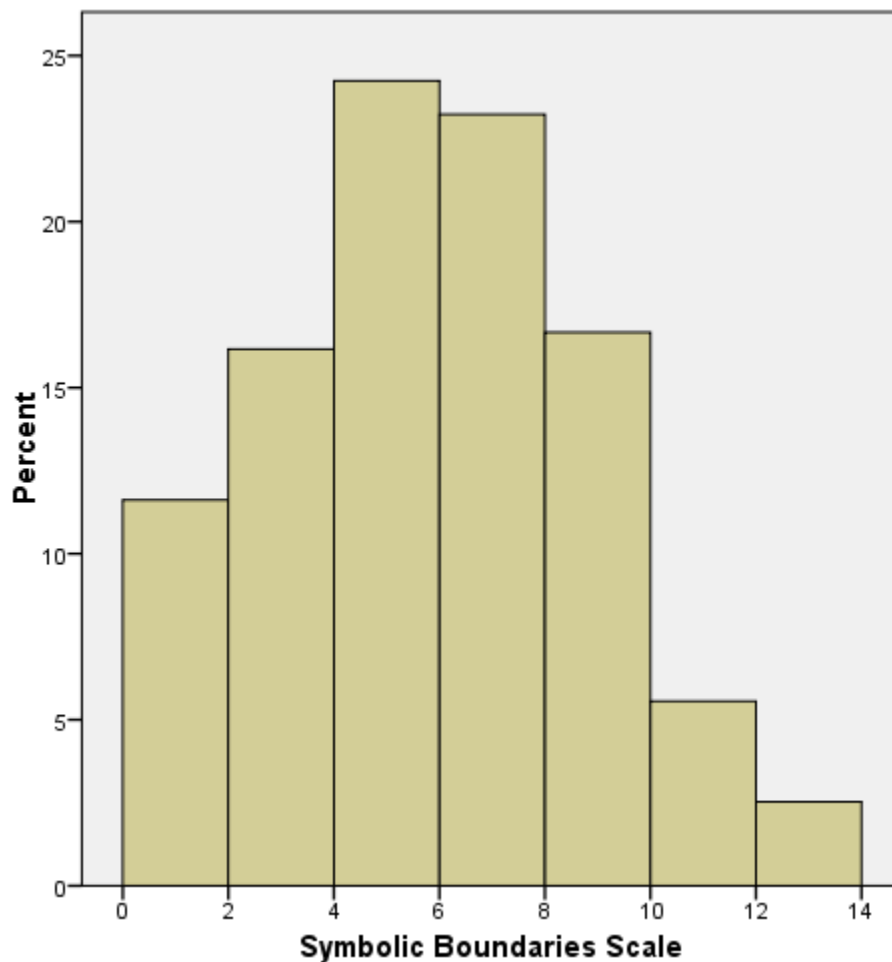
<sup>31</sup> Prior to analysis, I expected both afterlife questions to be the two top disputed.

Finally, atheists who have never come out to friends or family members are almost universally accepted. Passing by omission – content to being presumed theist as the default in America – is an acceptable strategy. Atheists are accepting of peers who withhold their disbelief.

### *Combined Scale*

Next, I combined the seven measures into a single scale, ranging from zero (complete acceptance) to fourteen (complete rejection). The combined scale has a mean value of 5.3 (averaging slightly closer to acceptance), a median value of five, and a standard deviation of 3.0. A histogram is provided below to show respondents' scores on the overall scale.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Values on the Symbolic Boundaries Scale



Overall, responses varied. Only 5.1% of respondents treat atheism as such a big tent that they accepted all seven of the claims. No single respondent had such rigorous boundaries as to deny all seven claims. There was a great degree of variation within the responses of any particular respondent. Including two respondents who were hesitant about all the claims, only six percent responded to all the queries with identical responses. The vast majority had distinct answers across questions. The distribution of responses is remarkably normally distributed, centered near the mean value of 5.3. Rather than a polarized, U-shaped distribution, the bulk of respondents fall in the middle, tapering off towards either extreme acceptance or extreme rejection. Most are between these two extremes, possessing nuanced views of what constitutes a genuine atheist.

#### *Internal Consistency*

In order to appraise the internal reliability of all seven questions in concert, I computed the Cronbach's Alpha for the entire set of seven. The Cronbach's alpha for the full set of seven was .72; this level indicates a good amount of internal consistency between the seven measures and supports using the cogent scale as a pseudo-interval-ratio variable in the analysis, when applicable.

#### *Factor Analysis*

Given the internal consistency of the overall scale, a Principal Component Factor Analysis considers how the variables grouped together. As further evidence of the internal consistency of the full seven-item scale, one component covers 38.2% of the total variance. Only the subsequent step, utilizing two components, has an Eigenvalue above one. Treating the scale as two components covers 56.1% of the total variance, with the addition of a second component

explaining 17.9% more of the overall variance. The output below shows the two components and their respective loadings. I bolded the two components for easier interpretation

**Table 55.** Pattern Matrix from Principal Component Factor Analysis (from Survey)

	<i>Component 1</i>	<i>Component 2</i>
Negative	<b>.50</b>	.04
Astrology	<b>.76</b>	-.12
Ghosts	<b>.81</b>	-.09
Reincarnation	<b>.83</b>	.05
Spiritual	<b>.57</b>	.18
Passing by Omission	-.00	<b>.85</b>
Attendance	.02	<b>.81</b>

The first component is comprised of the negative atheist, astrology, ghosts, reincarnation, and spiritual. The second component is comprised of passing by omission and passing by attendance. Simply put, they bunch into boundaries dealing with beliefs and boundaries dealing with actions (or lack thereof) that allow one to pass, respectively.

Accounting for the third component would help explain an additional 12.8% of the variance. This constitutes a noteworthy amount, but just shy of the seventh of the standard cutoff for an Eigenvalue of one. However, the small loading values warrant an exploratory factor analysis.

**Table 56.** Pattern Matrix from Principal Component Factor Analysis, Lower Eigenvalue Cutoff (from Survey)

	<i>Component 1</i>	<i>Component 2</i>	<i>Component 3</i>
Negative	-.05	-.07	<b>.88</b>
Astrology	<b>.82</b>	-.05	-.04
Ghosts	<b>.87</b>	-.01	-.03
Reincarnation	<b>.71</b>	.08	.23
Spiritual	.18	.12	<b>.65</b>
Passing by Omission	-.11	<b>.83</b>	.13
Attendance	.09	<b>.85</b>	-.14

Now the belief component has been split in two. The first is comprised of astrology, ghosts, and reincarnation, the three anti-supernaturalism beliefs. The second is comprised of negative atheism and spirituality. Altogether, 68.9% of the variance is explained between these three components. Using a finer grain of analysis demonstrates that spirituality separates into a different component than the three anti-supernaturalism variables. This provides evidence that atheists do not consistently associate spirituality with the supernatural, as some definitions do.

### Multiple Regression

Provided below are the results from a series of multiple regression equations predicting one's score on the full, symbolic boundaries scale. There are six separate regression equations. The first looks at minority status. The second looks at the effects of the cohort during which one received primary socialization into and the cohort during which one became an atheist. The third considers the effects of the messages received in childhood, both for religiosity and religious particularism. The fourth considers the effect of affiliation with an organization or message board. The fifth combines all previous variables. The sixth and final model adds measures of

present-day politics, zealotry, and dogmatism, to appraise whether the effects of the independent variables work through them or whether they are truly independent.



**Table 57.** Multiple Regression Predicting Symbolic Boundaries Scale (from Survey)

	<i>Minority Status</i>	<i>Cohort</i>	<i>Childhood Religion</i>	<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>Full</i>	<i>Full with Present Controls</i>
Male	-.06 (.43)				-.26 (.43)	-.22 (.45)
White	-.02 (.49)				-.10 (.48)	-.21 (.48)
Birth year		-.02 (.03)			-.02 (.04)	-.02 (.04)
Year Atheist		-.02 (.04)			-.01 (.04)	.00 (.04)
Childhood Religiosity			-.09*** (.02)		-.07** (.02)	-.06** (.02)
Childhood Particularism			.14** (.04)		.14** (.05)	.08 (.05)
Affiliation				-.82 (.53)	-.95+ (.53)	-.63 (.57)
Dogmatism						.12** (.04)
Zealotry						.03 (.06)
Social Liberalism						-.98** (.35)
Economic Liberalism						-.29 (.25)
Constant	5.37*** (.49)	7.25*** (1.19)	5.82*** (.47)	5.44*** (.24)	7.21*** (1.50)	9.16*** (2.18)
N	197	195	194	195	190	169
R <sup>2</sup>	.00	.01	.07***	.01	.08*	.24***
RMSE	3.01	2.99	2.90	2.94	2.89	2.66

### *Minority Status*

The regression equations find no evidence that either women or people of color have any difference in symbolic boundaries compared to whites or men. This holds true both when race and gender are the sole variables and in the full regression equations.

### *Cohort*

Similarly, birth cohort and cohort at which one declared his or her atheism do not matter. In both the simple regression equation and the full one, they show no effect on the height of one's symbolic boundaries around the atheist label.

### *Childhood Religion*

One's religious upbringing matters in determining their symbolic boundaries around atheism. By themselves, childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism account for 7.1% of the total variation in the symbolic boundaries scale.

However, the two measures differ in direction. Childhood religious particularism causes higher symbolic boundaries and a stricter definition of atheism in the present day. This is in the originally hypothesized direction. For each one-point rise on the childhood religious particularism scale, one's level of symbolic boundaries are expected to rise .14 points ( $p < .01$ ). The standardized coefficient in the third model is .32, indicating a one standard deviation increase in childhood religious particularism is predicted to elicit an increase of almost a third of a standard deviation in the symbolic boundaries scale. The effects of religious particularism in childhood remain unchanged by the inclusion of demographics, cohort, and organizational affiliation. However, they shrink to insignificance upon consideration of the present day controls, primarily due to of inclusion present-day dogmatism. The standardized coefficient became .18.

The drop indicates that a considerable amount of its explanatory power occurs through dogmatism.

Childhood religiosity runs contrary to the hypothesized positive relationship, controlling for childhood religious particularism. For every single unit increase in childhood religiosity, one's symbolic boundaries around atheism are predicted to *drop* by .09 points ( $p < .001$ ). As a standardized coefficient, a one standard deviation rise in childhood religiosity predicts a .37 standard deviation drop on the symbolic boundaries scale. The results shrink slightly, to a .07 unit drop in symbolic boundaries for every one-unit increase ( $p < .01$ ), when demographics, cohort, and affiliation are controlled. Through this model, the standardized effects of childhood religiosity come remarkably close to the effect of childhood religious particularism, albeit pulling in differing directions. In the final model, however, childhood religiosity does not shrink as much with the inclusion of present-day controls (standardized coefficient of -.27, compared to .18 for childhood religious particularism). For every one-unit increase in childhood religiosity, one is predicted to fall .06 units on the symbolic boundaries scale ( $p < .01$ ). The shrink in the effects of childhood religiosity operate primarily – although not exclusively – through its overlap with dogmatism.

### *Affiliation*

Running the affiliation-only model is tantamount to doing a hypothesis test comparing the affiliated and unaffiliated. In doing so, the results wind up shy of marginal significance, indicating no evidence of effect from affiliation, absent any controls.

Moving to the penultimate model, the effects of affiliation inch over to marginal significance. The slope of -.95 indicates that the affiliated are expected to be about one point

lower on the symbolic boundaries scale. Controlling for present-day beliefs makes the effects of affiliation once again insignificant.

### *Present-Day Beliefs*

The final model also included a measure considering respondent's present day beliefs. Including present day beliefs raised the amount of variation explained to 24.3%. In this model, one's present-day dogmatism and liberalism on social issues are two of the biggest impacts on symbolic boundaries (along with the aforementioned childhood religiosity). One's dogmatism has a positive effect: every single unit rise on the dogmatism scale predicts a .12 unit rise in symbolic boundaries (a standardized coefficient of .24). Dogmatism – by itself – winds up mediating roughly a quarter of the effects of both childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism.

Each step on the five response social liberalism question is predicted to result in a .98 unit drop in symbolic boundaries. Meanwhile, zealotry and economic liberalism have no discernible impact on symbolic boundaries.

## **Discussion**

The descriptive statistics of this analysis are news in and of themselves, representing a step towards defining atheism. As far as I can ascertain, past research omitted this topic. All seven of the measures showed a degree of variability, indicating a lack of consensus about what constitutes a legitimate atheist identity. Only five percent of the total sample completely rejected or accepted the seven claims. For individuals, the contours of atheism remain nuanced as well. Overall, the combined results are remarkably normal, centered just on the 'accept' side of 'hesitancy.'

The criterion that came closest to universal acceptance is passing by omission. Only a fifth of the sample express any reservations about the claims of someone who fits these criteria. This should not come as a surprise, given the dominance of theism – and Christianity in particular – in America and the stigma often attached to atheism.

The ties between atheism and science are the strongest, though still far from universal. Many are hesitant about or outright reject claims that rely on pseudo-science or unsubstantiated claims. Surprisingly, belief in some sort of existence after death is not the biggest sticking point. Rather, unscientific beliefs that are associated with some sort of specific ideology – whether religious or cultural – are the most rejected. Unaffiliated unscientific beliefs, such as belief in ghosts, are slightly more acceptable coming from a self-described atheist. As summarized by Charles, there is an expectation that atheists be fiercely independent, coming to their own conclusions, free from the influence of broader cultural beliefs:

I would say that [atheists] are more likely to be logical thinkers. More likely to come up with their own opinions and more likely being willing to be shunned... not shunned, more willing to not give a crap what other people think about them. [...] You kind of have to be willing to go against the grain.

This defiance of norms is so strong that a belief in ghosts is more acceptable than other supernatural beliefs that might be less far-reaching, due to the other case, astrology, being attributable to specific cultural traditions.

This finding also demonstrates that ‘spirituality’ – although not necessarily religious in its broadest sense – shows moderate overlap with the explicitly supernatural. However, it does not show the same consistency as the three explicitly supernatural probes: reincarnation, ghosts, and astrology. Most atheists consider spirituality as something other than merely repackaged supernaturalism.

The findings also demonstrate general acceptance of negative atheists or those attending religious services, though some controversy persists. The controversy is a bit surprising in the case of the former, given that some of the New Atheist authors – most notably Richard Dawkins – fall into this category. As seen two chapters earlier, there was notable variability in the epistemological stances of these interviewees, as well.

Several of the inferential hypotheses did not receive support. However, this may be interesting in its own right. Foremost, there is no evidence of the intersection of the minority identity of atheism with minority identities in race or gender. While other areas of this study suggest differences across race and gender, there is no effect on the symbolic boundaries erected around the atheist label by race or gender.

Similarly, birth year and time since becoming atheist do not matter. The rise of the New Atheist authors has not resulted in closer ties between atheism and symbolic boundary maintenance in more recent generations.

In one model, atheists who are affiliated with an organization or message board have fewer symbolic boundaries around atheism. It initially appears that the push towards expanding a group's or board's membership by utilizing an inclusive definition of 'atheist' is greater than the counter tendency to build collective identity via sharp contrast with anything that can be construed as religious. Controlling for other variables, however, makes these results shrink to insignificance; the inclusiveness of affiliates is due to other differences between affiliates and non-affiliates.

One's childhood religious particularism leads them to higher symbolic boundaries around atheism. The impact works partially through their present-day dogmatism. Upon controlling for it and political beliefs, the results shrink to insignificant. This suggests a degree of residual from

one's religious upbringing. Those raised to see sharp distinctions between their religion and others will be more dogmatic atheists and, in turn, have higher symbolic boundaries.

In contrast, childhood religiosity – the scale measuring the salience of religion in one's upbringing – exerts a negative impact on symbolic boundaries around atheism. This persists even controlling for present-day dogmatism. More intense familiarity with religious practice leads to a bigger tent, with one more accepting of the claims of those willing to call themselves atheist.

While dogmatism was originally included solely as a control variable, its usefulness suggests that one key way atheists erect symbolic boundaries – and choose either to accept or deny questionable claims of the atheist label – are to extrapolate from their own level of certainty, applying it to their expectations for all 'genuine' atheists. In the absence of any singular definition or authority figure, many extrapolate from their own stances and beliefs. Furthermore, this pairs with an earlier chapter to demonstrate the continued effects of one's religious upbringing, as the two prongs influence the definition of atheism through present-day dogmatism.

The control variable of social liberalism is negatively related to symbolic boundaries. Perhaps in light of religion's most visible encroachment into the public sphere centering on women's and LGBT issues, the socially liberal are most amenable to a big-tent approach to atheism.

### **Impact of Cohort: Another Vein of Inquiry**

The above results and analysis considered cohort effect on permissiveness and strictness around the 'atheist' label. They yielded no impact of cohort becoming atheist, contrary to what

would be expected according to previous research finding those new to a role tend to take a more formal definition of what it entails, with little room for idiosyncratic definitions.

However, permissiveness versus strictness is not the sole way to investigate this formal aspect of role acquisition. This transition from a formal to more idiosyncratic definition could also manifest itself in the overall coherence of atheists' symbolic boundaries. Compared to more recent cohorts, those who have long been atheist would have more coherence in their stances, according to this definition. Internal consistency between items in the scale will be greater for more recent cohorts.

To test this, I divided respondents into two groups, those who became atheist prior to the popularization of the New Atheist Movement and those who became atheist after. As the first major book associated with the movement – *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (Harris 2004) – was published in late 2004, anyone who became atheist in 2005 or later was coded as being a member of the New Atheist cohort, while those who became atheist later were not. This simple binary split the survey into two groups of roughly two thirds and one third of the total sample, respectively.

The results of the Cronbach's alpha for the two groups defied the expectations distilled from the formal and informal stage arguments. The group in the New Atheist cohort had a Cronbach's alpha of .67, compared to the pre-New Atheist cohort yielding .82. Contrary to expectations distilled from the formal and informal stages of acquisition, earlier cohorts actually had far greater levels of internal consistency between the seven scale components.

Why this occurs is a question that will require future work to definitively answer. However, the sheer amount of texts available since the popularity of the New Atheist Movement, coupled with the widespread use of the internet, may allow for later cohorts to have access to a



plethora of information and opinion when defining a genuine atheist. Whereas earlier cohorts had only a few sources of informal measures – or often just had to completely independently forge a definition – those who have become atheist in the past decade have had a plethora of options to decide from when promulgating precisely what being a genuine atheist entails. In much the same way that recent decades have seen a rise of spiritual bricolage among the believers, perhaps a parallel has arisen among atheists, as more recent cohorts can create an à la carte definition, mixing together aspects of several different conceptions.

A less comprehensive – and less interesting – explanation is that the differences in internal consistency are instead attributable to issues of retention. By this explanation, those recent atheists that have less internal consistency in their definitions may eventually find their way back into theism. In comparison, among earlier groups, only those with clearer definitions remain. However, as aforementioned, further work – perhaps even a panel study – must be undertaken to either decisively explain why the differences in internal consistency arise, or to identify them as an anomaly.

### **Additional Questions**

There are a few additional questions that could be asked in a more complete survey. For instance, I could have asked respondents whether they would consider someone atheist if they identified themselves as one, but disputed the theory of evolution. The anti-supernaturalism scale surveyed acceptance of mysticism and pseudo-science. In contrast, a question asking about an atheist who eschews evolution would probe into the explicit rejection of science.

Additionally, I could have asked respondents if someone would be an atheist if they were raised free of religion, but never had to think deeply about atheism or religious belief. For instance, whether one who was raised without religion in a chiefly irreligious area – such as

mainland China – would be atheist. In the interview portion, numerous respondents reported that they expected that atheists in general were “independent” and “rebellious.” Several presumed that an atheist would have been raised religiously and then pulled his or her self out of religion by the bootstraps. In the case of a person raised without religious influence, it remains to be seen whether he or she would have an uncontested claim to being atheist or just be considered irreligious. Perhaps some consider atheism as an identity achieved through the explicit rejection of theism.

### **Productive vs. Counter-Productive Axis**

The quantitative, survey portion polled the distinctions atheists make between genuine and dubious claims to atheism, which this chapter has analyzed in depth. However, during the interviews, another axis arose: productive atheists versus the counter-productive. To indirectly construct what actions and attitudes were suitable for atheists to exhibit, sixty-four percent of the respondents offered critiques of atheists who were counter-productive to their vision of securing atheism's place in a multicultural society. These boundaries often came up when I asked respondents how they think they “differ from the bulk of other atheists.”

Listed below are the total interviews and the percentage of interviews in which each category of criticism occurred. Sometimes, multiple boundaries were mentioned in a single interview; this accounts for why the total is greater than thirty-two interviewees.

**Table 58.** Percentage of Incidence of Criticism of Fellow Atheists (from Interviews)

<i>Form of Criticism</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Too pushy/vocal about beliefs	40%
Anti-theist	28%
Nihilistic	8%
Use specious arguments	2%
Abrasive personality	2%

The two most common criticisms of fellow atheists, mentioned by forty percent and twenty-eight percent of the total interview respondents, is that they are too pushy/vocal about their beliefs or are anti-theists. Rather than helping to fight the stigma faced by atheists, this was often seen as hurting atheists' efforts to gain acceptance and needlessly causing friction with other groups. Previous studies have similarly demonstrated the work atheists do in distancing themselves from the 'angry atheist' strawman (e.g. Mueller 2012).

Often, counter-productive atheists were framed as too closely resembling the negative qualities of theists. For instance, respondents occasionally used 'evangelical' to refer to those atheists who were too pushy and vocal about their beliefs, interjecting them outside of civil philosophical and theological debates. Ethan is one such example, who stressed that at the two extremes of the spectrum, theists and atheists start to resemble each other:

I think that really aggressive atheists are no better than their religious counterparts. I don't think it's right to try and strip someone's beliefs out from underneath them. I think it's unkind and pathetic. No one needs that.

Unfortunately, the sample size of fifty interviewees limits the analysis of symbolic boundaries separating productive and counter-productive atheists. However, those offering criticism of fellow atheists are significantly ( $p<.05$ ) less zealous than those without criticism. This is unsurprising, as the more zealous are more willing to broadcast their beliefs in

conversations or debates, while the less zealous eschew the combativeness of some fellow atheists. Beyond this, future research can more systematically flesh out the proper role of atheism and secularism in a pluralistic society, by looking at those hindrances to it.

## **IX. Conclusion**

This project aimed to answer one broad question: What factors are responsible for the differing experiences and stances of atheists? While earlier studies catalogued variations among atheists, they devoted little attention to explaining variations. In a generally diffuse phenomenon like atheism, there exists a myriad of experiences, stances, and definitions. This study serves as a step towards explaining these differences, though considerable work remains.

Respondents' exit narratives vary widely, as did how they currently define and experience atheism. There is such variety that some respondents might not even consider others their peers, disputing whether some are indeed 'genuine' atheists. The qualitative interview portion provided a glimpse into how respondents construct and define what it meant to be an atheist and what external steps, if any, the otherwise internal identity entails.

However, each unique journey does not take place in a vacuum. Rather, outside influences impact the agency respondents exhibit while leaving theism and discovering how to live without religion. Certain patterns appeared throughout the course of this study, including several unforeseen ones emerging only during data collection. In this concluding chapter, I compile the relevant factors and highlight fertile ground for future studies.

Childhood religious intensity, time-period, gender, and race yielded variations among atheists. Although the impacts of first misgivings and affiliation were limited, they still demand consideration in future studies.

Driven by the insufficiency of applying traditional conversion literature to religious exit – whether from organized religion or theism altogether – this study drew from several different facets of sociology.

## **Big Picture: Race and Gender**

Drawing from intersectionality allowed for considering variations in how individual atheists experience atheism – itself a stigmatized, minority religious identity. Different axes of power, privilege, and oppression produce results that are often not simply additive, but rather interact with each other (Collins 2000, McCall 2005). The history and privileges behind atheists' other statuses influence their narratives and definitions. Starkly different histories and experiences result in differing views of what precisely one is rejecting, as well as uneven consequences from religious exit.

Additionally, the magnitude of stigmatization and the wherewithal to address it varies across axes of privilege and power. Emphases on women's sexual purity and primary role in socializing children invites greater stigma upon deviating from organized religion (Schutz and Roth 2014). White males also possess privileges in areas of race and gender, providing them additional resources to weather the stigma associated with atheism (Miller 2013). In short, intersectionality highlights the possibility that demographics may play an important role, both in previous experiences with religion and present ones as an atheist.

### *Effects of Gender*

I found initial evidence for the role of gender and gendered expectations in fostering residual guilt. While both male and female interviewees reported conscious residual from their religious upbringings, continuing guilt from religion was almost exclusively the domain of females. In their explanations, interviewees' explanations contained two strands underscoring the inequitable effects of gender. First, there are differing expectations for sexual purity among boys and girls. An abridged version of Megan's explanation appeared earlier. In a longer quote, she linked her persistent feelings of guilt to repressed and shamed masturbation in her childhood:

When I was a kid, I was like a crazy masturbator. I would hump anything. This to me is a very clear example of how I had bought so far into it, without questioning it. And how it really messed up my psyche a lot as a kid. I think that I'm not mad that I was raised Catholic, but I do wonder if my psyche would be different if I wasn't. I remember thinking, when I was a kid, doing this. And I didn't know what I was doing. But that my dead relatives and god were watching me do this. And it created such an intense sense of guilt about myself. [...] But that intense sense of somebody is always watching and judging you, and you always better do what's the right thing to do. That always fucked with me as a young person. And I still think about it today.

Secondly, recall Heather's example of residual guilt. Her parents and church socialized her to be humble, placing her God and community before herself. She still "psychologically struggles" with tinges of guilt for feeling satisfaction and pride in her own achievements. The communal orientation she learned from a young age persists, even though she has left that community and reference group behind. The greater emphasis placed on girls' communal orientation (Rudman and Glick 2001) and sexual purity (Schutz and Roth 2014) influences how they perceive of religion and internalize the teachings. This carries potential to influence definitions and meaning-making as well, given how definitions and experiences of atheism often serve as a counterpoint to religion. A future study can more thoroughly flesh out this relationship, employing a larger sample size and survey questions which specifically probe whether the respondents still feel guilt from their original religion (and how prominent a role guilt played in delaying or complicating their exit process).

Differing religious expectations and levels of stigmatization may also explain the surprising differences in dogmatism. While males are more likely to inflate their confidence when expounding upon mundane topics (Lundeberg, Fox, and Punčohář 1994), female atheists were actually more dogmatic. The women in this study were more certain that their present beliefs would not substantially change, standing the test of time and weathering any attempts at persuasion. While contrary to existing research, differences in men's and women's experiences

with religion can explain these differences. Female atheists have to deal with greater incidence of external stigmatization (e.g. Schutz and Roth 2014), as well as internal guilt, judging by the interviewees' examples of residual. During the interviews, women (in addition to interviewees of color) volunteered experiencing negativity towards atheists at twice the rate of White male interviewees. Altogether, these internal and external pressures make atheism a more embattled identity for females. Women who are willing to openly claim to be atheists, instead of employing a euphemistic label, are confident in their beliefs. Facing a comparably larger threat may cause women to coalesce around the 'atheist' label and offer greater certainty of their present stances.

Finally, the threat and stigmatization women experience explains gender differences in how atheists should engage religion. Men focus on combatting religion's delaying of progress and disregard for the future, while women focus on protecting rights from religious intrusion and ending preferential treatment for the religious. Increased emphasis on women's religiosity – for reasons of sexual purity and child rearing – and recent focus of the Religious Right on reproductive issues (overturning *Roe v Wade* and Hobby Lobby's fight against the contraceptive mandate) explain the different tacks for confronting religion in politics. As the paramount political controversies focus on issues concerning women, a rights-centered approach is necessary to counter religion on these issues. Aims which are symbolic, without immediate policy implications, still serve to increase the visibility of non-theists and alleviate stigmatization. Men's lower sense of immediate threat from religion provides them leeway to endorse long-term, stewardship examples of the public good. In short, differences in stigmatization and threat from the politicization of religion in America produce gender differences in internal certainty and conceptions of the public good. A future survey with a variable which specifically probes perceived threat from organized religion can confirm that



threat functions as an intervening variable, connecting gender with dogmatism and conception of the public good.

### *Effects of Race (and Gender)*

Overall, differences across gender were starker than those across race. In part, this is attributable to the small non-White sample, which necessitated homogenizing race and ethnicity into a simple White/non-White dichotomy. While sufficient for considering whether or not one was from a privileged racial position, the lack of distinction lost sight of the particular role of churches in various racial and ethnic groups. Future work can address this by disproportionately sampling non-White atheists. While the findings should be treated as exploratory, this analysis uncovered few interactions between race and gender.

The substance of one's first misgivings served as the first instance. Among Whites, first misgivings at the institutional-level were almost exclusively mentioned by women, appearing in approximately two-thirds of the White females' narratives, compared to practically none of the White males' narratives. Among people of color, however, males and females fared comparably, with approximately a quarter of each group citing institutional-level misgivings. The effects of gender on first misgivings are therefore conditional on race. The central role that religious institutions play – both historically and into the present-day – in political and community organizations for racial minority groups furnishes it with a degree of esteem, limiting any fissure based on gender. Often, churches, mosques, and temples represent the only large-scale institution where people of color predominate in leadership positions. Gender inequalities can be overlooked, given the significant role religious institutions and communities play in these minority populations. Criticism of the church for being less-than-perfect on gender issues could be construed as discounting the considerable progress it forged around race and ethnicity,

ensuring institutional shortcomings are rarely the catalyst. In contrast, White women cite their religious institutions far more frequently than White males, focusing often on the institutionalized inequality – whether sexism or homophobia – along with other shortcomings. While marginalization can sensitize one to institutional issues, not all axes of inequality are equal. The unique historic role of religious institutions in some minority communities adds nuance, while White women’s first misgivings frequently target their religious institutions. Gender influences one’s first misgivings with religion, but a minority racial status mutes these differences.

Specialized secular organizations address the unique history and role of religion for racial and ethnic minorities. In a large metropolitan area like Chicago, there is a critical mass of non-believers, allowing for atheist organizations based around race and ethnicity. These organizations address the unique experiences of atheists of color; this was the draw for Vanessa, who noted how her Latino/a atheist organization was cognizant of how religion permeates Mexican culture, presenting unique challenges and dilemmas. These organizations offer a way to bypass White males’ disproportionate sway over discourse and leadership positions in atheist organizations (Miller 2013). Their existence may account for the lack of racial differences in affiliation. The contrasts between race/ethnicity-based organizations and general ones can be considered by a future study employing participant observation.

Finally, respondents demonstrated a plethora of epistemological stances that varied across race/ethnicity and gender. Whites were more likely to be positive atheists than were people of color. This finding does not conform to any easy explanation and is deserving of future analysis. Additionally, women and people of color were more likely to be epistemologically apathetic than White males. These effects also demand further analysis, preferably with a sample large enough

to avoid dichotomizing race. One explanation worth considering in future research: individuals who are marginalized in either race and/or gender place more stress on the tangible effects of religion, rather than quibbling over epistemological certainty.

Overall, the effects of demographics demonstrate some impact from their intersection with atheism, more for gender than for race. Differing stresses on religion, utility of religion, stigma for non-belief, and susceptibility to the politics of the Religious Right inform how atheists conceptualize religion and its shortcomings, resulting in differences in definitions of atheism and engagement with religion.

### **Big Picture: Affiliation**

Prior research on group identification highlighted how differentiation is achieved, vis-à-vis the out-group (Tafjel 1978). In the case of atheists, this includes the checklist of symbolic boundaries that they drew around atheism: what stances and beliefs were and were not acceptable for an atheist to have. Supernatural beliefs – namely those associated with another belief system – were most frequently rejected, while ‘passing’ as a theist in America was the more acceptable.

Affiliation with an organization or board goes beyond mere identification, as those entities socialize members. While the majority of atheists do not join organizations, affiliates are exposed to and participate in organizational discourse and political activities. Previous empirical work shows organizations stress confrontation with religion (Ritchey 2009) and a sharp distinction between atheism and religion (Chalfant 2011). There is evidence of differences in zealotry and rigidity of definitions between affiliates and non-affiliates (Langston et al 2015).

### *Decision to Affiliate*

I gleaned information about what motivated affiliation with a group or message board. Affiliates came from more homogenously religious social circles. Differences in social circles disappear by the present day, indicating that a lack of a peer group serves as impetus to affiliate, one that is amended through membership. Social motivations were particularly salient for thirty-somethings like Denise, who joined expressly to meet people with whom she shared one characteristic in common.<sup>32</sup> Rather than recruitment, social isolation often drives individuals to affiliate. The effects of one's original social circle persist upon accounting for childhood religious intensity. This suggests that differences are due to directly addressing lack of non-theists in one's social circle, rather than a residual drive to affiliate with a community centered around some shared belief. Among younger participants, further education and the vigorous debate that occurs within organizations – where members can disagree with each other – were some of the biggest draws.

However, affiliates comprised only a fifth of the sample. The rest did not regularly affiliate with any group or message board, limiting themselves to sporadic lurking, if anything. Non-affiliates cited a variety of explanations, including time constraints, priorities, or lack of centrality. The sheer number of non-affiliates demonstrates that studies which sample exclusively through organizations overlook a great number of atheists.

### *Effects of Affiliation*

Beyond overlooking qualified respondents, samples of affiliated atheists also run the risk of systematic bias. Affiliates were far more zealous about their disbelief. This is likely due to the

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<sup>32</sup> Technically two characteristics, since she joined an organization for Black non-theists.

highly zealous being more apt to research and join organizations and message boards. A longitudinal study can definitively separate cause and effect, but it appears zealotry is the driving force behind opting to research and join an organization. In contrast, non-affiliates cited a lack of centrality as one of the paramount reasons for not joining a group or message board. The strong relationship between zealotry and affiliation threatens the generalizability of previous studies comprised purely of group members.

While I considered affiliation as a source of the variations, its effects were negligible. This was especially surprising in the case of dogmatism: belonging to a community of like-minded peers elicited no direct impact on one's certainty of their current stances. While group membership occasionally appeared to have a direct impact, the results were invariably demonstrated to be spurious upon controlling for zealotry. Highly zealous atheists possessed greater drive to search out and join organizations and boards, but membership itself had no direct effect. However, the small subsample of affiliated atheists leaves opportunity for a future study with a larger sample size. Aside from the noteworthy exception of zealotry, this study did not find much evidence impugning the results of previous studies which sampled exclusively through organizations.

Overall, the effects from the religious, political, and social climate – measured as time period effects – are more salient to the variables considered than is affiliation with an organization or message board. Rather than atheist organizations operating as a major source of socialization into an atheist identity, both affiliates and non-affiliates glean definitions from broader sources.

## **Big Picture: Time-Period**

Atheists gathered information from the time periods in which they grew up and left religion. Overall, there is greater evidence for time period and cohort – rather than institutional membership – influencing atheists’ definitions and practices. Secularist organizations are not atheists’ primary source of information. Compared to organized religions, atheism is more diffuse and leaderless, despite the high profile atheists who frequently appear both on the screen and in print. The broad strokes of atheism are gleaned from the larger social climate, both during one’s upbringing and anticipatory socialization stage. Atheist collectives play a comparably minimal role in socializing new members.

Some trends identified by earlier studies include differences in stigmatization in the broader population and an increasing association between religion and conservative causes. Additionally, the rise of the ‘New Atheist Movement’ further linked atheism with scientific empiricism and heightened confrontation with religion.

### *Effects of Time-Period*

Time period’s largest effect appears in atheists’ aims and strategies concerning religion. A shift is underway, where earlier atheists endorse contractual aims, while later groups endorse stewardship aims. Those who were born earlier are more likely to focus on issues of rights. In part, this could be a reaction to Cold War era stigmatization of non-believers (Barb 2011). Younger atheists instead stress human progress and safeguarding the future from myopic policies. Increasingly, prominent atheists seek to gain legitimacy by connecting atheism and science, treating religion as fundamentally incompatible with science (Cimino and Smith 2011). This increasingly dominant frame leads to younger atheists stressing progress and upkeep as their primary political aim. Stewardship aims were more common among those who discussed

the incompatibility of religion and science during their interviews. A future survey could ask respondents what they consider to be the strongest argument for atheism (offering scientific, philosophical, and humanist options), then see whether one's response predicts their conception of the public good.

Another impact of time-period concerns the internal consistency of one's definition of atheism. Early work on acquisition found that more recent acquirers hold a more rigid definition of what the identity entails. Only with time does one develop a flexible, idiosyncratic definition (Thornton and Nardi 1975). However, the internal consistency of individuals' symbolic boundaries around atheism runs contrary to this expectation. Those who have been atheists for longer periods of time tend to have a more coherent set of requirements for fellow atheists. This holds true at the lenient and strict ends of the spectrum. In comparison, those who became atheists later tend to hold more idiosyncratic definitions, with less consistency from criterion to criterion.

These findings coincide with the rise of spiritual bricolage in recent years. Just as one can pick and choose exactly how they define and practice spirituality (Shrader 2006), atheists can similarly pick and choose in constructing their own definition of atheism. There are an increasing number of non-theist public figures to draw from, offering more opinions in delineating one's particular definition. A rise in publications by new atheist authors, the popularity of the internet, and the sheer proportion of non-theists allows atheists to 'shop around' for an individualized definition. This results in the lack of internal consistency among more recent atheists. Older interviewees tended to be relatively isolated during their doubting process, either undergoing it completely solo or discussing matters with a few associates. In comparison, more recent atheists often drew from a wider array of sources: peers, the internet, and New Atheist authors.

Finally, respondents from earlier cohorts were more likely to be positive atheists. Future, longitudinal research is necessary to conclusively determine the cause. The differences could stem from changes in stigmatization: older atheists grew up in a time-period with greater sanctions for being non-religious. Only those with absolute certainty of god's non-existence may have been willing to invite scrutiny and call themselves atheists. The distinction may instead be attributable to life course, where differences stem from retention. Negative atheists and the epistemologically apathetic may prove more likely to shed the 'atheist' label later in their lifecycles. Future longitudinal work can confirm whether retention is responsible, or whether the stigmatization in previous decades discouraged all but the most certain.

Overall, these results demonstrate that atheists can glean definitions and focus from the general social and political climate as they undergo primary and anticipatory socialization. Notable variations occur in how they aim to engage religion and how comprehensive (or idiosyncratic) their expectations for other atheists are. Whether issues of conceptions of the public good, internal consistency, or epistemology, our understanding of all these topics could be enriched with a longitudinal study, as will be explored further at the end of this chapter.

### **Big Picture: First Misgivings**

Prior research on first misgivings was scant, providing ample opportunity for this study to forge a link between religious upbringing and present-day atheist beliefs, by considering justifications for leaving religion. One earlier study found atheists are more likely to cite issues of correctness in explaining why they exited religion, compared to agnostics (Fazzino 2014). As certain misgivings may lead one to envision religion as posing a greater threat, earlier studies showing the role of perceived threat in identification (Giannakakis and Fritzsche 2011) and mobilization (Benford 1993) were also salient. Otherwise, first misgivings remained an



underexplored source of variation amongst atheists. However, in attempting to fill in this gap, I found negligible evidence of the influence of first misgivings into the present day. The sole major finding involved respondents' exit process: certain misgivings influenced odds of researching other religions.

### *Effects of First Misgivings*

Generally speaking, the content and level of one's first misgivings did not furnish the expected results. This may be due in part to a small sample size, as analyses including first misgivings were limited solely to the fifty interviewees. Nevertheless, effects of first misgivings were important to consider, both as causes in themselves and intervening factors between one's religious upbringing and their present-day stances.

Institutional-level misgivings' effect on affiliation proved contrary to the hypothesized direction, as they made respondents surprisingly less likely to affiliate with an atheist group or message board. The working hypothesis – now thoroughly discredited – focused on supposed differences in the threat religion represents, where early criticism of religious institutions could lead one to conceive of religion as posing a larger, more organized threat. However, this expectation was unsubstantiated, as those with institutional-level misgivings abstained from organizations and message boards.

The discrepancy stemmed from a misunderstanding concerning what atheist organizations provided to respondents. Rather than grand policy battles with organized religion, the primary motivator for joining organizations was not to enact political change or battle organized religion in the public sphere. Affiliates referenced other aims, including Rosa's interest in keeping current with debates concerning atheism, Denise's desire to socialize with new people through an organization, and Vanessa's and Stan's desire for a support group. This

was reflected in how respondents affiliated: chiefly with meet-ups or campus groups – which bolstered their social circle and only provided small-scale opportunities for local activism – or with online discussion boards – which were avenues for debate with fellow atheists. While expressly political organizations garner the most attention from researchers and the media, few belonged to them. Perhaps a future study, conducted wholly with members of expressly political organizations would find a positive impact of institutional-level misgivings. However, the current data – which primarily included members of local meet-ups and campus organizations – provides contrary evidence.

There was one noteworthy direct impact of first misgivings. Those with first misgivings occurring at the doctrinal level were more apt to research religious alternatives during their doubting periods. This distinction points to an underexplored area in the research on conversion. At first glance, respondents' first misgivings and their decisions to research (and potentially join) other religions were two discrete events. Very few respondents were actively recruited into other faiths by acquaintances or random evangelizers. Rather, many initiated their searches purely of their own volition. The internet was popular, though there were other cases, such as Denise, who called her local Jehovah's Witnesses inquiring for more information. As very few were actively recruited, it is prudent to consider what factors made research more likely.

What one initially found lacking in their original religion influenced how likely he or she was to seek out another. Some did extensive research into religious alternatives, while others immediately discounted organized religion altogether. Doctrinal misgivings were considered as confined to one's previous religion, with the initial possibility that a different holy book and faith may be able to satisfactorily address them. In contrast, misgivings occurring at other levels were less certain to be addressed by a fresh scripture. First misgivings of personal necessity, for

example, led respondents to be skeptical of religion in general, questioning what any faith could offer. Respondents often construed earthly misgivings, such as institutional and interpersonal issues, as endemic to all forms of organized religion, rather than a flaw unique to one's original religion.

First misgivings represent an avenue towards considering the agency of potential converts, in lieu of focusing on recruitment. Future research should devote greater attention to what converts found lacking in their previous religions as they shop for a faith capable of assuaging those doubts. In particular, this explains the appeals of Buddhism and other Eastern religions. Skeptical of their previous religion's doctrine, respondents felt attracted by the piecemeal approach Westerners take to Eastern faiths. As Brittany summarized:

I felt that there was a lot of wisdom and what I found myself was not necessarily agreeing with all the tenets of Taoism or Buddhism, but rather picking little bits of knowledge or wisdom or things that would be helpful.

In the same vein, Glenn summarized his attraction to Buddhism as "a guidebook for life" and "a blueprint for how I should act," rather than a set religious ideology. Looser, less rigid faiths held an attraction for many interviewees, albeit a fleeting one.

As a caveat, these cases represent but one outcome: researching other faiths, yet eventually finding them similarly lacking and becoming atheist. Future research can more systematically consider whether doctrinal misgivings truly make one more open to other faiths, or whether interpersonal and institutional misgivings are more easily – and permanently – satiated by other religions. Overall, the analyses into first misgivings found they generally exert greater influence over the details of one's journey out of religion, rather than their destination in atheism.

## **Big Picture: Childhood Religion**

The persistent influence of religious upbringing was a key focal point of this study. I was interested in whether religiously-instilled schemata persist, even after the religion is rejected. In designing the survey and deriving hypotheses, I borrowed from Ebaugh's (1988) work on role exit, which noted the potential for residual effects after disavowing an identity.

Some respondents had far more side bets staked on religion, which heighten commitment and make exit more complicated and prolonged (Becker 1960). Additionally, considerable side bets – specifically, a religiously homogenous social network – can make it more difficult to encounter competing viewpoints.

### *Effects of Childhood Religion*

Prior to discussing significant results, it is necessary to mention the lack of effect from type of religion. For instance, despite their highly centralized church and inability to easily switch to a more congruent denomination like Protestants can, Catholics were no more likely to report first misgivings at the institutional level. Consideration of type of religion was limited by trouble getting clear answers in the survey. A disappointing amount of cases answered with insufficient detail to differentiate evangelicals from mainlines, or even to differentiate among Christians. Compounded by a relatively small sample size, these unclear categories hampered any analysis accounting for type of religion, delegating it to cases where it was part of a formal hypothesis (or involving interviewees, who were probed on their precise childhood religion). Future work will need to consider *type* of religion, to build upon this study's findings concerning *degree*.

Many respondents consciously tied affiliation with an atheist organization or message board back to religion. Unaffiliated atheists' most common justification was that an organization based around religious (dis)belief was too similar to religion. Respondents from an array of religious upbringings made this comparison, drawing from symbolism they shared with fellow non-believers to explain and justify their decisions. Jhumpa came from a minimally religious upbringing and stated

When I was not an atheist, my religious identity was not that important to me. And I guess, as an atheist, I do claim myself to be an atheist but it's not an identity that's very central to me in terms of associating with other people.

Meanwhile, Sonya grew up in an intensely religious environment and explained

[Affiliation] just reminds me of church. [...] I find that one of the big problems I have with religious people and atheists is that if we surround ourselves only with people who are just like us – there are times to do that – but I don't want that to be the foundation of our life.

From all over the spectrum of childhood religious intensity, respondents saw atheist organizations (and boards) as being simply repurposed churches. The results demonstrate no unique effects from childhood religious intensity. Rather, the effects are indirect, working through present-day zealotry. When atheists are cognizant of the link between their childhood religion and a present-day stance, there is no direct evidence of residual.

Some exceptions appeared during the interview portion, where respondents volunteered ways which they were still cognizant of the persisting influence of their religious upbringing. These instances differ from the other cases due to the powerful affective ties involved, such as guilt or attachment to a reference group. Those raised with the highest childhood religious intensity feel the most persistent residual effect from their religious upbringing, even though they recognize the link with their previous religion. More than purely abstract instances, such cases of conscious residual are difficult to fully and decisively extricate oneself from.

In addition to those conscious instances, childhood religious intensity impacts some present-day stances, mostly indirectly, through present-day dogmatism and zealotry. Childhood religious particularism is positively related with both zealotry and dogmatism, while childhood religiosity is negatively related with dogmatism (upon controlling for its overlap with religious particularism). Higher childhood religious particularism leads one to be more certain of their present beliefs and more willing to interject them into politics and interactions, despite overhauling the specific beliefs. Controlling for particularism, higher religiosity in one's childhood leads them to view their present beliefs more tentatively.

Childhood religious intensity's impact on epistemological stances occurs through its residual influence on dogmatism. Those who are generally the most dogmatic are most likely to state absolute certainty of the non-existence of any deity. Through its impact on zealotry, one's religious upbringing indirectly influences their decision to affiliate. Only the most zealous – the most willing to inject their disbelief into politics and casual conversation – become active members of atheist organizations or message boards. Finally, a portion – though not all – of the effect of childhood religious intensity on symbolic boundaries occurs via its influence on dogmatism. Individuals extend their personal certainty when compiling their comprehensive list of symbolic boundaries for atheism. All examples demonstrate the persistent, unique effects of childhood religious intensity, albeit indirectly<sup>33</sup>.

There are two major takeaways from these findings. First, childhood religious intensity is not monolithic. Childhood religious particularism – distinguishing and elevating one's religion

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<sup>33</sup> Dogmatism mitigates some, but not all, of the effects of childhood religious intensity on symbolic boundaries. Some of its effect is direct, where those with the most childhood religiosity have fewer criteria that a 'genuine' atheist must meet. Those that were highly religious – only to eventually exit – are most accepting of questionable claims to be atheist.

above others – has the persistent effect of leading one to be more zealous of their present atheist beliefs, being more willing to inject them into casual conversation, personal relationships, and political opinions. Similarly, growing up with a thick line delineating one's religious beliefs from all other possibilities carries over to the present-day. Those raised with the highest levels of religious particularism also demonstrate higher levels of dogmatism about their current beliefs, despite the dramatic overhaul those beliefs have undergone since. Of the two prongs, childhood religious particularism exerts stronger effects over present-day variables.

In contrast, high levels of childhood religiosity denote knowledge of one's holy book and regular practice. Once one disavows the faith they exhibited high religiosity for, they take a more tentative approach to future stances, including atheism. This is seen in the negative relationship between childhood religiosity and present-day dogmatism (which, in turn, makes one less likely to be a positive atheist). Less certainty in one's overall beliefs, in turn, translates to below absolute certainty about the non-existence of god or a higher power.

The degree of religious intensity during one's childhood also exerted influences over their doubting process, as certain issues with religion appeared more problematic for the deeply religious, compared to the nominally religious. Those with more religious childhoods tend to cite first misgivings originating at the interpersonal level and/or involving moral content. These results bolster the retention literature, demonstrating the specific misgivings needed to swim against the current of a highly religious upbringing. One critical factor explaining why the highly religious do not leave, either to seek out alternative faiths or leave organized religion altogether, is their homogenously religious social circles (Gunnore and Moore 2002). These people have considerable side bets staked on their original religion, representing additional stakes to potentially be lost by questioning and exit (Becker 1960, Ebaugh 1988). The more tight-knit

one's religious community is, as well as the more integrated they are into it, the more difficult exit is. While cases do exist, such as those studied by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) as 'Amazing Apostates,' they are rare. However, despite the probabilities, atheists come from a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds. Those raised with higher levels of religious intensity are more likely to cite first misgivings at the interpersonal level. While one's integration into a tight-knit, all-encompassing religious community often either precludes doubt altogether or leads to resolution in favor of faith, the rare cases who do leave often initially focus on the very factor which prevents exit for many. They question the fabric of their religious community, finding fault with it. Results are particularly pronounced around childhood religious particularism. Growing up seeing one's religion as the exclusive means to truth, the sole arbiter of right and wrong, the first cracks in respondents' faith occurred when they noticed that – despite their access to the capital T 'Truth' – the actions of their peers were not improved. While a moral reference group of religious role models (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, Smith and Denton 2005) and individuals' desire to appraise themselves as moral (Katz 1975) may limit exit, those who are able to exit despite intensely religious upbringings are more likely to start with impugning the morality of their faith. Once again, in order for doubts to gain traction and lead to an honest look at their faith's tenets and community, one of the key factors precluding exit first had to be scrutinized.

These findings show which misgivings allow doubt to get its foot in the door, particularly for the highly religious. As previously demonstrated by narratives such as Grant's and Brittany's, first misgivings are often insufficient to lead one to exit religion, much less terminate in atheism. Rather, first misgivings catalyze a prolonged questioning period, where individuals draw from a variety of sources – some reaffirming, some skeptical, some neutral – to attempt to reach some



sort of resolution and lessen their cognitive dissonance. During this period, many subsequent misgivings can arise, demanding attention and inquiry. Two key misgivings are those which impugn religion's timeless nature – termed longitude – and those which impugn religion's claim to be the sole, universal truth, impervious to competing options – termed latitude. Contrary to initial expectations, finding out that their religion is not timeless, yet rather mutable and evolving, was not particularly traumatic to the highly religious. Respondents often mentioned that they had doubts stemming from how either their holy book or religious institution changed and mutated over time. However, there was no pattern to who cited longitudinal issues.

In contrast, patterns emerged with issues stemming from latitude. Latitude took on a variety of forms. Some were abstract, while others required close knowledge of other religions and groups. Some were this-worldly, while others focused on other-worldly punishments. Some dealt with issues of correctness, while others dealt with moral issues. Altogether, I identified four different forms of latitude. All shared a sense of unease stemming from familiarity with other religions or ways of living, which turned respondents' critical inquiry back to their own religion, causing them to ask questions. "How'd I get so lucky to be raised in this religion?" "How is my religion unique from all other options?" "What makes mine the one true religion?" Altogether, respondents who were raised with higher levels of religious intensity were more likely to mention problems stemming from latitude. Placing high stress on the primacy and correctness of one's religion makes it especially problematic to encounter evidence of other options. While all-encompassing religions may delay contact with competing viewpoints, they increase the probability – compared to more ecumenical faiths – of that information shaking one's faith.

To make sense of these findings, I extend Putnam and Campbell's (2011) Aunt Susan Principle. The principle, based on contact theory, states that knowing an upstanding person of

another faith can lead to the liberalization of one's own beliefs, amending them to be more inclusive of out-groups. However, the Aunt Susan Principle functions more smoothly with a faith that is able to accommodate the new information and allow for greater openness to other beliefs. The recorded incidents of latitude demonstrate the other side of the equation. Those in rigid faiths are sometimes unable to assimilate the contact with or knowledge of other religious groups into their present religion. As seen in the exit narratives, the cognitive dissonance caused by this asymmetry can fester, becoming a watershed event along their path out of religion, more often than those from more accommodating faiths. In an increasingly religiously pluralistic society, with increased access to information via online sources, it becomes necessary to delineate the processes by which individuals either reconcile such information with their religious beliefs or prove unable to, furthering doubt.

### **Broad Contributions**

Foremost, this study contributes methodologically, demonstrating issues with sampling design. Overwhelmingly, earlier studies sampled through organizations or else conducted snowball sampling which originated with organization members. However, the generalizability of these previous studies is suspect, as affiliated atheists rank higher in zealotry, being more willing to interject their lack of belief into personal interactions and political decisions. Thus, previous studies risk overestimating atheists' zealotry,<sup>34</sup> reaching erroneous conclusions on

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<sup>34</sup> This is also true also for those variables which are related to zealotry, such as childhood religious intensity.

subjects influenced by zealotry, such as political opinions or social behavior. Whenever possible, future research should avoid a design centered on organizations.<sup>35</sup>

This study endeavored to explain atheists' reasons for leaving religion, rather than simply cataloguing their explanations. As a byproduct of this aim, certain findings augment research on retention and conversion, two areas which rarely concern themselves with the motivations and justifications of those who leave theism altogether. Foremost, research on religion retention provides insight on who is least likely to exit their religion, either to convert or to leave organized religion altogether. In short, a closed, homogenous social circle makes exit less likely (Gunnore and Moore 2002), due to lack of competing information, as well as additional side bets staked on the identity (Becker 1960, Ebaugh 1988). Similarly, the ties between religion and morality – a preponderance of religiously-based role models and the use of religious edicts for self-evaluation – makes exit a rarer and more difficult proposition for the highly religious (Ellison and Sherkat 1995, Smith and Denton 2005). The interviews illuminated how those who swim against the stream are able to resist the considerable undertow of their faiths. Those from highly religious backgrounds are most likely to cite first misgivings which impugn one or both of these pillars. They often begin their arduous doubting process by focusing either on the issues stemming from their religious peer group and/or the moral aspects of their faith. By first questioning these factors which retain so many peers, the once-highly-religious are able to then turn their scrutiny to other factors, such as the oversteps of religious institutions or the incompatibility of creation mythology with scientific empiricism.

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<sup>35</sup> In the time since I started data collection, another study has appraised differences based on affiliation status (Langston et al 2015).

Secondly, increasing focus on misgivings with one's previous faith – and away from active recruitment efforts – can enrich conversion research. As a caveat, formally joining a new religion was a rarity. Nevertheless, in most cases, interviewees researched one or more potential religious options. I dealt with all those who actively investigated a new faith, not only those who officially joined. One key pattern stood out: those whose first misgivings were doctrinal showed the most susceptibility to researching a new faith, while first misgivings concerning institutions, congregations, or necessity were less likely to engage in research. This was particularly true for first misgivings of necessity, which caused respondents to discount organized religion altogether. However temporarily, doctrinal issues appeared the most possible to address with a new faith, whereas more worldly misgivings engender skepticism that a fresh scripture can ameliorate the shortcomings of one's previous faith. This finding broadens research into (actual, permanent) conversion to a new religion, turning attention to what was originally found lacking in the previous one. Greater consideration to misgivings of potential converts can account for receptivity to the evangelization and teachings of other faiths.

The analysis produced multiple examples of residual from one's religious upbringing. While their impact on present-day stances and actions was not overpowering, childhood religious intensity nevertheless exerted a significant impact on atheists' present-day dogmatism and zealotry that could not be accounted for by other factors. Through dogmatism and zealotry, religious upbringing influenced other present-day variations. These findings expand upon a previous survey which showed persistent differences between converts to Protestantism and those raised Protestant (Funk and Martinez 2014). That study considered only movement between branches of Christianity, demonstrating schemata from one's previous church carried over, despite not being endorsed by their receiving one. This study expanded the scope: rather

than merely switching between branches of the same religion, respondents in this study exited theism entirely. Despite the considerable overhaul to their most central beliefs, the schemata of respondents' upbringing still influenced the certainty of their beliefs, their engagement with outsiders, and their opinions of other beliefs. Rather than individuals being *tabulas rasa* – blank slates wiped clean after exit – certain schemata learned through religion can persist. What individuals were previously raised to believe about religion can carry over, particularly when schemata are not directly and consciously tied to their religion. While beliefs in god and miracles, for instance, do not persist, more abstract ideas and relationships can. Among atheists, one of the primary distinctions is how deeply – and genuinely – invested in religion they once were, whether merely nominally religious or deeply invested in the faith. In short, among atheists, how precisely they are ex-religious matters, accounting for a portion of the variation in their contemporary stances. Future research can extend this insight, going beyond the spectrum of childhood religious intensity to consider the implications of being raised without religion altogether. These 201 respondents demonstrate that the ex-religious are not merely a clean slate, but those rare individuals raised without religion can broaden understanding of precisely how the ex-religious differ from the never-religious. Expectations should be tempered, however, as even these individuals would not be wholly free from the influence of religion. In America, disbelievers of all varieties must still engage with religion, due to its pervasive – yet shifting – influence in the American public sphere (Smith 2011).

This study also highlighted shifts across cohorts of atheists, consisting of three prongs. Most notable is a shift from engaging religion on issues of rights, towards focusing on stewardship. This aligns with the increased prominence of scientific arguments for skepticism, as well as the highly visible scientists within the New Atheist Movement. Aligning atheism with

scientific empiricism – and framing religion as diametrically opposed to it – places progress and foresight as a paramount concern of younger atheists, to the detriment of issues focusing on rights. Secondly, later generations show less internal consistency in the stipulations they attach to being an atheist. This suggests a growing ‘shopping cart’ approach to atheism, paralleling bricolage among the spiritual-but-not-religious (Shrader 2006). The plethora of sources available to younger atheists – in the form of online posts, New Atheist authors, and non-theist peers – allow them to take a piecemeal approach, picking and choosing what exactly atheism entails. As a side-effect of the increasing connectivity and accessibility of non-theism, there is a proliferation of piecemeal, highly individualized conceptions of what it precisely entails. Finally, later generations of atheists are less likely to be epistemologically positive atheists. There are two explanations for this, which will require a panel study to distinguish. More likely, the modest decline in stigmatization makes it so those without complete and utter certainty are more comfortable applying the ‘atheist’ label, rather than deciding upon a weaker, more euphemistic alternative. As another possibility, retention may be greater among positive atheists. The latter option highlights the need for studies which consider retention among atheists, no longer merely assuming exiting religion is a one-way, permanent proposition. Overall, these three cohort differences demonstrate the shifting nature of atheism and disbelief among individual atheists. Despite the lack of a centralized organization, patterns and shifts nevertheless emerged among rank-and-file atheists over the past few decades.

Finally, the interview portion discovered differences in the efficacy of the Aunt Susan Principle. Contact with others outside one’s faith (or what one’s faith defines as righteous<sup>36</sup>) can

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<sup>36</sup> In the case of those raised in homophobic faiths, contact with LGBT folk, for instance.

liberalize one's beliefs and make one more accepting and ecumenical. However, there are limits to the power of contact. The liberalizing effects are most reliable with more malleable religions, where one possesses leeway to amend it in the face of the new information provided by contact and familiarity. In contrast, a sufficiently rigid faith does not possess the malleability needed to seamlessly accommodate information about and intimacy with out-groups. When childhood faiths cannot easily *bend* to accommodate new information about outsiders, there is increased likelihood of the contact being a key factor in a *break* with that faith. Furthermore, the analysis of the examples (and likelihood) of latitude adds onto the Aunt Susan Principle: while contact sparked some of the examples of latitude, actual, proximal familiarity was not required. Others arrived at the same dilemmas via thought experiments or encountering information online, rather than face-to-face contact. Thus, the Aunt Susan Principle should be extended to include virtual contact. The popularity of the internet provides greater opportunity for those in rigid faiths to encounter challenging information (and those in lenient faiths to encounter more liberalizing information).

### **Reflections on the Role of Upbringing**

In drawing each interview to a close, I invited respondents to reflect upon their experiences and speculate how their religious upbringing might have impacted their biography and exit narrative. Specifically, I asked respondents how their experiences might have differed, had they been raised with religion playing a greater or lesser role in their upbringing. To the best of my knowledge, this represents the first time a study posed this question.

Responses to the question varied. Some respondents believed it required too much extrapolation on their part, as their religious upbringing was so intertwined with their family, social circle, and identity that it was impossible to treat it as a single, isolated variable. Some

others dismissed the question, certain that they would have found their way out of theism via a similar process. Such certitude appears in earlier research. For instance, Chalfant's (2011) analysis of discourse on message boards found a strong predisposition towards essentializing disbelief as something inherent; posters portrayed atheism as their default state, temporarily deferred by a religious upbringing. Several interviewees similarly referenced a lack of a need for religion, in contrast to theists. Thomas recounted:

Thomas: The way I most often describe it to people is the void that some people say that they have: "I have this void in my life that can only be filled with god, can only be filled by religion." I just don't perceive myself to have that. So when I was no longer identifying as Catholic I don't really need a religion, cause I'm good [without religion].

Interviewer: Implying that for some people religion it's kind of a necessity for them? You're just not wired that way?

Thomas: Yeah. I don't know if it's a natural thing, like I was born without a need for religion. The way I was raised, religion was held up as just a thing you do, but not a very important thing that gives your life meaning. There are lots of people I've met since then that have different causes for religion. Lots of people say "there's a hole in your heart that can only be filled by god." I don't really feel that.

However, interviewees like Thomas represent a minority. Most offered some conjecture about how their circumstances, experiences, and present sense of self might have differed if their religious upbringing were notably different. For some, their doubting period could have come either sooner or later or been either briefer or more protracted. For others, their outlook towards religion might have changed based on their earlier experiences with it; they might have more or less acrimony towards organized religion. Most intriguing, however, a third of the interviewees reflected that they could conceivably not be sitting in the room with me that day, being interviewed, were they raised differently. These seventeen people speculated that – with a different emphasis on religion – they might never have left.



Vikram was open to that possibility. I summarized his biography in an earlier chapter. His mother raised him strictly Hindu, although accepting of other faiths. Upon arriving in America as a pre-teen, he began to experience ‘vicarious fire-walking.’ His upbringing led him to expect that strictly adhering to some religion (whether Hinduism or otherwise) was necessary to live well; experiencing counterfactuals in Illinois sparked his questioning. As he reflected, had he been raised with less religion, his expectations for the necessity of religion in his life would not have been so critical. Vikram’s doubts might never been catalyzed and he might still be Hindu today, had his mother’s stringent socialization not have imparted the expectation.

I think if I grew with a little bit less [religion], in the same circumstances: I grew up in India then came here. If I grew up with less religious influences I probably would not have become an atheist. I think, there was such a strong emphasis back there and I came here and everything was so radically different. I just kind of let it go. But if it played a more minor role, I don’t think it would have been as big of a deal to come here and experience such a different way of thinking. But it would’ve probably been less of a deal. I probably wouldn’t have become atheist.

Beyond acknowledging the role of religious intensity in his narrative, Vikram also highlighted the watershed event of immigrating to America. It proved vital in undermining his preconceived notions about religion’s necessity in day-to-day life.

Diana reached a similar conclusion, albeit approaching the thought experiment from the other side of the hypothetical: how a *more* religious childhood would have impacted her. I also summarized Diana’s narrative in an earlier chapter. Raised Presbyterian by her father, her mother grew up in China, without any religion. Diana’s mother was upfront with her about not believing in God, though she occasionally accompanied the family to church. Her Presbyterian church’s doctrine that belief in Jesus Christ was necessary to enter heaven wore on Diana, as it implied the condemnation of those who did not believe, such as her mother and some friends. Reflecting back on her experiences, Diana noted that she sees questioning one’s values as a natural part of

adolescence. What varies is how one reacts to the challenge: breaking with the belief system or managing to resolve the problems. Diana suspected that, if she was more heavily inculcated into her church's beliefs, she would have eventually been able to accept its stance regarding salvation.

If I was raised much more strongly religious, I think I would still be religious today. I'd still have calcified it. Because I feel like everybody has that crisis when they're sixteen or seventeen and you either scar over it and keep on going or you break out of it entirely. And I feel like I would've scarred over it, like kept in it, kept saying the same things for the rest of my life. If I made it past sixteen, seventeen I would've been religious for my entire life.

While Diana saw her questioning of the church's stances as inevitable, how they are resolved depends on the centrality of the position religion played in her childhood.

Overall, respondents demonstrated a variety of replies while commenting on how their upbringing influenced their journey. Like Vikram, some thought less religion would have made exit unlikely, while Diana and others thought more religion might make exit unlikely. Vikram thought certain circumstances could have precluded the very possibility of misgivings, while Diana thought certain circumstances could have altered the resolution of those misgivings.

All in all, interviewees were attuned to how their upbringing colored their later experiences with religion and atheism. Although many did not go as far as Vikram and Diana to speculate that they might never have left religion, others offered conjecture about the length and acrimony of their exit experiences. Some, like Vikram, highlighted particular life events as essential to their exit process.

These results differ markedly from the discourse in message boards (Chalfant 2011), which serves to essentialize disbelief as a default state merely deferred by a religious upbringing. Outside of message board discourse, many atheists show a more nuanced understanding of the

role that their upbringing and experiences played in molding their present identity and beliefs. This reiterates the importance of sample design, as organizations and message board discourse diverges from the broader population. Secondly, this underscores one of the broadest points of this study: not only do the circumstances of one's childhood influence his or her experiences exiting religion and how they define atheism, but atheists are cognizant of the effects these factors play in their own narratives.

### **Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

There are two possible methodologies for investigating religious upbringing, first misgivings, and experiences leaving religion: sample current atheists and inquire about their recollections – this study's methodology – or cast a wide net by longitudinally polling many religious individuals (a small subset of which will become atheist). Presupposing unlimited time and access, the latter option is preferable.

Foremost, a longitudinal study can consider cases where respondents have an existential crisis about their faith, yet work through it and remain in their religion. In comparison, this study only considers successful exits from theism. It risks committing survivorship bias. Doing so overlooks those misgivings which are resolved within one's religion, as well as other trajectories which do not terminate in atheism, such as conversion to another religion or becoming an unaffiliated believer. A longitudinal study offers the opportunity to consider what misgivings and circumstances are less likely to lead to exit. It also can investigate whether doctrinal misgivings are truly more likely to lead to research into other religions, or whether those with other misgivings are simply more likely to find suitable religious alternatives, and thus not become atheists.

Furthermore, recollections inherently contain a trace of bias, with certain facets being either stressed or downplayed (Zuckerman 2012). A longitudinal design could prevent this possibility, eliminating the chance of respondents' recollections being misremembered due to the passage of time. Polling first doubts as they occur, prior to potential affiliation with atheist organizations, also protects from the biasing effect of organizational rhetoric (Snow and Machalek 1983). For instance, Jehovah's Witnesses internalize the Watchtower movement's rhetoric when asked to recount their conversions (Beckford 1978). This possibility underscores the need to pay attention to the influences of the New Atheist Movement, organizations, and peers, as they provide a vocabulary from which respondents may draw.

Building a longitudinal study from the ground up is not without its difficulties. As atheists comprise a minute part of the larger population (Hout and Fischer 2002, Zuckerman 2007), a very large initial sample would be required to yield 201 atheists upon completion. Secondly, expressing one's doubts to others represents a pivotal step in the exiting process (Smith 2011), so interviewing participants about their burgeoning misgivings carries the possibility of unduly influencing what it aims to measure.

Another long-term study could also address retention in atheism. Sampling current atheists once inadvertently portrays the transition from a religious identity to atheism as one-directional. There are cases, however, which contradict this implicit assumption: previous studies have demonstrated a substantial number of individuals who leave religion eventually return (Hadaway and Roof 1979, Smith and Denton 2005) – although many of these individuals are unchurched believers, rather than bona fide atheists. Additionally, cross-national life-course studies find that belief in god tends to rise later in individuals' lives (Smith 2012). While most returnees are not atheists – but rather unchurched believers or those offering less certainty of

god's non-existence – future research should nevertheless consider one's trajectory into atheism as not necessarily terminal. One respondent, Leslie, contacted me after data collection to explain that she no longer identified as an atheist, but instead jettisoned the term in favor of other non-theist designations. This underscores the need for a follow-up study which considers whether affiliation, certain misgivings, or other circumstances make one more or less likely to still identify as an atheist after a certain number of years. It could also provide evidence supporting the validity of the dogmatism scale.<sup>37</sup>

One problematic facet of interviewing respondents only once, with interviews occurring over a fairly short timeframe<sup>38</sup> is that it is difficult – if not impossible – to neatly disentangle cohort from time. Respondents' birth cohort and age are tangled in the analysis, as their cohort is difficult – if not impossible – to distinguish from the passage of time. Instead, I drew from previous work to make informed speculation about which played a role in the observed relationships. Eventually, subsequent studies will be needed to disentangle the two and provide a definitive picture.

Future work also needs to systematically measure parenting style. Previous research linked parental religion with parenting styles on issues such as corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat 1993). Children's feelings of alienation can lead to a withdrawal from religion and other family activities (Bengston et al 2017). It is possible that some of what is attributed to childhood religious intensity is actually indirect, instead due to differences in parenting style. Given the difficulties in accurately polling respondents – some of whom were in their seventies – on their

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<sup>37</sup> For the curious, Leslie's dogmatism score was approximately average for the sample.

<sup>38</sup> Although members of my committee may feel otherwise about the sheer length of time this project took.

parents' child-rearing strategies in their early childhood, to safely control for parenting style would likely require a grandly ambitious longitudinal study, with all its aforementioned difficulties.

Also, a study with a larger sample size offers two possible improvements. It can consider the specific schemata imparted by various religious traditions, and whether they persist. I compared Catholics and Protestants at times, but my analysis was hampered by a small sample size and a lack of specificity into respondents' precise childhood religion. A larger study – one placing greater emphasis on exact denominations – could allow for more comprehensive consideration of residuals across religious traditions. Secondly, a larger sample size would draw sufficient non-White respondents so race and ethnicity would not have to be collapsed into a simple binary. View findings about race tentatively, until confirmed by a larger study.

Finally, future research can broaden this study's population of interest to include atheists who were raised wholly without religion. While I focused on those receiving at least a modicum of religious socialization, those raised without religion offer another important piece of the puzzle. As a small subgroup within an already small group, they constitute a prohibitively difficult group to reach for a large sample. Nevertheless, a study which includes a sizeable portion raised without religion can ascertain precisely how being an 'ex-theist' influences atheists, demonstrating how any previous relationship within religion shapes one's understanding of atheism and religion.

These examples demonstrate the considerable research yet to be done in exploring individual atheists' definitions of and experiences with atheism and religion. In a thus far underexplored topic, there are frontiers in every direction. This study serves as first step,

demonstrating the agency atheists exhibit in leaving religion, while still acknowledging the constraints they experience.

## Appendices

## Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

## Atheist who was raised in religion?

Take part in a sociological research study on the sources of variations amongst atheists. This study – run through the University of Illinois at Chicago – aims to add to our understanding of atheism, by evaluating differences in definition of atheism, organizational membership, feelings about organized religion, etc. Applicants will be polled on their religious upbringing, reasons for leaving religion, and the meaning and significance they presently attach to atheism.

**To be eligible you must**

- Be at least 18 years of age
- Currently identify yourself as an atheist
- Have been raised with some degree of religion

**The study is comprised of 2 parts:**

1. Online survey (administered to 200 applicants)

Time commitment: about 20-30 minutes

Reimbursement: 1-in-100 chance to win \$100 amazon gift card

- ## 2. Audio-recorded interview (administered to 50 applicants)

Time commitment: about 30-60 minutes

Reimbursement: \$10 for your time

To enter the study or get more information about the study, please contact Caleb Schaffner, Sociology PhD candidate, cschaf3@uic.edu or (630)272-7105

**Please tear and take one if you meet the requirements.**

[illegible]



## Appendix B: Online Survey Text

Before we get started, please type your 5-digit ID code provided by the principal investigator.

---

To reiterate, do you consider yourself to be an atheist?

\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_ No

(If no, survey will end here)

### *Demographics*

1. In what year were you born?

---

(If subject is younger than 18, the survey will end here.)

2. What racial/ethnic group do you identify as?

\_\_\_\_ White

\_\_\_\_ Black

\_\_\_\_ Latino/a

\_\_\_\_ Asian

\_\_\_\_ Biracial/multiracial

\_\_\_\_ Other

3. Do you identify as male or female?

\_\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_\_ Female

4. Which would you describe yourself as belonging to?

\_\_\_\_ Upper class

\_\_\_\_ Middle class

\_\_\_\_ Working class

\_\_\_\_ Lower class

5. Which best describes your political views on social issues?

\_\_\_\_ Very liberal

\_\_\_\_ Somewhat liberal

\_\_\_\_ Moderate

\_\_\_\_ Somewhat conservative

\_\_\_\_ Very conservative

6. Which best describes your political views on economic issues?

\_\_\_\_ Very liberal

\_\_\_\_ Somewhat liberal

\_\_\_\_ Moderate

\_\_\_\_ Somewhat conservative

\_\_\_\_ Very conservative

7. What is your sexual orientation?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. Has your sexual orientation been stable, since you've been sexually active?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

9. What is your relationship status?

\_\_\_\_\_ Never married

\_\_\_\_\_ Married

\_\_\_\_\_ Engaged

\_\_\_\_\_ Cohabiting

\_\_\_\_\_ Divorced/separated

\_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

10. How many years of education have you completed? (Example HS graduate with no college = 12 years)

\_\_\_\_\_

11. If your education is ongoing, how many years do you intend to complete?

\_\_\_\_\_

*Confirming identity/beliefs*

12. Which option best describes how you currently define yourself?

\_\_\_\_atheist

\_\_\_\_agnostic

\_\_\_\_spiritual, but not religious

\_\_\_\_theist (belonging to some religion)

13. Which best describes your current view?

\_\_\_\_I am certain there is no such thing as God or a higher power.

\_\_\_\_There is not possible for humans to know whether or not God or a higher power exists.

\_\_\_\_I, personally, do not know whether God or a higher power exists.

\_\_\_\_I believe that God or a higher power exists.

\_\_\_\_Whether or not God exists is of no concern to me

*Upbringing*

14a. Did you ever attend a religious school, from pre-school through high school?

\_\_\_\_\_

14b. During what grades?

\_\_\_\_\_

(If respondent answers “yes” for 14a)

15. If you have not lived in your current city your entire life, please list which year(s) you and your family moved.

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16a. What religion were you raised as? Please specify to the best of your ability.

---

16b. If applicable, please list the specific denomination, to the best of your ability.

---

*Childhood Religiosity scale*

17. On a scale from 0 to 4, to what extent did those who taught you about religion...

1. Stress religion as the most central part of your life?
2. Emphasize regularly attending religious services at your house of worship?
3. Make religion relevant to day-to-day living?
4. Stress reverence and obedience for religious leaders?
5. Insist upon you making a personal commitment to God?
6. Provide a strict interpretation of scripture and religious rules?
7. Stress that you must follow these religious rules absolutely, without exception?
8. Have you pray regularly with them (i.e. before meals)?
9. Encourage you to pray on your own (i.e. before bed)?
10. Emphasize how wrong it would be to leave your religion?
11. Attend events with your religious community aside from regular services (e.g. church potlucks or choir rehearsals)?
12. Encourage you to read your holy book or other religious texts on your own?

0 = Not at all

1 = A slight extent

2 = A moderate extent

3 = A considerable extent

4 = A great extent

*Childhood Religious Particularism scale*

18. On a scale from 0 to 4, to what extent did those who raised you...

1. Stress that your religion was the only true one?
2. State that people who did not follow your religion would go to hell?
3. Stress that all other forms of morality, including those of other faiths, are inferior to your religion's morality?
4. Encourage you to learn about other faiths?
5. Encourage you to respect other faiths?
6. State that people from other faiths had to convert to your religion?

0 = Not at all

1 = A slight extent

2 = A moderate extent

3 = A considerable extent

4 = A great extent

*Exit questions*

19. At what age did you first begin to have misgivings about the religion in which you were raised? (Feel free to specify to the month, if known.)

\_\_\_\_\_

20. At   (respondent's age of first misgivings)   what proportion of your friends or family did you know to be of another faith?

- a. None
- b. Very few
- c. Less than half
- d. About half
- e. A majority
- f. Almost all or all

21. At what age did you no longer consider yourself a member of the religion in which you were raised? Note: not necessarily an atheist yet, just no longer identifying as   (respondent's childhood religion)  . (Feel free to specify to the month, if known.)

\_\_\_\_\_

22. At what age did you first consider yourself to be an “atheist”? (Feel free to specify to the month, if known.)

\_\_\_\_\_



*Present atheism*

23. Nowadays, what portion of your friends are also non-religious?

- ☐ None
- ☐ Very few
- ☐ Less than half
- ☐ About half
- ☐ A majority
- ☐ Almost all or all

24. There is some disagreement about what are the most important projects facing atheists in America today. Rank the following from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important).

- ☐ Countering religion's short-sighted disregard of the future
- ☐ Dispel the assumption that everyone believes in God
- ☐ Protecting civil liberties from religious encroachment
- ☐ Stopping religious groups and individuals from standing in the way of human progress
- ☐ Ending tax-exempt status for churches

*Dogmatism Scale*

25. On a scale from 0 to 4, rate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. Anyone honestly seeking the truth will end up believing as I do.
2. One can never be absolutely certain his or her convictions are correct.
3. I could never doubt the things I now believe.
4. I have never discovered a system of belief explaining everything to my satisfaction.
5. I will always remain open to the possibility of other ways of viewing the world.
6. Time will prove my opinions to be correct.
7. There is no argument that could ever make me believe in God.
8. I am absolutely certain my ideas about fundamental issues are correct.
9. "Open-minded" is a pseudonym for lacking strong convictions.
10. I have yet to reach definitive conclusions about some central issues in life.

0 = Strongly disagree

1 = Somewhat disagree

2 = Neither agree nor disagree

3 = Somewhat agree

4 = Strongly agree

*Atheist organization*

26a. Do you belong to any atheist/secular humanist organizations? Yes/No

26b If so, which one(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

26b follow-up. To what degree are you involved? Check all that apply.

\_\_\_\_ Membership alone

\_\_\_\_ Donating money

\_\_\_\_ Submitting written material

\_\_\_\_ Recruiting other members

\_\_\_\_ Organizing and decision-making

26b follow-up. How did you hear about (name of the organization) ?

\_\_\_\_ Friend told me about it or convinced me to join.

\_\_\_\_ Heard about it through another organization or discussion board

\_\_\_\_ Searching about information on such organizations on my own

\_\_\_\_ Some other way

27a. Do you regularly participate in any atheist discussion boards online? Yes/No

27b. If so, which site(s)? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

27b follow-up. How did you decide to join (name of message board) ?

\_\_\_\_ Friend told me about it or convinced me to join.

\_\_\_\_ Heard about it through another organization or discussion board

\_\_\_\_ Decided to join it on my own

*Political zealotry scale*

28. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

1. Religion always does more harm than good.
2. If someone mentions God or religion, I am sure to mention that I'm an atheist.
3. I consider it my duty to be vigilant against violations of the separation of church and state in my local community.
4. I am less likely to vote for a candidate who attends church regularly.
5. Issues like removing "under God" from the pledge of allegiance are not merely symbolic.

0 = Not at all

1 = A slight extent

2 = A moderate extent

3 = A considerable extent

4 = A great extent

*Symbolic boundaries*

29. Some people consider anyone who doesn't believe in God to be an atheist while others have more demanding criteria. Would you consider someone to be an atheist if he or she...

1. Believes in astrology (the significance of zodiac signs)?
2. Still attends church regularly with his or her family?
3. Has never proclaimed their atheism to any friends or family members?
4. Believes ghosts exist?
5. Believes there's no way to ever definitively know whether or not God exists?
6. Believes in reincarnation?
7. Considers himself or herself to be "spiritual"?

0 = This applies to me and I consider myself an atheist

1 = I would consider this person to be an atheist

2 = I would be hesitant about considering this person to be an atheist.

3 = I would not consider this person to be an atheist.

30. When confronted with a moral dilemma, which criterion do you typically use to determine the just course of action?

- a. Which option follows from abstract moral laws (Deontological ethics).
- b. Which option will create the most good for the most people (Utilitarian ethics).

## **Appendix C: Interview Guide**

(NOTE: these questions will serve as a basic roadmap. The ordering of the questions may shift or additional probing questions may be asked, if a new vein of inquiry arises.)

### **Confirmation:**

-Just to confirm the results from the survey: do you identify as an atheist?

### **Pre-misgivings:**

-What did your religion mean to you, while growing up? OR How big a part of your life/identity was it?

-Did you have friends outside your religious denomination while growing up?

-Did your faith cause any tension with other aspects of your life while growing up?

### **Misgivings:**

-What were the first misgivings you experienced with the religion in which you were raised?

(Clarification, if needed: Misgivings: feeling conflicted about your birth religion, for any cognitive or emotional reason)

-And how did you deal with this problem, once you acknowledged it?

-Who else did you share your misgivings with, if anyone? What is their relationship to you? What was their reaction?

-Did you read any books or websites while trying to resolve your misgivings?

-Did any subsequent misgivings arise during this period when you were still questioning your religion?

-During this period, what steps, if any, did you take to distance yourself from your religion?

(Clarification, if needed: changes in religious practice, familiarizing yourself with scientific explanations that may have been omitted from your education, reading secular or atheist authors)

### **Exit & Atheism:**

-Was your decision purely internal or did you make any outward changes to signify this?

-Did you consider joining any other religion after you exited your original one?

-Did you consider yourself an atheist after leaving? Why? If not, what label did you first apply to yourself?

(If not an atheist immediately) What were the sources of misgivings or doubt that finally caused you to decisively consider yourself an atheist?

-If someone, either a devout believer or someone questioning his or her faith, were to ask you why you are an atheist, what would your response be?

-Throughout the entire doubting process, from your first doubts to becoming atheist, did anyone you knew have a particularly strong influence on you?

-Did any atheist writers? Do you still pay attention their work to the same extent you used to?

Public sphere and zealotry:

-Who all have you disclosed yourself to as atheist? What is their relationship to you? What was their reaction?

-What do you consider yourself to share in common with other atheists? What differences do you have with other atheists you know? (or) How would things be different if everyone was atheist?

-If not a part of any organization: Some atheists opt to join an atheist organization. Why did you choose not to?

-If a part of any organization: Some atheists opt not to join an atheist organization. Why did you choose to?

Residual Question:

-Are there any ways where you still feel the influence of your religious upbringing in your life? If so, how? (or) How do you think your experience would be different if you were raised with less/more religion?



## **Appendix D: Summary of Common Survey Variables**

The following appendix gives an overview of the survey variables which were present in multiple analyses. It provides the question phrasing, valid answers, descriptive statistics, and any potential pitfalls to keep in mind during the analyses.

### *Childhood Religiosity*

I measured childhood religiosity with a series of twelve variables considering how much emphasis respondents' parents and others who raised them put on religion. I modeled the questions off of a scale used by Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006). The questions are as follows "To what extent did those who raised you..."

1. Stress religion as the most central part of your life?
2. Emphasize regularly attending religious services at your house of worship?
3. Make religion relevant to day-to-day living?
4. Stress reverence and obedience for religious leaders?
5. Insist upon you making a personal commitment to God?
6. Provide a strict interpretation of scripture and religious rules?
7. Stress that you must follow these religious rules absolutely, without exception?
8. Have you pray regularly with them (i.e. before meals)?
9. Encourage you to pray on your own (i.e. before bed)?
10. Emphasize how wrong it would be to leave your religion?
11. Attend events with your religious community aside from regular services (e.g. church potlucks or choir rehearsals)?
12. Encourage you to read your holy book or other religious texts on your own?

Each question had 5 potential ordinal responses.

- Not at all
- A slight extent
- A moderate extent
- A considerable extent

- A great extent

I coded the responses to each question from 0 to 4, then combined into a single scale, ranging from 0 (minimal childhood religiosity) to 48 (maximum childhood religiosity). The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of .94, indicating the twelve measures are largely measuring the same underlying construct. The scale has a mean score of 25.07 (nearly halfway to the upper bound of 48) and a standard deviation of 13.01. Responses ran the full spectrum, with one respondent reporting a minimum childhood religiosity and one reporting a maximum on the scale.

Question two posed a minor issue for the scale. After the interview portion (and once the audio recording had stopped), one ex-Hindu respondent shared that focusing on "regularly attending religious services" may overlook ways in which Hindus tend to practice. Although this represents just a single item on the twelve-item scale, this critique offers something to bear in mind during the analyses.

More generally, both religious intensity scales ask about the impact of "those who raised you." This choice of phrasing potentially downplays the experiences of those few unique respondents who were self-starters in religion, practicing chiefly of their own volition and exceeding the religious intensity of their parents and guardians.

### *Childhood Religious Particularism*

Next, a series of six questions measured the religious particularism of one's upbringing. This, again, was loosely based off of Hunsberger and Altemeyer's (2006) childhood religiosity scale. However, Hunsberger and Altemeyer's original scale lumped childhood religiosity and particularism together. Respondents were asked "To what extent those that raised you..."

1. Stress that your religion was the only true one?
2. State that people who did not follow your religion would go to hell?

3. Stress that all other forms of morality, including those of other faiths, are inferior to your religion's morality?
4. Encourage you to learn about other faiths?
5. Encourage you to respect other faiths?
6. State that people from other faiths had to convert to your religion?

The questions had the following valid ordinal responses:

- Not at all
- A slight extent
- A moderate extent
- A considerable extent
- A great extent

I reverse coded questions four and five, so that a higher number signified more particularism in respondents' childhood religion. I coded the responses from 0 (low) to 4 (high), then combined them in a scale ranging from 0 to a maximum of 24. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .88. The scale had a mean of 11.60 (very near the midpoint) and a standard deviation of 6.66. Responses ran the gamut, with seven apiece reporting the minimum and maximum childhood religious particularism.

Question four may be slightly misleading for respondents in particularistic faiths which stressed evangelization. Two interviewees – Matilda and Terrence – both discussed learning the specifics of other religions with the aim of converting outsiders. Terrence even completed a mission trip to India for that purpose. Thus, the question may understate the childhood religious particularism of a few select respondents.

### *Dogmatism*

Two survey scales measured facets of respondents' current beliefs and actions. The first of these was a ten-item scale measuring dogmatism about one's current beliefs. I loosely based it on an adaptation of Hunsberger and Altemeyer's (2006) DOG scale. The majority of the

questions contained no explicit mention of atheism or god. However, when viewed in the context of a broader study concerning atheism, respondents inevitably considered questions as referencing atheism and religion. I asked respondents to rate how they agreed with the following statements:

1. Anyone honestly seeking the truth will end up believing as I do.
2. One can never be absolutely certain his or her convictions are correct.
3. I could never doubt the things I now believe.
4. I have never discovered a system of belief explaining everything to my satisfaction.
5. I will always remain open to the possibility of other ways of viewing the world.
6. Time will prove my opinions to be correct.
7. There is no new evidence that could ever make me believe in God.
8. I am absolutely certain my ideas about fundamental issues are correct.
9. "Open-minded" is a pseudonym for lacking strong convictions.
10. I have yet to reach definitive conclusions about some central issues in life.

And they were provided the following potential responses.

- Strongly disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Strongly agree

I recoded the second, fourth, fifth, and tenth questions, so that the responses could be totaled into a single scale, ranging from forty (maximum dogmatism) to zero. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .64. It had a mean of 17.02 and a standard deviation of 5.77.

### *Zealotry*

Dogmatism measures the private aspect of atheism, which are not outwardly manifested. In contrast, zealotry considers public variations among atheists, in their political orientation and interactions with others. Zealotry can be succinctly defined as a measure of how fervently one

injects their atheism in public life. Its five items polled respondents' focus on fighting perceived incursions of religion into their life, in both the public sphere and day-to-day interactions. The questions were as follows: "To what extent do you agree with the following statements?"

1. Religion always does more harm than good.
2. Religion has no place in the public sphere.
3. I consider it my duty to be vigilant against violations of the separation of church and state in my local community.
4. I am less likely to vote for a candidate who attends church regularly.
5. Issues like removing "under God" from the pledge of allegiance are not just symbolic.

The responses were:

- Not at all
- A slight extent
- A moderate extent
- A considerable extent
- A great extent

I combined the responses into a single scale. The scale ranged from twenty (highest zealotry) to zero (the lowest zealotry). It had a Cronbach's alpha of .64, a mean of 9.28, and a standard deviation of 4.09.

### *Political Views*

Two survey questions gauged respondents' political views. I asked respondents "Which best describes your political views on social issues" and "Which best describes your political views on economic issues." I offered the following possible responses to both questions:

- Very Liberal
- Somewhat Liberal
- Moderate
- Somewhat Conservative
- Very Conservative

The responses were coded so zero was very conservative and four was very liberal, effectively making the questions a measure of how socially and economically liberal one is. The median for social issues was “very liberal” and the median for economic issues was “somewhat liberal”. The mean values of being socially and economically liberal were 3.4 and 2.7, respectively.

The sample was remarkably liberal on social issues, not terribly surprising, given backlash against the marriage of the Religious Right to conservative political aims (Hout and Fischer 2002, Hout and Fischer 2014). The two measures have a Pearson’s correlation coefficient of .48.

#### *Birth Year, Timing of Misgivings and Declaration of Atheism*

Three questions polled respondents on the year of their birth, their age at first misgivings, and their age when they decided they were atheist. The latter two variables were subsequently recoded into respondents’ year of first misgivings and year declaring atheism by adding their responses to their birth year.

Birth year ranged from 1940 to 1996, with a mean value of 1986. It has a standard deviation of 10.08. (It was recoded so the earliest year, 1940, equals zero, to make the constants of the regression equations more natural to interpret.)

The mean year of one’s first misgivings was 2000, with a standard deviation of 10.25. (Again, this was recoded so the earliest year, 1952, equals zero, to aid in interpretation.)

The mean year that atheism was declared was 2006. (Also recoded so the earliest year, 1959, equals zero, to aid in interpretation.) The standard deviation was 8.53. The difference

between birth year and year declaring atheism was 20 years, in line with other findings that early adulthood is the peak period for leaving religion (e.g. Regnerus and Uecker 2006).

Sampling largely on college campuses yielded a sample with many young adults, as evidenced by the mean birth year of 1986. This contrasts with sampling through organizations, which often yield mean ages exceeding middle age (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, Pasquale 2010). While perhaps overcompensating for issues in previous studies, a younger sample is preferable when focusing on recollection of misgivings. The sample's low overall age results in less time passing since one's misgivings and exits, minimizing the possibility of memories degrading over time.

Since some analyses focus on length of the overall doubting period, a variable was produced subtracting the age one first had misgivings from their age they became atheist. Doubting periods ranged from zero years (instantaneous) to twenty-seven years. The mean length of doubting period was 5.2 years, with a standard deviation of 4.9 years.

### *Race and Gender*

I provided respondents a multiple-choice option for male, female, or other (with a blank provided). Three respondents gave non-binary responses to the question; unfortunately, this number was too small to draw any sort of conclusion. For race/ethnicity, I provided respondents the options of White, Black, Latino, Asian, American Indian, Biracial/Multiracial, and Other. To increase the explanatory power and deal with the few responses in some categories, I broke race and gender into privileged/non-privileged binaries for the analysis: Male/Non-Male and White/Non-White. The analyses are chiefly concerned with whether Whites and Males can weather the stigma of atheism more easily than those who are not privileged in race and gender, who have to deal with the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. The

following cross-tabulation shows the total number of respondents in each gender and racial combination.

**Table 59.** Frequency of Each Combination of Race and Gender (from Survey)

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Non-Binary</i>	<i>Total</i>
White	81	66	3	150
Black	4	3	0	7
Latino	7	8	0	15
Asian	9	8	0	17
Bi/Multi-racial	5	4	0	9
Other	3	0	0	3
Total	109	89	3	201

Only forty percent of the sample are White males. There is a considerable amount of variation on race and gender, making both effective control variables.

#### *Past and Present Social Circle*

Two survey questions evaluated the composition of respondents' social circle when they had their first misgivings and their present-day social circle. The questions measured somewhat difference aspects of one's social circle. The first asked "At [Age respondent gave for first misgivings], what portion of your friends and family did you know to be of a different faith?" The second asked, "Nowadays, what portion of your friends are also non-religious?" The two questions are slightly incongruent, in two ways. The first includes family, while the latter does not: family ties and religion play a larger role when many first start having doubts in their teens, whereas individuals possess more agency to change their friend group overtime, rather than their family's beliefs. Secondly, both questions measure a different aspect of the religion of one's social circle: the first question gauges the heterogeneity of one's social circle upon first



misgivings, in order to ascertain how closed one's social network was when questioning began. In contrast, the second question asks about one's present-day social circle being non-religious, measuring the secularity of one's present acquaintances. I gave the first question the label 'Heterogeneity of Social Circle at First Misgivings' and labeled the second 'Amount of Non-Religious in Present-Day Social Circle.'

Both questions offered six potential answers:

- None
- Very few
- Less than half
- About half
- A majority
- Almost all or all

**Table 60.** Percentage of Each Response for Heterogeneity of Social Circle at First Misgivings (from Survey)

<i>Proportion of Social Circle Outside One's Faith at First Misgivings</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
None	16.4%
Very few	40.8%
Less than half	14.4%
About half	12.4%
A majority	10.0%
Almost all or all	6.0%

This variable was treated as if it were interval-ratio, ranging from zero ('none') to five ('Almost all or all'). This scale had a mean of 2.8 and a standard deviation of 1.4.

**Table 61.** Percentage of Each Response for Amount of Non-Religious in Present-Day Social Circle (from Survey)

<i>Proportion of Non-Religious in Present-Day Social Circle</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
None	1.5%
Very few	11.9%
Less than half	16.4%
About half	25.9%
A majority	36.3%
Almost all or all	8.0%

This variable was similarly treated as if it were interval-ratio, ranging from zero ('none') to five ('Almost all or all'). This scale had a mean of 3.1 and a standard deviation of 1.2.

The two measures of social circle have no significant correlation with each other. After leaving religion, many experience shifts in relationships and lifestyle, reflected in the disjunction between the two measures.

### *Affiliation*

Two questions measured affiliation. I later combined the two into a single yes or no scale for the analyses. The questions asked respondents if they "belong to any atheist/secular humanist organizations" and if they "regularly participate in any atheist discussion boards online." The phrasing of the latter question precluded the possibility of lurking or sporadic participation on any board. The percentage of affiliated atheists likely would have been higher, were 'lurkers' also measured. However, 'lurking' does not represent sustained participation as a de facto member of an online community.

Respondents had the option of listing up to three forms of each, if applicable. In the interview portion, many respondents revealed that their participation in organizations was at the

local level and more socially-motivated than politically-motivated. Most organizational membership is through either local meet-ups or campus organizations. Similarly, much of the online participation occurred through social networking sites, namely Facebook and Reddit. In total, 19.8% of the sample had some form of participation. The other four fifths refrained from affiliating.

### *Childhood Religion*

Finally, I polled respondents on their childhood religion. Answers were problematic, as many included less detail than originally intended. Some did not specify their Protestant denomination with enough detail to distinguish between mainlines, evangelicals, and Black Protestants. A few respondents just answered “Christian” and are included in the ‘Other Christian’ category along with Russian Orthodox respondents and others. These difficulties limit the uses of the religion variable. It only occurs when a hypothesis specifically calls for it.

Finally, unexpected but not problematic, three respondents grew up in multiple religions and appear in the ‘Dual Upbringing’ category. Charles was one of these individuals. In the interview, he explained that his father is Catholic and his mother is Jewish. They raised him with instruction in both Catholicism and Judaism, sending him to classes to learn the details of each. They intended for Charles to choose between the two upon turning thirteen. He delayed the choice a few more years, before choosing Judaism (albeit temporarily).

The distribution of childhood religion is provided below.

**Table 62.** Percentage of Respondents' Childhood Religion (from Survey)

<i>Childhood Religion</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Catholic	40.5%
Protestant	42.0%
Other Christian	6.5%
Jewish	5.0%
Muslim	.5%
Hindu	2.5%
Buddhist	1.0%
Sikh	.5%
Dual Upbringing	1.5%

## Appendix E: Regression Predicting Zealotry

Due to childhood religious intensity's lack of impact on affiliation choices when accounting for zealotry, it is fruitful to consider how the two factors precisely impact zealotry. I present a series of multiple regressions exploring the question below.

**Table 63.** Multiple Regressions Predicting Zealotry Scale (from Survey)

	<i>Childhood Religious Intensity</i>	<i>+ Period and Demographics</i>	<i>+ Affiliation</i>
Childhood Religiosity	-.05 (.03)	-.05 (.03)	-.07* (.03)
Childhood Religious Particularism	.23*** (.06)	.24*** (.06)	.22*** (.06)
Birth year		.02 (.05)	.03 (.05)
Year Atheist		-.02 (.06)	-.01 (.06)
White		.16 (.66)	.36 (.63)
Male		.12 (.59)	.01 (.56)
Affiliation			3.39*** (.69)
Constant	7.75*** (.65)	7.71*** (2.19)	6.56** (2.07)
N	191	189	188
R <sup>2</sup>	.09***	.09**	.20***
RMSE	3.95	3.97	3.73

The first regression considers the role of childhood religiosity and childhood religious particularism on zealotry. Together, the two measures account for nine percent of the total variation in zealotry. Controlling for the other measure, only childhood religious particularism has a unique impact. Each unit rise in the religious particularism during one's childhood is predicted to result in a quarter-unit rise in zealotry ( $p < .001$ ), holding childhood religiosity constant.

The results remain the same while accounting for demographic and time-period controls: childhood religious particularism has an impact, but there is still no unique impact of childhood religiosity.

Finally, to entertain the possibility that affiliation actually is the cause of zealotry (rather than vice versa), I included a regression equation which added affiliation. Affiliation explains about a tenth of the variation in zealotry, as affiliates tend to be about 3.4-units higher in zealotry, accounting for other controls. Childhood religious particularism's unique impact remains significant ( $p < .001$ ) and unchanged upon controlling for zealotry. However, controlling for affiliation (on the assumption affiliation impacts zealotry), leads to childhood religiosity having a significant ( $p < .05$ ), negative impact. Each one-unit rise in childhood religiosity is predicted to result in a .07 unit drop in zealotry.

Altogether, these regressions demonstrate how childhood religious intensity impacts zealotry – and show how its direct influence on affiliation disappears upon controlling for zealotry. Those raised with higher levels of religious particularism become more zealous atheists. There is a more modest amount of evidence that those with higher levels of childhood religiosity wind up being slightly less zealous as atheists.

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Vita

***Caleb Schaffner***

*Curriculum Vitae*

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2006: *Northern Illinois University*

B.A.: Sociology (Summa Cum Laude)

Minors: Philosophy, Political Science

2009: *University of Illinois at Chicago*

M.A.: Sociology

Concentration: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

M.A. paper title: "No One Is an Island: Floating Public Policy Opinions in a Sea of Race"

M.A. committee: Maria Krysan, William Bielby

2017: *University of Illinois at Chicago*

Ph.D.: Sociology

Concentration: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender

Dissertation title: "Paths Out of Religion: A Cartography of Atheism"

Dissertation chair: William Bielby

Dissertation committee: R. Stephen Warner, Lorena Garcia, Paul-Brian McInerney, Ryan Cragun

**Research interests**

Religion; Atheism; Public policy; Race; Gender; Intergroup contact; Statistics



## **Teaching Experience**

University of Illinois at Chicago: 2007-2017

- **SOC 100** Introduction to Sociology
- **SOC 105** Social Problems
- **SOC 201** Introduction to Social Statistics
- **SOC 215** Sociology of Childhood and Youth
- **SOC 244** Sociology of Work
- **SOC 385** Sociological Theory
- **SOC 401** Intermediate Social Statistics
- **SOC 426** Special Topics in Race, Ethnicity, and Gender: Bending and Breaking with Religion

Northeastern Illinois University: 2016-2017

- **SOC 212** Introduction to Social Statistics

## **Research Assistant Experience**

- “Chicago Area Study Practicum on Race and Ethnic Differences in Political Participation, Policy Attitudes, and Political Knowledge,” Principal Investigator: Maria Krysan
  - Testing and editing survey questions
  - Data collection via telephone interviews
  - Entering and recoding variables using SPSS
  - Data analysis
  - Coordinating with other members of the research team
  - Presenting summary report

- “Ethnic Communities in Chicago: A Study of their Formation and Influence,” Principal Investigator: Anthony Orum
  - Compiling literature reviews
  - Entering and recoding variables using Excel
  - Coordinating with other members of the research team
  - Data analysis
- “Social Statistics for a Diverse Society,” Principal Investigator: Chava Frankfort-Nachmias
  - Writing, proofreading, and formatting text for textbook series
  - Coordinating with authors and copy editors
  - Generating sample output using SPSS
  - Checking references and solutions to sample problems
- “Americans’ Support for Workplace Interventions for Combating Racial and Gender Bias: The Impact of Policy Justifications and Inequality Beliefs,” Principal Investigator: William Bielby
  - Compiling literature reviews
  - Recoding variables using Stata
  - Data analysis
  - Coordinating with other members of the research team
  - Presenting summary reports

### **Papers Awaiting Publication**

- Schaffner, Caleb and Ryan T. Cragun. 2017. “Non-Religion and Atheism” in *Handbook of Leaving Religion*. Eds. Daniel Enstedt, Göran Larsson, and Teemu T. Mantsinen.

### **Academic Papers Presented**

- Schaffner, Caleb. "Neighborhood Racial Predictors of White Support for Affirmative Action: Contact Theory vs. Perceived Threat Theory." University of Illinois at Chicago Sociology Department Colloquium. December 2008.
- Schaffner, Caleb. "No One Is an Island: Floating Public Policy Opinion in a Sea of Race." 2009 MAPOR Conference, November 20, 2009
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Filling in the Definition of 'None': Framing in the Early Atheist Movement." 2012 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. March 29, 2012
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Making the Normal Familiar: Teaching the Normal Distribution Using the Social Construction of Culpability." 2013 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. March 29, 2013
- Bielby, William T., Maria Krysan, Cedric Herring, Caleb Schaffner, Nick Rochin, and Allison Helmuth. "How Americans View Workplace Anti-Discrimination Interventions: Why We Need a New Conversation About Race, Gender, Who Wins, Who Loses, and What Works." Ford Foundation Research Workshop. August 12, 2013.
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Interactions of Race and Gender in Support for Gender-Targeted Affirmative Action." 2014 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. April 3, 2014
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Bio-Power at the Borders: National Boundaries and Fertility." 2014 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. April 4, 2014
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Contrasting Religion's Impact on Race- and Gender-Targeted Affirmative Action Beliefs." 2014 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. April 5, 2014
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Teaching Type I and Type II Errors using Students Preexisting Beliefs about Astrology." 2014 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. April 6, 2014
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Enlightenment or Threat: Education's Effects on White Males' Opinions of Affirmative Action Policies." 2014 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. April 6, 2014
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Secular Saint Peters: Gatekeeping around the Atheist Label." 2014 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Conference. November 1, 2014.
- Schaffner, Caleb. "Generational Differences in Atheists' Definition of the Public Good." 2016 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. March 24, 2016.

- Schaffner, Caleb. “Childhood Religion’s Effects on Atheists’ Present Day Dogmatism.” 2016 Midwest Sociological Society Conference. March 24, 2016.

### **Invited Guest Lectures**

- Schaffner, Caleb. “Race, Incarceration, and the Drug War.” University of Illinois at Chicago class. April 2008.
- Schaffner, Caleb. “Race and the Social Construction of Legal and Illegal Drugs.” University of Illinois at Chicago class. April 2009.
- Schaffner, Caleb. “The Non-Religious.” University of Illinois at Chicago class. April 2013.
- Schaffner, Caleb. “Alpha-Level and Type I Error.” Central Washington University class. April 2015.
- Schaffner, Caleb. “Atheists’ Definitions of Atheism.” Davidson College. April 2015.
- Schaffner, Caleb. “The Symbolic Boundaries Around Atheism.” College of St. Scholastica. February 2016.

### **Additional Skills**

- Proficient in using and teaching Microsoft Excel, SPSS, Stata, and SAS programs
- Can understand and read basic Spanish

### **Miscellaneous Service**

- Volunteered for administrative duties at Engendering Change Conference.
- Reviewer for *Secularism and Nonreligion* Journal.

### **Professional Affiliations**

- American Sociological Association
- Society for the Scientific Study of Religion
- Midwest Sociological Society