Moral Discourses of Atheist Organizations: Moral Contrasts, Symbolic Boundaries, and Collective Identities

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This dissertation examines the ways atheist organizations construct morality and valorize atheist identities. Focusing on a discursive resources approach, wherein “atheist” is a social category whose meaning is contested, this analysis examines how representations of “atheists” are sedimented by the ways individuals and organizations communicate about atheism, religion, morality, secularism, and other relevant concepts which constitute this identity.

Examining the websites of two prominent atheist organization, Qualitative Content Analysis is used to identify the strategies used to legitimate atheist identities, discredit religion, and construct a coherent atheist morality. I describe the way atheist organizations engage in boundary work to challenge common conceptions of atheism and religion, using moral contrasts, appeals to science, and human rights framings. I argue for the utility of a discourse-centric approach in the social scientific study of religion and nonreligion. This study demonstrates how to analyze in parallel the interrelated concepts of symbolic boundaries, collective identities, and legitimizing discourses, to produce a coherent sociological account of the identity formation processes for stigmatized and marginalized communities.
MORAL DISCOURSES OF ATHEIST ORGANIZATIONS: MORAL CONTRASTS, SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES, AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy Sociology Western Michigan University June 2023

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1. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines the characteristics of moral discourses distributed by atheist organizations, focusing on moral contrasts, available subject positions, and the role morality plays in creating symbolic boundaries. I present evidence that atheist organizations discuss morality and moral issues as a way to: (1) draw attention to the differences they have from religion, (2) legitimate atheist identities, and (3) highlight how secular values make the world a better place. My original contribution to the sociology of religion and nonreligion is a deeper understanding of the moral components of the collective identity-work of atheists, how atheist organizations (re)produce symbolic boundaries and legitimate subject positions, and the content of morality communicated by atheist organizations.

This introduction provides a brief description of relevant concepts and a contextual frame for the proposed work. First, I discuss how atheism is often depicted as threatening as well as how identifying as atheist carries with it a social stigma. I then discuss how this context influences the formation and discourses of atheist organizations. This section concludes with the research questions which guided my research process.

1.1. Atheism as Threat

There is a long-standing discourse which positions atheists as a primary threat to America and society in general (Peterson 2010; Schmidt 2016; Tocqueville 1841). The boundaries of who could be considered a “good American” based on religious affiliation have shifted over the last century – in early US history it was Protestants, but later included Catholics as the Vatican expressed anti-communist and pro-capitalist sentiments in the early- to mid-1900s. More recently, with increasing interreligious awareness and discourses of “all-religions-point-to-the-
same-truth” or Eliadean notions that all religions are oriented towards a single, universally recognized “sacred”, non-Christian religions were seen as capable of being properly American. This widening of the net did not extend to include the nonreligious. The discursive reconstructions of these boundaries would not change from religion as the basis of the possibility of morality and patriotism\(^1\).

In this shift, the interreligious and ecumenical weakening of intergroup boundaries may have strengthened the boundaries between religious and nonreligious; “religion” became the basis for solidarity and collective identity rather than a specific tradition or denomination (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). It seems that the nonreligious, and atheists in particular, are the ultimate “other” in American society. Social distance measures consistently find atheists as the least-trusted group (Cook, Cottrell, and Webster 2015; Edgell et al. 2016, 2006).

Another dimension of the atheism-as-threat discourse is the ubiquitous equation of religion and morality (Edgell et al. 2006). Religion is seen as the only possible basis for morality, so those lacking it can have no coherent moral system. How can you trust someone who has no basis for morality? This line of argumentation centers on distrust of atheists. Indeed, research suggests that the poor standing of atheists on social distance measures is due to distrust rather than dislike (Gervais 2013; Gervais et al. 2017; Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011; Simpson, McCurrie, and Rios 2019). This distrust has social consequences. One study reports that 41% of atheists reported experiencing discrimination because of their nonreligious status (Hammer et al. 2012). Another study found that “21.6% of non-religious individuals report having experienced discrimination” (Cragun et al. 2012:121), and those who identified as atheist

\(^{1}\) It has been pointed out that the new atheist movement has strong elements of patriotism in the works of Harris at least (Bullivant 2010).
were more likely to report discrimination than nones in most contexts (Cragun et al. 2012), although this self-report data does not tell us whether they are the target of discrimination at a greater rate or simply perceive and classify more actions as discriminatory towards themselves. That atheists are perceived as a threat because they are assumed to have no basis for morality is a primary reason this project focuses on moral discourses produced by atheists.

There are many ways to define atheism, and different definitions will motivate different attitudes and evaluations. This fact is important in academic studies of atheists and atheism – different conceptualizations not only make comparisons of studies implausible but leads to an incoherent image of atheism as it exists in society. Questions of how many atheists, what impacts atheism has in different contexts, and any investigation of causality or correlation dealing with nonreligion are impacted by the definitions researchers use in their studies. Attempts to sediment a common conceptualization of atheism in the social sciences have not been successful (Cragun and McCaffree 2021; Lee 2015b; Taves 2018). If we cannot reach a consensus about what constitutes atheism, then it is vital to studies of nonreligion that researchers define and delimit their use of relevant labels.

To that end, my approach has been motivated by theories of discourse and social constructionism: when someone claims to be an atheist, we count them as such, if someone uses other labels, then we will not categorize them as an atheist to fit whatever specific definition we prefer. For example, there have been surveys which label which attempt to determine how many atheists there are in the US which labels participants by using a series of questions about their beliefs concerning deities and supernatural entities (Gervais and Najle 2018). This approach is designed to avoid the contaminating effects of the stigma atheism carries to get at an accurate count of people who would identify as atheists if no such stigma existed. Approaching the study
of atheism in this way might be useful for assessing the distribution of beliefs about deities, but why label them with a socially loaded and stigmatized term? We could just leave it at “X% of Americans do not believe in supernatural entities”.

It seems that there can be two reasons for jumping from a description of beliefs as they appear in the survey instrument to a categorization which may or may not fit participants’ self-understanding for many different reasons. The first is that it would prove cumbersome to have to keep writing out the full text of the questionnaire item every time we refer to a lack of belief in deity. If this is the reason, why not use a less loaded term? Which brings us to our second potential reason: the researcher has wants to make atheists as large a population as possible. It would not be hard to imagine that the very widely varying estimates of how many atheists there are could be due to different researchers choosing conceptualizations which support their political purposes, whether to minimize or to maximize the presence of atheists. This could be occurring without researchers performing any conscious calculations of how to make the evidence suit their desires. Social scientists are not neutral outside observers of hot button issues, so we should expect motivated reasoning in the design and implementation of research projects concerning atheism.

Atheism as an analytical category refers to a lack of belief in the existence of deities, but not everyone who does not believe in God considers themselves an atheist. In terms of this project, I will consider only those who explicitly self-label as “atheist” to be atheists. Since “atheist” is a potentially socially-damaging label, it is important to respect people’s self-labels when it comes to their nonreligion. Additionally, methodologically this might be significant, as people who take on the “atheist” label might differ in significant respects from those who do not, even if the (dis)belief system is otherwise similar (Galen 2009; Silver et al. 2014).
This is the context in which atheists and other nonreligious people create their self-understanding: atheists are viewed negatively, as lacking morality and therefore untrustworthy – to take on “atheist” as a label requires a redefinition and reevaluation of that subject position. The longstanding discourse which binds morality to religion provides many cultural resources for painting atheists as the ultimate threat. This project investigates what types of discursive resources atheists create and distribute to legitimize their position and make visible a moral system that does not rely upon the concept of God or the supernatural.

1.2. Organizational Discourses & Discursive Resources

Previous research has situated atheist identity-formation at the individual level, focusing on stories of “coming out” (LeDrew 2013a; Smith 2011). Some more recent studies have moved towards a more organizational approach (for example, Smith 2017a). This project focuses on organizational discourses to highlight the fact that atheist identities (as are others) are constructed from available discursive resources, often generated by organizations whose job is to represent a cohesive group but in the process of representation creates the possibilities of belonging to the group made visible by identifying its boundaries. This means that even though it is easy to track the influence of the key voices of atheism (Dawkins and the like) for atheist identities, it is likely that organizations play an important role in creating collective identities in a way that is under-realized in the literature. This project outlines the characteristics of discourses produced and distributed by atheist organizations to empower future researchers to recognize the ways in which these discourses impact the self-understandings of atheists. For instance, interviewers will have a tool for thinking about how organizations are shaping the reports of subjects when atheists do not explicitly identify the influence of these organizations.
1.3. Research Questions

My research explores how atheist organizations construct morality by examining the discursive resources distributed and promoted by those organizations. The primary focus will be on instances where “atheist” as a subject position is given a positive moral evaluation. This project is purely descriptive; my purpose is not to determine whether the arguments concerning “good atheists” are logical, reasonable, or convincing, but rather to describe the resources and strategies used.

Using qualitative content analysis, I followed an inductive approach similar to that of grounded theory, where general orienting questions motivate an investigation into a data set which lead to continual refinement of the ultimate research questions. In this approach, the data leads the researcher to examine assumptions, rethink the ultimate topic of study, and provide an adequate description of the phenomenon of interest, an approach which Margrit Schreier terms “emergent flexibility” (2012:24). My starting questions revolved around the construction of morality in atheist organizations:

1. Is “morality” a concept which atheist organizations are concerned with in many discursive contexts (as opposed to being only significant in highly specialized philosophical discourses, or as opposed to being entirely insignificant)?
2. In these organizations’ documents, what symbols, terminology, and criteria represent what it means to be a “good” atheist or “good” person more generally?
3. What discursive resources are used by these organizations to legitimate “atheist” as a viable and occupiable subject position?
2. THEORY & LITERATURE

This study involves research from five main subfields: nonreligion generally, atheist organizations in the US, symbolic boundaries, collective identities, and discourse theory. These bodies of research ground my project and guided my approach at every step in the research. The following sections will consider the relevant literature in each of these areas.

2.1. Nonreligion, Secularity, & Atheism

There is a cluster of concepts around “atheism” which need to be distinguished to clarify the scope of this study. Until recently, social scientists treated the “other-than-religious” as a more or less singular category (Pasquale 2007). Researchers are uncovering a great deal of variety among those who position themselves as nonreligious in some regard, from convinced atheists to spiritual-but-not-religious persons (for a discussion of the continuum of nonreligious to religious positions, see Beyer 2015). With the growth of “nonreligious studies,” some attempts have been made to establish a set of terms and measurement tools which do justice to the variety of beliefs, practices, and identities which are situated outside of “religion” proper (Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen 2015; Lee 2014, 2015b).

We will start with the broadest category within this field, “nones”, and move toward more specific sub-types, marking key distinguishing factors to disambiguate what constitutes “atheism” as opposed to other forms of nonreligion.

2.1.1. Nones & Nonreligion in General

Much recent work in the sociology of religion has been concerned with the phenomenon of religious “nones”. Nones are those who when asked which religious tradition or denomination they identify with choose (whatever variant in the measurement instrument indicating) “none or no religion”.
Survey research indicates that nones are on the rise (Baker and Smith 2009; Gallup 2019; Hout and Fischer 2002; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). According to the latest American Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin and Keysar 2009), nones comprise roughly 15% of the population. More recent data estimates as many as 22.8% of Americans are unaffiliated (Pew Research Center 2015).

“Nones” as a category of religious classification is a residual of survey research (Pasquale 2007). Instead of being a native term which fits one’s self-understanding (as with “Catholic”), it describes a position in distinction to a religious stance, in some sense forced by the nature of survey research. This other-than-religious stance includes a wide variety of beliefs, practices, and identities, from staunch atheists to spiritual-but-not-religious, but still might be inclusive of those who simply do not regularly attend religious events (Beyer 2015; Pasquale 2007). For some, this “other than religious” stance is a salient part of an affirmative identity (Lee 2014), whereas for others it plays no significant part in their self-understanding. In terms of commonality across this group, there seems to be little more than preferring an other-than-religious position when prompted (see also Keysar 2014).

Social scientists are developing tools to better understand the variety of (non)religious stances within these so-called “nones” (for example, Cragun et al. 2015; Galen 2009). The category of nones is overly simplistic; it covers over the significant differences between atheists and those who express traditional religious beliefs but do not identify with organized religion (Baker and Smith 2009). Up until very recently, survey research has generally consolidated non-affiliation, nonbelief, and skepticism into a single category.

One problem for understanding nones is that the “religion” that is being rejected could actually mean a wide variety of things (Von Stuckrad 2013a). Consider, for example, the
“spiritual but not religious” self-designation that has grown in prominence in recent years. This practice of distinguishing two domains which would have previously been considered inextricably bound suggests that some people want to hold supernatural beliefs or transcendent experiences as meaningful “spiritually” but are unwilling to associate with (what is usually termed) “institutional” religion, usually with the implications of dogmatism, clericalism, and other currently socially-undesirable elements (Ammerman 2013; Beyer 2015). Many people who are “spiritual but not religious” will self-identify in terms of the “none” category in survey research.

Fortunately, recent methodological developments in the social sciences are accounting for the complexity of religiosity and spirituality in survey research. Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen (2012) have developed a scale which allows participants to be nuanced in their “other” identity, and includes both religion and spirituality as dimensions for understanding this phenomenon. Still, there are problems in self-identification and beliefs or practices which would otherwise lump together or separate individuals separately from self-designation will be differences between scholarly classification based on beliefs/practices and participants’ self-designations. Classification is not a neutral act (Lincoln 1989), but we can as researchers do our best to minimize the symbolic violence we do to others by maximally respecting their logics of division which make the world meaningful to them.

More research on the identity-work of atheists and the construction of symbolic boundaries around “religion”, “atheism”, and “spirituality” is needed to better understand the shifting meanings of (non)religion in contemporary cultures. In other words, we need to explore what people mean when they say they are “religious”, “spiritual but not religious”, “atheist”, and other labels.
In addition to these complications with assessing the beliefs of the nones, there are also issues when considering dimensions of (non)religion other than belief. In survey research, attempts to discover which religion someone practices/believes, questions often select one of three routes: affiliation, preference, or beliefs. There is evidence that the question asked by each of these routes are substantially different, and that this has implications for operationalizing religiosity.

It is difficult to know how best to study forms of nonreligion, whether based on a family resemblance model where beliefs or practices are the basis of classification or based on self-identification. Historical instances of atheistic organizations struggled with how to name themselves, and developed many alternatives to “atheists” (Schmidt 2016) – should we treat them as the same category as each other alternative, in addition to lumping them with New Atheists like Dawkins?

Beyond issues of operationalization in survey research, the relationship between having no religious preference and being “nonreligious” or “atheist” is made complicated by several political and cultural factors. Disaffiliation from religious institutions may be more a political act than one expressing a change in belief or practice:

many [nones] are individuals who are unaffiliated with traditional religious structures like churches or synagogues but still engage in religious practices and hold religious beliefs…[but conversely] non-religious people can be found in religious categories. This is especially the case where religion has very deep-seated religious roots in a culture, such as with Christianity in Europe, Islam in the Middle East, Hinduism in India, and Buddhism in South-east Asia. (Zurlo and Johnson 2016:58–59)

Additionally, cultural contexts provide reasons for religious people for not identifying as adherents of a religion, and for nonreligious people to identify with a religion (Zurlo and Johnson 2016). Individual personality differences may also account for preferred identity labels.
(Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016). Whatever the cause, this incongruity of identification and practice is a major obstacle for understanding demographic patterns of (non)religion.

If the largest increase in nones is due to the connection between Christian evangelicals and Republicans (Hout and Fischer 2002), preferring no religion expresses a political stance instead of a religious orientation per se. To further complicate this, recent research questions the individual-level stability of being a none, estimating that 20% are “liminal nones” – those expressing no religious preference in a first interview and name a religion when re-interviewed later (Hout 2017). Distinguishing between having no religious beliefs and taking on an other-than-religious identity proves in many cases difficult for quantitative researchers. There is evidence, however, that the incongruity of identification and practice is decreasing in the US; in other words, people who are not religiously active or strong believers are more often self-identifying using labels which correspond to this fact (Scheitle, Corcoran, and Halligan 2018). It is difficult to assess the relationship between labelling preferences and level of actual religious beliefs, and more empirical studies are needed to better understand the social and psychological dynamics motivating this gap (see, for example, Baker 2022; Lindeman et al. 2019; Norenzayan and Gervais 2013; Silver et al. 2014).

Atheist identities tend to be more stable and salient. Lois Lee’s (2015a) study of atheism and nonreligion in Britain found that atheists tend to express a high level of conviction in their view, whereas more generic nonreligious identities are ambivalent. This could be in part due to the stigma associated with atheism, which makes taking on “atheist” as a self-identification more socially damaging than other designations which express no explicit (dis)belief in deity (Cragun et al. 2012; Doane and Elliott 2015; Gervais et al. 2011; Hammer et al. 2012). This suggests a higher stability in an atheist identity over other nonreligious stances (Galen 2009); we should
expect a lower proportion of “liminal atheists” than “liminal nones”. Also, atheism often has content, unlike more generic “none” (which is a catch-all) or “spiritual-but-not-religious” (in which spiritual means many different things but is often not explicitly defined or substantial) designations.

Most nones are not atheists – in many cases the move towards no religious preference is understood as a strategy of distancing oneself from the political associations which have been attached to the “Religious Right” (Hout and Fischer 2002). Nationally representative polls put atheists as between 4% (Pew Research Center 2019) and 12% (Gallup 2019). Some contest these figures as being artificially small due to stigma of identifying as atheist (Gervais and Najle 2018), and suggest that “indirect measures suggest that roughly one in four (26%) American adults may be atheists” (2018:8). Older data put disbelief in a higher power at 27% of nones (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012). Most nones are “spiritual but not religious” (Ammerman 2013): 51% of nones believe in a higher power and only 26% were hard agnostic (the existence of deity is unknowable) or atheist (Kosmin et al. 2008). It is therefore important to distinguish between subtypes of nones in research on nonreligion.

In the US, atheism should be considered a form of nonreligion because it is a stance that distances itself from religion, whether or not some forms of Satanism in the US or Buddhism in eastern Asia should be considered atheistic (implying the category “religious atheist”, thus challenging the universal validity of equating atheism with nonreligion). In the American context, atheism is the type of nonreligion farthest removed from religion – although it is unclear exactly how “nonreligious” spiritual-but-not-religious identifying persons are, it is clear that atheists mean to situate themselves at a maximum distance from religion.
2.1.2. Atheism

There are different ways to determine who counts as an atheist in social science research. As a researcher who focuses on the discursive construction of reality, my preference is generally allowing “atheist” to function as an empty signifier – that is, we must take into account what people mean when they use that word and allow self-identification as our operationalization (a similar approach to that used by Quillen 2015). Instead of outlining the characteristic beliefs and practices which will separate atheists from non-athletes (using criteria established by the researcher), only those who explicitly take on the label “atheist” should be considered as atheists. Since the primary focus of this project is on boundary processes in the creation of subject positions (as labels infused with content), a self-identification approach is best (since arguing that a group creates atheist subject positions without calling them such does not make sense from this perspective). This issue is avoided altogether in my project, since I am dealing with organizations which are explicitly labeled “atheist”, but this is still an important point generally and can help make sense of why I focus on identity offerings and subject positions.

Atheists are highly stigmatized in the US, with high levels of perceived discrimination (Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012). Since there are no outward signs identifying them, atheists may hide their deviant status in most contexts – atheism is therefore best conceptualized as a concealable stigmatized identity (Abbott and Mollen 2018). Several researchers have found that atheist individuals and organizations frequently engage in efforts to combat this stigma (LeDrew 2015; Smith 2013a). Stigma management is therefore an important part of atheist practices, and the ways organizations construct morality and legitimate atheist identities are shaped by this context, as I demonstrate in the following chapters.
The number of self-identified atheists in America has been rapidly increasing – from 2007 to 2014, the percentage nearly doubled from 1.6% to 3.1% and represent 13% of nones (Pew Research Center 2015). Perhaps more than simply indicating an increase in disbelief in deity, this means that the perceived legitimacy of an atheist stance is increasing; the discursive resources available which normalize atheism have proliferated, allowing more people to feel justified in identifying with this minority position.

This project was designed to provide resources for understanding atheist identities, including an analysis of the moral frameworks which construct and legitimate collective self-representations of atheists. By focusing on the discursive resources made available by atheist organizations this project can contribute to the existing literature on atheist identities and boundary processes. This project extends previous work concerning atheist conceptions of morality (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016) by moving beyond individual-level accounts to organizationally-distributed content. Additionally, previous studies have suggested that atheists construct moral selves, or that they invoke morality as an important part of legitimating atheism, but no in-depth description of the content of these accounts of morality has been provided. The present work provides a description of the content of atheist morality as well as a discussion of the discursive strategies atheist organizations use to make “atheist” a legitimate or desirable identity label.

Regarding Terminology

There is no academic consensus on terminology used for identifying nonreligion/irreligion and its subtypes. “Nonreligion” seems the most prevalent, as researchers see the defining characteristic of this area to be the practices, beliefs, and identities which are
constituted by their distance from “religion”, and avoids the normative connotations of “irreligion” (Lee 2015b).

Although this study only includes self-designated atheists, the rise in prevalence of other forms of nonreligion or non-affiliation is an important part of the “triumph of secularity” discourse, which bolsters the atheists’ self-perception as a legitimate and soon-to-be majority-status identity group. Thus, although the rise of nones might not be directly related to questions of the cultural influence of atheism, it remains important in this study to the extent that atheist discourses and self-understandings (uncritically, perhaps) include the rise of “secularity”.

My work follows the terminological conventions established by Lois Lee (2015), wherein “nonreligion” (or “non-religion”) describes the most general object of the field; it encompasses more specific concepts such as areligion (having no contact with religion) and irreligion (rejection of religion), as well as non-religion (ideas/objects developed in contradistinction to religion). In this scheme, practices, beliefs, and dispositives are nonreligious if they are made meaningful due to their relation to (as “other” than) religion (see Smith and Cragun 2019). Religion is thus a vital concern of nonreligious practices, beliefs, and dispositives.

In contexts where religion is of little to no importance, Lee proposes “secular” as the preferred descriptor. Practices, beliefs, and dispositives that contain no necessary relation to religion are analytically distinguishable from those positioned as “other” than religion. So although driving to work could in most cases be considered non-religious (lacking religious import), it should not be considered nonreligious in this sense, but rather secular.

2.2. Atheist Organizations in America

There is a limited number of studies which deal with atheist organizations, but research on nonreligion is rapidly expanding. Atheist organizations have been categorized as internet
groups (Smith and Cimino 2012), face-to-face (Smith 2013c), and hybrid, such as using Meetup.com to coordinate copresent gatherings (Guenther et al. 2013). Additionally, the level of formality differs across groups, some being ritual-based and formal (Smith 2017a) while others are less structured and tend to be informal (Guenther et al. 2013).

Membership in secular groups has been historically quite low among secular people (including atheists), which has led to speculation that secular persons tend to be individualistic (Brewster et al. 2020; Zuckerman et al. 2016). Secular people tend not to value community-orientedness. As Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale (Zuckerman et al. 2016) note, “Overall, the data paint a fairly consistent picture. Seculars tend to be strongly desirous of autonomy and independence, strongly egalitarian and meritocratic, yet desirous of social contact” (Zuckerman et al. 2016). In a 2012 survey covering religious beliefs and values, self-described atheists and agnostics afforded the least amount of importance to belonging to a community with shared beliefs, with only 22% selecting very important and 35% selecting not at all or not too important. By comparison, 53% of Christians indicated that belonging to a community with shared beliefs was very important and 34% selected somewhat important (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012; Zuckerman et al. 2016).2

This generalization about “secular groups” and “secular people” may not be directly applicable to self-described atheists – much of the explanation for low membership hinges on the notion of indifferent seculars, that is, people who do not replace religion with some positive notion of the secular, but that move on with their lives without concern for “filling the gap” left by religion. People who self-identify as atheist are not indifferent in their secularism; because

2 Although separate figures for atheists and agnostics are not found in the Pew report, Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale acquired these in October 2012 by personal correspondence.
that label carries stigma, taking it on signifies an active and committed rejection of religion. There is some evidence that visible and committed nonreligion is more prevalent in highly religious contexts (Bullivant 2015; García and Blankholm 2016), making it seem that this rejection identity (including its “not-self”) is just that: the strength of one’s atheism seems to be correlated with one’s perception of the strength of religion. That atheism is a label that implies in most cases a rejection identity which social stigma makes the image of an “indifferent self-identified atheist” unlikely.

2.2.1. Formation of & Participation in Organizations

Recent studies have found a variety of purposes for creating and participating in these organizations. The diversity of nonreligious stances is represented in differences in practices across groups. Different groups can have directly opposite stances concerning appropriate aims and practices for atheists. For example, consider recent findings related to attitudes toward ritual in atheist organizations. A study of the boundary-making practices of an atheist group in California (Guenther et al. 2013) found a general disdain or mistrust of practices which resemble religion, such as communal rituals. Conversely, in a study of the Sunday Assembly (Smith 2017a), a nontheistic congregation that appropriates the structure of Christian services, incorporates rituals and “religion-looking” elements to build community and produce transcendent (though still not supernatural) experiences; the members positively evaluate the use of rituals for their community. These studies illustrate that no consensus exists across nontheists concerning the appropriateness of using secularist rituals. This is only one dimension of difference across such organizations.

These studies demonstrate the difficulty in generalizing across atheist organizations in terms of content. However, the research identifies two basic purposes for atheist organizations:
forming to (1) provide nonreligious individuals a sense of community (Smith 2011, 2017a), and (2) promote a political agenda through atheist mobilization (LeDrew 2013a; Smith 2016). These organizations bolster solidarity through rituals (Cimino and Smith 2015; Smith 2017a), through validation and a safe space for nonbelievers to “come out” (LeDrew 2013a), through the construction of a collective identity by highlighting differences from the religious (Guenther et al. 2013), and through legitimation of secular worldviews (Cimino and Smith 2011), beliefs (Bullivant 2015), and moral systems (Guenther 2014). Atheists also use these organizations as a platform for promoting political activism in virtual and actual contexts (Smith and Cimino 2012). These purposes are not mutually exclusive; a given organization may focus solely on one or the other, but most have some combination of the two.

There is evidence that atheists perceive themselves to be particularly vulnerable to bias (Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012), such that the threat of discrimination is a concern which leads some to join and participate in atheist organizations. Further, this perception of threat from the religious becomes an important part of the collective identity of atheists which motivates political action (Guenther et al. 2013). Threats of discrimination and a sense of shared fate can be significant factors for why atheists might choose to affiliate with atheist groups, but an important basis for solidarity is the construction of moral selves.

My research is an extension of previous research on the construction of moral selves by nonreligious people, moving the emphasis from individuals to organizations. Guenther, Mulligan and Papp (2013) examined how atheist organization-affiliated individuals construct moral identities in contrast to the religious, Sumerau and Cragun (2016) explored how organizationally unaffiliated individuals do this, and my project focuses on how documents distributed by atheist organizations do the same. Whereas the earlier studies relied on interviews to see personal
constructions of morality, I examine organizations’ web content which provides moral subject positions as identity resources to legitimate atheism. This distinction falls along two dimensions: (1) resources and identity offerings rather than personalized moral systems, and (2) organizationally-approved (insofar as published on their website) content rather than potentially idiosyncratic personal accounts of morality and legitimacy in atheism.

Guenther and colleagues (2013) studied an atheist group in California, finding four core strategies of oppositional positioning which puts the religious as dangerous and inferior to atheists: (1) painting religion as threatening to individual atheists, (2) evidencing the threats that religious people pose to atheist individuals, (3) maximizing the distance and antagonism between religious and atheist worldviews, and (4) positioning religious persons as inferior to atheists. The authors found that atheists highlight differences between themselves and the religious in order to valorize their position. This study also highlights the importance of permeable social boundaries in the atheist social movement – these groups rely upon “converts” to join their group (where previous opponents become insiders) to reinforce the boundaries which constitute an atheist collective identity.

Sumerau and Cragun (2016) explored how nonreligious people who are not affiliated with secular organizations demoralize religion and moralize nonreligious identities. They found that “nonreligious people defined religion in ways that challenged its assumed morality, but left room for it to be an important part of the morality of others” (Sumerau and Cragun 2016:399). These unaffiliated nonreligious respondents often linked religious morality to conformity and obligatory rules-following – a stance which might in part explain why they are unaffiliated, as an aversion to uncritical obedience is an important part of the individualistic tendency of secular people (Blankholm 2022).
As stated earlier, this project extends the research of these two studies which asks questions of the construction of nonreligious morality and boundaries, only focusing on organizational discourses rather than individual-level responses in interview research. The focus is shifted to more or less authorized constructions of atheist morality and collective identities which serve as discursive resources for individual identity processes.

Conceiving of organizationally-distributed materials as discursive resources facilitates an understanding of identity processes as being a cultural *bricolage* (in the sense of creating new identities from existing cultural “toolkits”, as described by Swidler 1986, as an extension of “cultural bricolage” as popularized by Levi-Strauss), which is particularly important for understanding groups which otherwise lack ready-made identities (with attendant statuses and roles) like atheists. This approach is justified by the high levels of engagement by atheists with atheist media. Atheists involved in organizations generally consume various forms of atheist media on a regular basis; in a study of an atheist group in California, Guenther et al. report that “more than three-quarters of our sample reported regular consumption of atheist material online, including watching YouTube videos of live debates, following atheist bloggers, and participating in discussion forums” (2013:467). That atheists engage with such media so frequently increases the possibility that the messages of the content creators and promoters will be incorporated in their identity *bricolage*.

Atheist organizations have members who actively seek media which bolsters and enriches their self-understandings. This is an important part of the creation of an imagined atheist community (this concept is borrowed from Anderson 1983 and is applied here to atheists) which allows atheists to see and visualize others who think and act as they do.
Social movements, such as those of which atheist organizations are a part, construct boundaries to distinguish insiders and outsiders to generate a collective identity; this boundary is permeable, as the formerly-religious are seen as legitimate members (Guenther et al. 2013). The next section addresses such boundary characteristics and processes, leading into a discussion of collective identities in the section following.

2.3. Symbolic Boundaries & Social Classification

Central to this project is the concept of symbolic boundaries. Lamont and Molnár define symbolic boundaries as “conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (2002:168). Symbolic boundaries select from the infinite number of differences across actors and objects one specific set of differences as uniquely significant. This is a process of “lumping” similar and “splitting” dissimilar types of objects and actors from an essentially continuous reality and is the basis of social classification (Zerubavel 1996). Durkheim highlighted the arbitrariness (meaning historically-motivated rather than necessary) of classification systems, suggesting that it is a social process and not just an individual cognitive task: “the simple fact of these resemblances [of things] is not enough to explain how we are led to group things which resemble each other” (Durkheim and Mauss 1969:8). There are many potential bases for finding similarity (size, shape, color, function, etc.), but socialization processes inculcate relatively unified, standardized perceptual schemes as a classificatory system. Symbolic boundaries, as a cognitive scheme and a cultural resource, provide actors with criteria for group membership: who counts as “us” and who counts as “them”.

Symbolic boundary (re)construction implies the activities of a community; much like a “private language”, a “private symbolic boundary” is either impossible or meaningless.
Processes of boundary-making require consensus within a community, as Lamont and Molnár indicate:

Only when symbolic boundaries are widely agreed upon can they take on a constraining character and pattern social interaction in important ways. Moreover, only then can they become social boundaries, i.e., translate, for instance, into identifiable patterns of social exclusion or class and racial segregation. (2002:168–69)

Symbolic boundaries are the possession of a community, and the social impacts of these boundaries are therefore tied to a group’s power. The fact that the dominant group views atheism as immoral and a threat results in distrust and discrimination (Cook et al. 2015; Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012; Weiller-Harwell 2011), but the atheists’ contention that their moral system is superior (Peterson 2010) cannot result in the same social consequences for religious persons.

Symbolic boundaries have significant consequences for a group’s access to resources and opportunities, and are therefore implicated in the creation and maintenance of social inequality (Edgell and Tranby 2010; Pachucki, Pendergrass, and Lamont 2007). Symbolic boundaries are created and sustained through boundary work. Atheists are among the least trusted and tolerated minority groups in America because dominant religious discourses link inextricably morality with religion (Edgell et al. 2016, 2006), and these particular discourses became dominant through processes of boundary work, whereby symbolic boundaries are actualized.

Boundary work is largely about constructing or modifying discourses. Discourses provide the interpretative and classificatory schemata which inform our everyday understanding of reality (Keller 2005), including the repertoire of possible identity resources available in a given context (Snow 2001). David Snow suggests that identity work is achieved through the “generation, invocation, and maintenance of symbolic resources used to bound and distinguish the collectivity both internally and externally by accenting commonalities and differences”
This quote provides the same argument made here with the terminology of social movement theory if we understand identity work and boundary work as a single process employing available symbolic resources (primarily as discourses, but also as dispositives as described below). More simply, identities are constructed from discursive resources which are produced and distributed in the process of boundary work.

Discourses have a traceable history, and the morality-religion-link discourse has been well-documented (Tocqueville 1841), with changes from a specific type of religion being the boundary marker (i.e., Catholics vs. Protestants) to the mere presence of religious belief an important trend of the past hundred years. Atheists are treated as the “other” and are therefore denied access to valuable resources and opportunities—the boundary work (often involving meta-stereotypes, Saroglou, Yzerbyt, and Kaschten 2011) transforms these symbolic boundaries into social boundaries.

Social boundaries, according to Lamont and Molnár, are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (2002:169). Social boundaries, which are constituted by boundary work, are the mechanism for maintaining inequality and should be addressed in a more systematic manner not only in studies of nonreligion, but across the social sciences.

Boundary work creates and maintains the “us” and “them” dichotomy by making visible a particular vision of which differences across social actors are important. This boundary work is realized through various means, both discursive and dispositive (Keller 2011, 2018). Discursive means of boundary work include a group’s origin stories as well as simple pronouncements of

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3 For a discussion of how religious affiliation impacts access to resources, see (Davidson 2008).
the principle of division which makes a group visible to itself as a group. Dispositives (also called “dispositifs” in the literature, following Foucault) are defined as “infrastructure established by social actors or collectivities in order to solve a particular situation with its inherent problems of action… [which] mediate between discourses and fields of practice” (Keller 2012b) or “the totality of the material, practical, social, cognitive, or normative ‘infrastructure’ in which a discourse develops” (Von Stuckrad 2013a). This means that the websites, lectures, books, policies, etc. that atheist organizations create (as dispositives) to spread their message are significant to not only distributing their discourses but also make the atheist community visible to itself. To clarify: if an atheist searches for atheist organizations on the internet, how many results they find might have implications for whether they feel that they are alone or that they feel in good company and thus reassured of their decision to self-label as atheist. This is a nondiscursive reality which might bolster a group’s legitimacy and must be considered in analyses of boundaries.

Dispositives preexist and constrain particular discursive events and may be created to constrain future events. Institutional contexts define statuses and corresponding role expectations, such that a representative of a given institution is limited in the range of messages they are permitted to transmit – the infrastructure of that institution, with its official documents, statuses and positions, and rules, serves to limit practices within the organization. The Pope is not permitted to reject Catholic doctrine; indeed, any statement made by the Pope is necessarily housed within the context of Catholic history. These concepts (discourse and dispositive) are significant for studies on boundaries; more will be said on the uses of discourse research below.

Symbolic boundaries (“us” and “them” distinctions) are continuously negotiated and either modified or maintained through boundary work and become social boundaries as these
distinctions are actualized in social practices which have consequences for access to resources and opportunities. Symbolic boundaries are dynamic; they change over time and context, and function as resources in struggles over definition and legitimacy (Fuist and Josephsohn 2013). Which distinctions are considered valid status markers is a source of constant conflict in some arenas (Bourdieu 1991).

Power is thus implicated in the transformation of symbolic boundaries into social boundaries, whereby social distinctions become differentiated access to resources and opportunities; this mobilization of discriminatory practices is contingent on the power of a group. There is another dimension of power which is significant in this process. The fact that only a few voices are selected as authoritative and representative of a group suggests an individual-level power to shape a group’s boundaries (Bourdieu 1991). Not all members of a group can command attention and seriousness for their vision of boundary-making. Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris have considerably greater chances of shaping the content of atheist identities and boundaries than most atheists, and the Pope has the ability to shape Catholicism in a way that no one else can. So we could theoretically compare the organizational power of Catholicism and atheism as well as looking within these groups to see who has the power to influence their shape and stances.

Recent research has identified various qualities of symbolic boundaries. For example, symbolic boundaries can be analyzed in terms of their permeability and relevance (Fuist and Josephsohn 2013). Permeability describes the extent to or ease with which boundaries can be crossed. Relevance here describes how important a symbolic boundary is for a given social context. Meanings and claims which constitute symbolic boundaries or modify their permeability or relevance can be categorized based on four relational principles: Truth (belief-agreement in religion and morality), Test (single-issue evaluation), Tolerance (acceptance of difference, non-
absolutism, and active other-interaction), and Tact (non-interference and non-conflict) (Fuist and Josephsohn 2013). The important point here is that symbolic boundaries can be analyzed using different theoretical frameworks; this study treats symbolic boundaries as a negotiated, often contested, ways of conceiving of similarities and differences which can constitute and modify how people see themselves and others.

Unlike proponents of a hard constructionist stance, I don’t believe that groups can be constituted on any purely arbitrary basis, but that this basis requires some objective grounding which can be recognized outside of the mystificatory power of classificatory discourses. Social classifications rely not only upon the discourse of authorized speakers, but also on the objective economic and cultural properties which are recognized as commonalities which are made relevant by authorized discourses. This means that the group which is created by invoking symbolic boundaries must be able to recognize the difference which constitutes that group – so that, for example, class consciousness is possible only when there are real economic differences which can be highlighted by classificatory discourses (Bourdieu 1991). In many cases an infrastructure of material and normative realities is required for discourses to constitute symbolic boundaries, which is why dispositives are an important part of this analysis. However, in terms of collective identities organized around shared beliefs, there may not need to be an objective basis for that group, so that the existence of atheist discourses themselves are the grounding for constituting atheist identities (this point is related to notions of “imagined communities” as described by Benedict Anderson (1983)).

Moral contrasts are a significant part of boundary-making processes. Boundaries are produced through discourses which, in order to become realized, must gain a hearing, be considered persuasive, and be able to elicit the sentiments (affinity and estrangement – or in
Durkheim’s terms *moral force*) out of which social borders are constructed (see Lincoln 1989:8–11). Although persuasion is often understood as the primary way to get an audience to agree with one’s construction of boundaries, sentiment evocation may be more important than persuasion in many cases (Lincoln 1989); the feelings and emotions of togetherness or solidarity might be “persuasion” enough without necessary logical or rational content. Using moral contrasts is one strategy for sentiment evocation which generates feelings of affinity to one’s group and estrangement from others. Moral contrasts can also be found in the creation of more or less desirable subject positions (Keller 2012b).

Because boundary processes are aimed at making particular visions of the world and the types of people we can choose from, rhetoric analysis is important to this approach. The notion of collective identity requires an examination of what strategies are used to make an identity not only conceivable but also compelling and attractive. Similarly, M. Lane Bruner (2005) suggests that using rhetoric theory to analyze the persuasion techniques used to create and sustain collective identities and form communities is an important addition to contemporary research. There are already some who have applied rhetoric theory to questions of public images and identities, such as Kaylor (2011), who examined how the Democratic Party used appeals to religion in order to repair their image as godless or antireligious. A more extreme perspective on rhetoric can be found in the edited volume *Rhetoric and the Emergence of Culture*, wherein the contributors argue that human sociality and intersubjectivity themselves are grounded in strategies of persuasion. Although the literature on boundary processes do not take this stance explicitly, the implication of assuming that identities and practices are constructed and oriented through culturally-motivated processes of distinction-drawing make the negotiation of which
identities are most compelling does seem congruent with assuming that culture itself emerges from the rhetoric.

2.4. Collective Identities

Collective identity, or a “we”-centered aspect of oneself, is an important concept for understanding activism and is the result of shared action and the creation of boundaries, as described in the previous section. We can therefore conceive of the discourses which constitute these symbolic boundaries as resources for identity construction, such that social categories and narratives shape individual and collective identities (Todd 2005). Whether or not someone who does not believe in God considers themselves an “atheist” is motivated by the cultural resources available for identity construction and an assessment of whether that label is a good “fit”. This fact underlines the importance of positive appraisals of a subject position in order for it to be adopted (for achieved rather than ascribed statuses). Much of my analysis focuses on discursive resources for this reason, and later I argue that a discourse-centric approach is important for understanding the construction of stigmatized identities.

Instead of following the “multiple identities” model which has recently gained prominence in social psychology, this project assumes that relevant aspects of the self are interdependent, such that one’s experience of being an atheist is shaped by their gender, class, race, and other markers of identity. This, what I call a relevance model, means that instead of viewing actors as strategically or spontaneously selecting from a list of possible identity categories to bring to bear in a social situation, all of these categories are always active, even if only as mediators of the most relevant categories (for an extended form of this argument, see Todd 2005). So, for example, when attending a lecture by a prominent atheist, one does not lose
gendered, classed, racialized, etc. elements of their identity to become solely an atheist for that situation.

This does not mean that actors’ understandings of how their identity comes into play in interactions cannot be compartmentalized. Conscious awareness of which statuses are active in a given situation is not necessary for those statuses to have social effects. Bourdieu’s emphasis on the inculcated and inscribed (or in some sense “automatic”) nature of the habitus is useful for breaking out of the “multiple identities” model to embrace a relevance model of identity.

Bourdieu suggests that issues of taste and social classification operate subconsciously as a habitus, and therefore subjects can only give distorted or incomplete accounts of the basis for these. In contrast, Michèle Lamont seems to believe that action is oriented toward classificatory criteria which are consciously held and articulable, in direct opposition to Bourdieu on this point (see Vila-Henninger 2015). I hold a position in the middle, where many internalized tastes and class-based visions operate subconsciously and inarticulably but there are many boundary criteria which are known and articulable. This means that atheist identities can be circumscribed, that is, that some criteria for membership can be articulated, but that at the same time it is likely that subconscious criteria are also in play. Class preferences, for example, have likely shaped the sense of “tastes” or aesthetics of atheism, likely due to the educated, middle-class character of typical atheists, but it is unlikely that most atheists would be able to articulate this fact.

Collective identities are not the direct result of authoritative pronouncements which constitute groups. Individuals take on achieved statuses, such as group membership, for a variety of reasons; being called an “atheist” by an authority figure does not make one an atheist in this sense. This is part of the reason why it is “unwarranted to discuss a whole group of individuals as if they exactly mirror a small but vocal portion of their community [Dawkins, etc.]” (Bullivant
Although some types of formal membership are performed through elocutionary acts (in the Austinian sense), like in a Catholic Confirmation ritual, individual adoption of collective identities might not follow the same pattern – one can certainly consider oneself Catholic without celebrating that sacrament. Additionally, for less formal groups, such as atheists, it is less clear who counts as an “authority”, so the power of individual figures or “elite” representatives might be limited.

The distinction between lived and systemic atheism (mirroring the distinction between lived and institutional religion found in the sociology of religion; Beyer 2015) can help us distinguish between “elite” discourses in the community and the beliefs and practices of “everyday” atheists. The question of whether organizations or individuals adequately represent atheists is open for empirical examination.

The relation between the two levels, the mutual determination of the lived and the systemic, has methodological implications for researching this atheism: even though lived atheism and systemic atheism are not identical, it is difficult to assess and analyze either without the substantial inclusion of data generated from individually initiated and attributed communication, that is, from the lived level. Moreover, given the possibility of the just-mentioned shift in our society to religion—and therefore arguably atheism, which forms itself over and usually against religion—being located more at the individual level than that of authoritative institutions, it would be difficult to argue that an elite group of ‘authoritative’ individuals—say the leaders of humanist organizations or authors like Richard Dawkins—could be the primary source of such data, unless of course one were to find that their communication of atheism seems to have a determinative influence on how ‘ordinary’ atheists construct their lived atheism. But that would just mean that one would still have to start with these ‘ordinary’ atheists in order to find such possibly authoritative atheism. (Beyer 2015:138)

This project, although it does not directly assess whether discourses produced by atheist organizations are authoritative or representative of atheists more generally, provides a description of how these organizations draw boundaries around the atheist identity which future research can use to compare to ethnographic and interview data to determine congruence.

Whether the documents distributed by atheist organizations have actual social effects is not the
concern of this project; a discursive resource perspective assumes that these organizations can create and modify symbolic boundaries in a way that provides new opportunities for the adoption of atheist identities, not necessarily that they are actually constituting “what counts as atheism”.

Identity formation should not be understood in terms of objective events but in narratives and interpretations by subjects (Ammerman 2003). Although it can be useful to think in terms of membership in organizations as a significant event for collective identities, the adoption/adaptation of the discursive resources of the group to create an individual (perhaps idiosyncratic) sense of identity is of primary interest in this view. Research on collective identities and symbolic boundaries emphasize personal understandings of and commitments to organizations instead of objective markers. Consider, for example, the concepts of interdependence and affective commitment.

Interdependence refers to an individual’s perception of sharing a common fate, or an awareness of “the commonalities in the way group members are treated in society” (Gurin and Townsend 1986:140). This is a psychologized measure of group belonging, rather than appealing to “official” membership – if you feel that your status and treatment are bound to that of a group, whether or not there is any basis for that feeling, this is interdependence.

Affective commitment describes the degree that one is emotionally invested in outcomes for a given group. Affective commitment is related to the sentiments of affinity and estrangement discussed in the previous section, and has impacts on in-group preference and behavior: “Affective commitment has been shown to uniquely predict in-group bias, and affective commitment can exist in the absence of positive in-group evaluation” (Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004:90). This means that even if one does not value the characteristics of one’s group (including instances of self-hate, usually in terms of ascribed statuses), the
emotional investment is associated with in-group preferential behavior. This means that some people might recognize their status as “atheist” even if they think that most atheists are too extreme and could feel a sense of affinity regardless of their negative evaluation.

Group stories are important for creating a sense of interdependence and affective commitment. As Ashmore and colleagues note: “the social representations of group story and the accompanying social realities such as power differentials are part of the context in which individuals develop, experience, and enact their collective identities” (2004:97). Group stories rearrange symbolic boundaries for a group and transform the moral evaluation of these power differentials – powerful groups legitimate their position and valorize their practices, but dominated groups use their relative powerlessness as a positive aspect of their group identity. This is likely an important reason for atheist groups highlighting instances of discrimination at meetings and in publications.

These concepts highlight the role of individual meaning-making processes in collective identities. Certain “objective” markers of identity (such as formal membership) are not central in this view but become significant for analysis in terms of the meaning that actors give to them.

2.4.1. Nonreligious Collective Identities

The reasons for taking on a nonreligious label, whether by religious people or nonreligious, vary by context (Zurlo and Johnson 2016). For example, the association between religious institutions and conservative politics has led many to become nones (Hout and Fischer 2002), even if only for purposes of survey responses. Similarly, there are several routes people can take to actively self-identifying as “atheist” (LeDrew 2013a), which serves as a context-bound distinction marker – meaning that some atheists reject religion as preposterous and
dangerous whereas others might simply not believe in God, the difference often being in what social context they are reacting to.

Atheism is a form of deviance that carries stigma (Smith 2011; Weiller-Harwell 2011). However, atheism is a concealable stigmatized identity (Abbott and Mollen 2018; Quinn and Earnshaw 2011), which means that there are no obvious visual markers which allows recognition of an atheist (in the same way that race or gender could). This idea is directly related to the distinction Goffman (1986) makes between discredited (one’s stigma is obvious) and discreditable (one’s stigma is concealable) persons. Atheists can largely choose whether or not to display that stigmatized portion of themselves to others and in which contexts. For this reason, the stigma associated with atheism might be the result, at least in part, of imagining an abstracted atheist rather than judging the personalities and behaviors of actual atheists. For example, in Edgell and colleagues’ (2006) study of moral boundaries and minority groups, the authors suspected that respondents were discussing “the atheist” as category and not individuals they had interacted with personally. In this way, associations between atheism and immorality are the dominant vision and create a symbolic context in which stigma can persist. In other words, when people are judging atheists to be untrustworthy, un-American, or otherwise “other”, these judgments have no empirical grounding.

There is ample evidence that the general public holds negative associations with atheism. A study which assessed distrust of atheists based on perceived threat found that the perception of atheists as morally threatening was most important for lack of trust (Cook et al. 2015). Other research suggests that the negative stereotype might be more specific in some contexts, for example as being grounded in untrustworthiness (Gervais et al. 2011) or narcissism (Dubendorff and Luchner 2017). Schmidt (2016) recorded the history of conceptions of atheists as a moral
danger or as un-American. A Gallup poll (2012) found that Americans are slightly less likely to vote for an otherwise qualified atheist presidential candidate than for a Muslim candidate (43% and 40% would not, respectively). Atheist groups are often explicitly engaging in anti-stigma action (Homan, Mann, and Cragun 2016; Smith 2016; Smith and Cimino 2012). This is an important part of the social context in which people select nonreligious labels.

The stigma surrounding atheism is one reason someone may not self-identify as atheist, but instead choose a different label which may approximate their self-understanding. Reluctance to self-categorize may be a result of a low assessment of their “goodness of fit” or negative social evaluation for that group; sometimes also uncertainty about what group one belongs to is significant (see Ashmore et al. 2004). Someone who does not believe in God might see someone like Dawkins or Harris and see similarities only based on this disbelief and might therefore avoid self-identifying as atheist; people are aware of the baggage of that term and avoid the word, even if they fit the technical definition.

When someone takes on “atheist” as a self-label, we can understand this in terms of shifts in the discursive resources available and in changing power relations in society. “The fact of identity change is explained when changing power relations conflict with embedded categorical understandings, expectations, and values. The direction of identity change is crucially affected by the resources available to different sectors of the population” (Todd 2005:452–53). I suggest that the struggle for legitimacy of nonreligious groups both structure and are structured by the discursive resources available, such that shifts in identities (personal and collective) are both stakes in the game as well as resources to be gained. This is why conceiving of atheist identities in terms of discursive resources is so important – instead of assuming that people who (dis)believe a certain way should be classified by researchers together, we should be careful to
see why one adopts or avoids those labels as an indicator of power struggles in the larger social arena.

This project employs a good number of concepts from discourse research to make sense of identities, nonreligion-as-phenomenon, and symbolic boundaries. The next section covers why discourse research is important and outlines the key concepts which have guided my research.

2.5. Discourse Theory

Various authors indicate that discourse is significant in constituting “atheism”: LeDrew suggests that some trajectories of atheist identity are shaped “through collectively enacted discourses and practices within an organizational structure” (2013a:448), and Smith adds that “atheists have different, or less-obvious, identity-resources” (2013b:462) than established religious groups. However, nowhere in the literature on nonreligion is there any extended treatment of “discourse” as a useful concept for understanding not only the social construction of (non)religiousness, but also the way cultural resources are employed in order to transform subject positions and bolster the legitimacy of atheism and other nonreligious stances.

Treating discourse as an afterthought or an aside in this manner misses the key insight of social constructionist positions: if we are creating reality through the sedimentation of institutionalized typifications (Berger and Luckmann 1967), then discourse, as the structuring factor of communicative acts (from linguistic conventions to dispositives) needs to be central for any notion of collective identity. Insights from discourse research can help understand how “atheist” as a label becomes stigmatized or desirable, how organizations form around collective identities while those organizations shape the same, and how self-conceptions (as moral or not, for example) are shaped.
Since in many cases we should see “atheist as a rejection-identity at its base (Smith 2011), understanding how differences are recognized and made into relevant principles of division in the creation of social groups is particularly important. Processes of social differentiation are discursive in nature. In other words, the social category of "atheism" is (re)produced when actors communicate how an atheist differs from non-atheists in order that a shared mental model of "atheism" is formed - the communicative interaction generates the social knowledge that such a category exists and makes it socially relevant. Boundary processes are largely discursive in nature.

The fact that atheism is religion's "other" in the US is the result of a traceable discursive history. Christianity has shifted its primary other from "paganism" and perhaps "Satanism" to atheism as a result of concrete communicative practices. Additionally, the antagonistic relationship of religion and science is perhaps not necessary, but rather is the result of contingent processes of differentiation of knowledge claims and legitimation practices (Ecklund and Long 2011; Von Stuckrad 2014).

Collective identity is a question of social psychology - how can people share an identity? Collective action yields a sense of shared experience and shared commitments - people who work together can feel like they belong together. However, this affinity is not a result only of recognizing that another person is doing the same things as oneself. In this instance, collective identity is created when such affinity meets with some form of communication of shared values/purposes - collective action is communicative, but some explicit discursive (verbal or textual) element needs to be present to generate group solidarity (such as a name for the group or a statement of purpose or goals, etc.). Collective identity in absence of copresent collective action requires discursive processes, such that communicative events construct for individuals
the possibility of having an identity based on a given category (carving one out of the near-infinite possible conditions of existence which may be the basis of group formation).

Sometimes this group arises as individuals are made aware of preexisting similarities, whereas oftentimes these collective identities are generated by creating the similarities which function as the logic of inclusion for such a group. For example, in atheism it is likely that some people reject the existence of God before they realize that they can join a community of like-minded individuals - the group arises when people realize a shared condition (see LeDrew 2013a for “discovery” trajectories to atheist identities). Another possible case is when a group of atheists promote their ideas to convince others; an individual might come across atheist arguments and become convinced at the same time they feel that they belong with the people who generated the text which convinced them to become an atheist.

2.5.1. *Relevant Elements of Discourse Theory*

In order to flesh out how discourse creates these boundaries and how particular discourses have shaped the American conception of atheism, some preliminary points need to be made. Following discursive psychology, I identify talk and text as having an *action orientation*, that is, communications and their properties serve a purpose for the actors involved (Edwards and Potter 1992). Boundaries and hierarchies are created through communicative actions (Zerubavel 1991) – but this is not to say that micro-level interactions are always a radical negotiation of social meanings, since institutionalized discourses have a stabilizing effect upon worldviews and conceptual schemes (Berger and Luckmann 1967).

Radical scholars of discourse argue that reality in its entirety is constructed through discourse, ignoring “the difference between something that *simply* happens (often without being reported) and something that is *made into a fact or event* by discursive and communicative
procedures” (Von Stuckrad 2013b:14). This stance betrays a cognitivist position, wherein realities are unknowable outside of their mental representations. A better way to express the basic insight is to say that discourses constitute objects by making distinctions and boundaries and marking their social significance. Stated another way, those things which make us the same or different are not simply natural categories but constructed through discourses; our stances and attitudes towards the distinctions thereby created are also discursively generated and negotiated. The basis of society, inclusion/exclusion and associated sentiments of affinity/estrangement, are discursively maintained⁴ (Lincoln 1989). Once certain difference categories are internalized and inscribed upon an individual’s habitus, the linguistic component of differentiation may be minimized such that the actor’s practices are habitual and founded in their disposition and the “programmed” sentiments of affinity and estrangement arise more or less automatically. Difference categories are typifications and often become the basis for habitualized action, and should therefore be understood as institutionalized representations (see Berger and Luckmann 1967).

My approach to discourse theory closely aligns with the Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse (SKAD), as seen in the works of Reiner Keller and Kocku von Stuckrad. SKAD examines how discourses contribute to the social construction of reality. As a social constructionist approach (Berger and Luckmann 1967), SKAD takes seriously the role of language in mediating perceptions (as mental models or typifications) (Keller 2012b), such that it makes sense to think of discourses as “constituting objects” (Von Stuckrad 2013a). By imposing a specific di/division of the world (Bourdieu 1991) and thereby carving discrete chunks out of a

⁴ Even if “obvious” differences, such as speaking different languages, created a more or less “natural” barrier in initial inter-group encounters – the argument does not rely on these sentiments originating in discourse.
(more or less) continuous reality (Zerubavel 1996), discourses provide the ordering principle for imagining objects and the creation of social positions/statuses. This means that what counts as knowledge (from commonsense knowledge to hyper-specialized forms) imposes limits on what and how we see and therefore how we may communicate about “reality”.

By examining how ideas about reality become institutionalized into social stocks of knowledge (Schutz and Luckmann 1973), SKAD navigates the problems contained in other discourse theories which over-emphasize structure and obliterate agency. Here, discourse becomes an interpretational practice (Keller 2012a), whereby discursive resources are brought to bear in making sense of reality and society; instead of seeing discourses as absolute structuring structures which impose monolithic schemes of perception/reality, we can see discourses as potential resources for sense-making which are activated strategically across contexts.

Unlike linguistic approaches to discourse, SKAD is social scientific in its orientation. This means that concerns of the structure of language and specific linguistic devices (grammar, syntax, etc.) are subservient to social processes and effects (Keller 2012a); certain rhetorical devices are only important if they serve an observable social function and will only be included in analysis when socially relevant.

It is also useful to distinguish SKAD from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which has an activist orientation which attempts to explore the liberatory potential of challenging dominant and oppressive discourses which legitimate and undergird schemes of domination (Wodak and Meyer 2001). CDA frequently begins with the conclusion that certain discourses or institutions are oppressive and then seek to find traces in texts to support that conclusion; the conclusion precedes the evidence (Keller 2011). SKAD begins with a knowledge-orientation, emphasizing the effects of authoritative discourses on what may count as legitimate knowledge, where
oppressive power effects are just one option of many possible orientations for how discourses reconstitute reality. It is possible to use the framework of SKAD to do critical discourse research, but it is designed to investigate through inductive processes like grounded theory (Clarke and Keller 2014) rather than beginning with a conclusion and building evidence.

2.5.2. Moral Universes

A moral universe is the constellation of possible subject positions for a community and an attending value schema— for example, in Christian discourses, we see references to “saints and sinners”, a scheme of moral judgment which distinguishes subjects according to their holiness or sinfulness. Of course, there are degrees of sinfulness and holiness within this scheme, but this is the basic list of subject positions people inhabit for particular Christian communities. Historically, Christianity also distinguished between Christians and Pagans, or Christians and Devil-Worshippers, collapsing all non-Christians into a lump of heathens whose religious practices were actually glorifying the devil. Of course, this understanding does not do justice to the variety of religious practices as we sociologists understand them, but the moral universe for contemporary or medieval Christians made these the relevant distinction operators (and therefore possible subject positions).

With this understanding of SKAD, the interface between language use as the (interpretative) constitution of reality and the performative nature of identity should be clear. Since subject positions are constructed through invoking social distinction operators, it is in performing typified actions which bolster our identity claims.

Although in some cases individual characteristics (such as personality, cognitive styles, or demographics) may account for differences in willingness to self-identify as atheist (Zuckerman et al. 2016), it seems that there are social dynamics at play as well. Treating identity
claims (“I am an atheist”) as strategic discursive performances rather than claims about facts/reality opens up new avenues for understanding the dynamics of why some people choose this label while others reject it (Scheitle, Corcoran, and Hudnall 2019); it also makes possible the question: what does taking on this label accomplish in this context?

While self-identification will increase with the perception of legitimacy of “atheists”, so too will the perception of legitimacy increase as greater numbers claim this social identity. The legitimacy of subject positions or social movements and the number of persons identifying with them are mutually bolstering; as more people claim to be atheists, the legitimacy of that position increases, while at the same time as the legitimacy of the atheist subject position increases, more people will identify with that label.

Self-identification should therefore be understood in the larger discursive context whereby sense and evaluations are made, or, in other words, in terms of moral universes. This focus on how moral evaluations are inscribed upon social positions through strategic use of discursive resources makes visible the effect that (self-)labeling has in processes of (de)conversion and identity construction. Atheist discourses provide resources for challenging the dominant religion-morality connection, such that the “new atheists almost uniformly claim that it is modern atheists who hold the moral high ground, and that it is the practitioners of the world’s religions that are immoral, both in historical practice and in fundamental commitment” (Peterson 2010:159). This alternative moral universe offers new subject positions with which people might associate.

This chapter has laid out the components of the theoretical framework which has motivated and informed my analysis. Additionally, it has introduced the relevant social contextual elements, such as how prevalent theism is and how significant perceptions of
discrimination are for atheists, which should help readers understand the importance of this kind of research. My hope is that this dissertation spurs more interest in sociologically-oriented discursive approaches for topics relating to religion and nonreligion and provides descriptions which extend our understanding of atheist organizations and atheist activism more generally.
3. RESEARCHING ATHEIST ORGANIZATIONS

To explore the construction of morality and moral subject positions within discourses distributed by atheist organizations, I used qualitative content analysis (QCA) as described by Margrit Schreier (2012, 2013). QCA systematically describes data using a coding frame but focuses less on frequency counts and manifest meaning (which characterize quantitative approaches) to concentrate on context-dependent meaning. A more complete explanation of the processes involved in and methodological rationale for using this form of content analysis will follow a description of the data sources.

3.1. Description of the Data & the Sampling Procedure

I analyzed the textual content available on two atheist organizations’ websites. The organization need not have authored the document, only be distributing it on their website. I included any content distributed by atheist organizations because the construction of their moral universe and self-understanding draws on far more resources than documents of their own authoring. If an organization is actively distributing a document, the content must represent them enough to have motivated them to display it on their website. Although this was my rule during the process of data collection, I found that the content on the websites were almost exclusively authored for the purposes of the organization as far as I could tell.

Some examples of what is included in the category of organizationally-distributed documents: a page called “What is Atheism?” on Atheist Alliance International’s website, which defines, describes, and then promotes an atheist worldview; a blog post titled “Bake a Cake – and Be Religious Too!” on the News & Blog section of the American Atheists website. The first example is authored by the organization itself, with the goals of justification and (to a lesser extent) recruitment, making it an obvious selection. The second example, as part of a blog with
Editorial decision-making (insofar as not all members may publish posts at will), has content authored by both the organization itself as well as individuals (the example above is by Amanda Knief) – the post, authored by an individual, has been deemed distributable by the organization and, by extension, representative of that group.

I analyzed the content available on every webpage from the domains of two atheist organizations: Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists. This selection provides a representative of the most influential organizations which explicitly identify as “atheist” at both the international and national levels. Although there are many other organizations which are de facto atheist groups but which do not self-label as “atheist” (for example, Secular Alliance, Center for Inquiry, and various Humanist groups), I felt that my discourse-centric approach suggests the need to focus on discursive constructions of explicitly “atheist” morality.

The process for gathering all relevant content involved generating a list of all websites on each organization’s domain, the textual content available on each of these being the data to be analyzed. There are programs that generate an exhaustive list of pages on a domain (meaning a base URL, such as atheistalliance.org), and others that will “scrape” an entire domain, meaning they run a systematic search of all files on a given domain and download all content available. Using such software, I found that American Atheists’ atheists.org has 336 individual pages, including all content from their homepage and blog (of which there are 91 pages), pages about the authors of posts (11) and other members (75), pages for affiliated regional groups (26), descriptions of activist activities (16), information on their annual convention (12), a contact page, and product pages (91) for merchandise available on their website. Atheist Alliance International’s domain (atheistalliance.org) has 230 individual pages, following a similar structure to atheists.org, although 91 of their pages simply display links to other pages.
categorized by tag. These organizational pages have no original content, but rather allow users to browse other pages by topic. Any pages on these domains which were deemed to not be relevant to my analysis were dropped from the list of sources to be analyzed. After paring down to only webpages containing relevant content, I performed an exhaustive analysis – every piece of content from every remaining webpage on these organizations’ domains.

The selection of data should be motivated by the research questions to be investigated. For purposes of my analysis, I counted any value-laden content about actors and their actions as being concerned with “morality”, and did not attempt to distinguish between “morality” and “ethics”, but instead wished to capture content inclusive of both concepts. The research questions for this project are (1) Is “morality” a concept which atheist organizations are concerned with in many discursive contexts (as opposed to being only significant in highly specialized philosophical discourses, or as opposed to being entirely insignificant)?, (2) In these organizations’ documents, what terminology and criteria represent what it means to be a “good” atheist or “good” person more generally?, and (3) What discursive resources are used by these organizations to legitimate “atheist” as a viable and occupiable subject position?

With these questions in mind, I selected websites as the primary data source as it is the easiest way for these organizations to reach potential members due to the accessibility of information on the internet. As a powerful tool for these organizations in terms of recruitment and member engagement, these websites are an important discursive space for the construction and negotiation of “morality”. I selected the specific organizations in a process of examining the web presence and assessing the apparent reach and impact of atheist organizations. I made a list of such organizations and compared their size, amount of web content, and other factors (such as
the number of documents/videos created by famous and influential atheists). I then opted to select one representative from the national and one from the international level.

I feel confident that my selections are appropriate for answering the research questions. My confidence was bolstered when I found that the top two results in a Google search for “what is atheism?” are from the two organizations I selected, indicating that their resources are likely the most-viewed by people who are interested in atheism. From a discourse-centric standpoint, having access to a large audience is a significant way to influence widely used patterns of meaning – that is, a wide distribution of relatively standardized meanings lends to stability of what a concept signifies and therefore concretizes the cultural meaning.

3.2. Description & Justification of QCA

Schreier (Schreier 2012) suggests that QCA is appropriate in contexts where the meanings of one’s data are not highly standardized. Since atheism is a term which means different things for different people and there is no agreement about the contents and appropriate vocabularies of morality, QCA is a useful way to analyze the construction of an “atheist morality”.

QCA is one of the most powerful research tools for examining context-specific meaning processes; such as the construction of morality within a community (Schreier 2012). Investigating how organizations contribute discursive resources for morality construction requires an examination of the messages distributed by those organizations. This fact eliminates other research methods as possibilities, such as interviews (which would represent the views of individuals within the organization rather than “official” or “approved” views).

Previous research has investigated personal constructions of atheist morality. Since no research has systematically assessed how atheist organizations construct morality, researchers
cannot yet compare official messages and the views of members of these organizations. QCA, as a systematic assessment of these messages, thus provides a first and necessary exploration of organizational discourses which could, in future research, be compared to individual narratives to attempt to assess how and to what extent the discursive resources provided on these websites are appropriated by members.

QCA does not strictly follow the logic of inductive coding, which generates coding categories which flow directly from the meanings of passages in the source material. Instead, QCA begins with a research question, and is therefore oriented towards identifying relevant passages and generating categories based on the meanings found there. This focused, research-question-oriented approach distinguishes coding in QCA from the coding styles associated with Grounded Theory (e.g., open and axial). This does not mean that QCA is not data-driven and inductive in its creation of codes and categories, but rather suggests that one does not approach the text with maximal openness to “see what is there” because the research question drives the domain of what is to be discovered.

In order to distinguish between passages that require coding and which are to be excluded from the data set, additional data preparation is required. QCA typically begins with a phase of initial coding of the source materials as either “relevant” or “irrelevant”. In preparing the webpages for coding, I had to convert the HTML files to PDFs. This conversion is necessary because HyperResearch (the coding software I used) cannot open HTML files. I opened each page individually to assess whether any content on the page is relevant. If there exists no relevant content on a page, I code it as “irrelevant” and move to the next page. For pages with relevant content, I code it “relevant” and keep it in the data set. The range of webpages I coded “irrelevant” includes (1) those whose only purpose is to link to substantive content (such as
“Blog”, which lists links to the most recent posts but has no original content), (2) those which provide forms for user interaction (“Login” and “Contact Us”), and (3) legal boilerplate pages (“Terms and Conditions”). After this process of coding for relevance, there were 95 pages for Atheist Alliance International and 110 pages for American Atheists to be analyzed. Following this initial data preparation process, QCA requires the researcher to build a coding frame.

3.2.1. Building a Coding Frame

A coding frame is a series of categories and subcategories which allows the researcher to classify passages from the source material in relation to specific research questions. Coding frames are hierarchical, meaning that subcategories identify aspects of the higher-order main categories. This section outlines the concerns involved in and the process for constructing a coding frame.

Requirements of Coding Frames

Schreier identifies three requirements for coding frames: unidimensionality, mutual exclusiveness, and exhaustiveness. Unidimensionality means that main categories should only apply to a single concept or aspect of the data. The requirement of mutual exclusiveness dictates that subcategories of a main category should not overlap conceptually – a given passage of text should not be able to be coded under a main category more than once. The exhaustiveness of a coding frame means that all relevant aspects (based on the research questions) must be covered by a category.
Structuring & Generating Categories

There are two approaches for determining the categories which constitute a coding frame: concept-driven and data-driven categorization. Concept-driven categorization is generally used for deductive research, and is a process of creating your coding categories based on previous knowledge, whether from theory, prior research, everyday experience, or logic (Schreier 2012). This approach is generally less well-suited for exploratory and descriptive research but can be used as a starting point for exploring the data.

Data-driven categorization is an inductive process, where the categories and subcategories of your coding frame are built from concrete portions of text. This strategy was more appropriate for the current research, as a description of strategies and discursive resources is the primary goal. Although data-driven categorization is inductive in nature, it does not mean that QCA is a purely inductive method in the traditional sense. QCA begins with a research question which determines which texts will be deemed relevant for the project at hand – this is different from more radically inductive approaches which attempt to limit preconceptions before diving directly into the data, such as Grounded Theory. Since the researcher begins with a delimited area of interest, QCA should not be considered a purely inductive approach even if the categories are in a sense “discovered” in the process of research.

The nature of my research question suggested a starting-point using a limited number of concept-driven categories (based on morality and identities). I began my initial coding process with the high-order categories “atheists doing good”, “legitimizing an atheist identity”, “religion doing bad”, and “values”. These over-arching categories capture the discourse on atheist morality by focusing on accounts of why “atheist” is a desirable subject position through:
1. accounts of increasing numbers of self-described atheists, their growing visibility, and the strengths of their community,
2. accounts of the positive actions atheists perform,
3. descriptions of why religion is undesirable at the individual and societal levels, and
4. descriptions of the values held by the atheist community.

These categories focused my initial coding process based on the literature concerning atheist morality and provide a general structure for generating data-driven categories.

There are several strategies researchers have used to generate data-driven categories (Schreier 2012). Subsumption, as originally formulated by Mayring (2010, cited in Schreier 2012), is used when a more or less definite main category is suggested by the research questions for a project. Since this study had a sufficiently narrow focus (claims concerning morality and identity), this approach was deemed to be the most appropriate.

Subsumption is a process whereby the researcher goes through the material to find statements and concepts related to the main category. The researcher provides a provisional label for a concept each time a unique category is encountered. When relevant passages have conceptually similar meanings, instead of creating a new category, the researcher subsumes that passage into the previously existing category (hence the name of this strategy). After reaching theoretical saturation (no new categories appear for several texts after coding a sufficient cross-section of the material), there is a revision phase in which the researcher detects overlaps in existing categories to subsume before the pilot phase as described below (Schreier 2012).

I generated categories which relate to morality and identity as they came up in the texts. I organized my categories according to the themes listed above: (1) atheists actively doing good in the world, (2) legitimating an atheist identity – such as appeals to growing numbers or increase
in atheist visibility, (3) instances of religion doing harm or bad things, and (4) atheist values as positive moral content. These high-order categories cover the range of moral appeals in all the webpages analyzed.

Defining Categories

After the process of generating categories and structuring them (putting them in category-subcategory relationships), the next step was defining the (sub)categories.

First, I gave the categories discovered in the previous steps an appropriate category name—these labels should be a concise description but not ambiguous. This process also applies to subcategories. Next, I provided a specific description of each category. Descriptions provide both a definition (a conceptualization of the category) and indicators. Indicators signal the presence of the category in question and can include keywords. A description functionally provides instructions about when a given category applies to the text.

When more than one researcher is coding the material, it is often necessary to develop decision rules. These decision rules help the coders to avoid conceptual overlap of subcategories (to satisfy the requirement of mutual exclusiveness) by spelling out as specifically as possible how ambiguous passages should be coded. This means addressing what is not included in the subcategory (and how to code those elements, if appropriate). Decision rules can also help a single coder improve consistency of coding and therefore validity.

3.2.2. Evaluation & Modification of the Coding Frame

The pilot phase tests the adequacy of the coding frame before performing the main analysis. The coding frame should be applied to a part of the data which contains the range of concepts which are covered in your coding frame. After creating a complete coding scheme, I
tested the adequacy of the coding frame. I coded the segments to make sure that the categories are unambiguous and mutually exclusive, then waited over 10 days (the minimum length of time suggested by Schreier 2012) to recode those same segments of text another time in order to test the reliability of the coding scheme. In this process, if certain categories prove difficult to apply, modifications to the coding frame are needed. After the pilot phase, I found some conceptual overlap across some subcategories, and so had to reduce and subsume several of my categories. These adjustments are an important part of the pilot phase.

After running into issues with reliability calculations – something about the conversion of HTML to PDF created a problem for the HyperResearch software – I recognized that several passes are necessary for coding the data to best investigate my research questions. By this I mean that only one higher-order category is coded at a time – so I coded every page using the subcategories for atheist values, then I coded every page using subcategories for atheists doing good, etc. The overlap of accounts of atheist values with stories of atheists doing good things was significant, and it made coding decisions unnecessarily hard. I repeated the pilot phase, again waiting at least 10 days between coding instances. After coding for only a single category at a time, coding decisions became clearer and it was not difficult to reach an acceptable reliability score (84.9%, as calculated by the HyperResearch software). There is no consensus about acceptable levels for intercoder reliability, but Campbell and colleagues (2013) report that past social scientific research has used varying standards, in some cases as low as 70% with others closer to 80%. My score of nearly 85% qualifies as “acceptable” for all standards found in the article by Campbell et al. (2013:310).
3.2.3. Analysis of Data

In QCA, the main analysis of data uses the final coding frame to code all materials. If the coding frame requires adjustments at this point, the process of coding starts over, and all material are coded based on the new frame. Schreier suggests doing a second pilot phase before beginning the main analysis if any doubt remains as to the adequacy of the coding frame; my process attests to the aptness of this suggestion.

Double coding the material is necessary to ensure the reliability of your coding scheme and your application of the same. As in the pilot phase, it is suggested to wait at least 10 days between the initial and the second coding (Schreier 2012) for this reliability test. This waiting period allows the consistency of your application of codes to be compared in a manner similar to assessing inter-rater reliability. This length of time is intended to minimize similarities in coding due to remembering what decisions you made before.

My coding frame focuses on the concepts relevant to my research questions, which deal with the frequency and salience of moral claims as well as the content of the moral system constructed by these organizations which make “atheist” not only a possible self-designation but also a desirable position.

3.2.4. Quality Measures

Schreier (2012, 2013) describes several measures for assessing the quality of QCA. Validity in QCA refers to the adequacy of the categories and subcategories of the coding frame to represent the concepts investigated in the research project. In content analysis, concerns of validity are often discussed in terms of manifest and latent content, and monosemous and polysemous (one or several meanings in a communication event). For QCA, both manifest and latent content are usable to the extent that the researcher has adequate information about
contextual elements. QCA, as a method of reducing the complexity of textual data, is not suited for analyzing ambiguous polysemous media, such as poems or art pieces, where many meanings (some of which may be contradictory) are easily “read into” the text. There are four types of validity relevant to QCA: face, content, criterion, and construct validity.

Face validity describes whether a coding frame seems to measure or code the concepts it is intended to measure. Content validity describes how well a coding frame covers all dimensions of the concepts under study. Both face validity and content validity are bolstered in the process described above for data-driven or concept-driven categorization, with related concerns of the mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness of categories. For example, if in the pilot phase you find that many units of coding are being assigned to residual rather than main categories, this is a threat to face validity insofar as your coding frame is inadequately capturing the meanings contained in your source material.

Data-driven and concept-driven categorization processes differ in which form of validity is most important: face validity is significant for data-driven categorization whereas content validity is critical for concept-driven categorization.

Criterion validity is assessed by comparing your coding frame to the indicators of an established measurement instrument covering the same concept(s). Construct validity describes whether the major concepts under study relate as predicted to connected concepts. Schreier suggests that criterion and construct validity “are only important if you want to validate inferences that go beyond the description of your material” (Schreier 2012). Since my analysis will not extend beyond a description of the discursive toolbox that atheist organizations offer on their websites for the construction of morality, this project need not be concerned with these forms of validity.
Reliability for QCA refers to consistency of coding. Assessing reliability as consistency means asking if the same subcategories apply to the same units of coding when the coding frame and associated decision rules are used to code a text more than once (whether by the same or different researchers). As mentioned above, the pilot phase (or phases) is essential for concretizing the codebook and establishing high levels of reliability.

Schreier discusses the importance of reliability in terms of ensuring “the quality of your coding frame” and “the acceptability of your analysis” (Schreier 2012). High levels of consistency in using the coding frame means that ambiguity of both the categories used and the material analyzed should not introduce error. Consistent application of the categories speaks to the adequacy of the classifications to extend beyond an idiosyncratic interpretation of the material – especially if intersubjective agreement concerning the coding frame can be reached.

Reliability is bolstered by double-coding procedures. This can be done by comparing independent instances of coding on the same unit of analysis by two or more researchers (for intersubjective consistency). If a single researcher is responsible for all coding (as in the current research), a process of recoding units can assess the consistency of the coding frame over time. This is called internal reliability. Both of these procedures will increase the plausibility of your interpretations. The pilot phase, in testing and adjusting the coding frame, is designed to overcome threats to the different forms of validity and reliability described above (Schreier 2012).

This research explored how atheist organizations construct morality without reference to God. Specifically, I examined the moral claims made by two prominent atheist organizations on their websites, assessing their content for what it means to be a good person and how it is possible to defend and positively evaluate the atheist position in a society in which theism is
ubiquitous and atheism is stigmatized. I identified three core discursive strategies, the use of moral contrasts, appeals to established common values, and conscious script-flipping, which I describe in detail in the subsequent chapters.
4. LEGITIMATING ATHEIST IDENTITIES: MORAL CONTRASTS

Research in the sociology of religion and nonreligion has greatly expanded our understanding of the varieties of nonreligious identities and existential beliefs. This is important and relevant work, especially considering the way that religion maps onto political divides in the US today. Political polarization along religious lines, most vividly illustrated by pervasive white Evangelical support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election, has been explained in relation to the concept of the “Religious Right” and various discursive resources developed by Evangelicals in the US (Baker, Perry, and Whitehead 2020; Delehanty, Edgell, and Stewart 2019; Martí 2019).

With boundaries shifting around many identities infused with religious and political import, sociologists have new opportunities for deep empirical work into the bases and strategies of identity construction and symbolic boundary negotiation. Social scientific studies of atheism, in particular, can shed light on the way a group that perceives very high levels of distrust and discrimination constructs valuable moral selves.

Smith (2011) conceptualized atheist identity in many cases as being a rejection identity - that is, constructed in opposition to an other (religion and theism). The term “nonreligion” is gaining traction in the social sciences to describe practices and identities where a noticeable absence of religious elements is significant to actors. This points to the importance many people ascribe to contrasting their actions and identities to religion, suggesting that this rejection identity concept is applicable not only to atheists, but to many nonreligious people in general.

Nonreligious identity construction does not always involve such rejection, since there are many people best described as “religiously indifferent”, or “ambivalent”, or “apatheists” and for whom rejecting religion plays no part in their self-concept (Cragun and McCaffree 2021; Lee 2015a; Norenzayan and Gervais 2013; Smith and Cragun 2019).
Since the historically dominant discourse in the West has assumed Christianity as a given, and has demonized nonbelievers, it is important to understand how actors’ identities shift with secularization. In a widening array of contexts, we find religion demoted from its assumed dominant position to, in some cases, being the subject of denigration itself. This discursive shift has two important impacts.

First, new nonreligious subject positions are made possible and inhabitable. Without fear of persecution for nonbelief and the increasing challenge modernity makes to religion, people can reject religion without being ostracized in many contexts. Second, religious discourses have shifted to figure out the relation of science to religious belief and texts. In some cases this has led to a demonization of science and secularization broadly and has increased the importance of religiosity for many actors, leading in some places to desecularization (Berger 2008; Karpov 2010). Faith traditions embracing anti-science and anti-secularization discourses might put pressure on adherents to avoid any contact with nonreligious people and ideas. The boundaries around religious and nonreligious identities are a continuous negotiation in this discursive context.

At the micro level, the twin – and seemingly contradictory – dynamics of the increasing acceptance of nonreligious identities and the rising salience of anti-secular discourses and practices can lead to significant interpersonal friction. Atheists in particular report discrimination in a variety of contexts (Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012). Some people who come out as nonreligious are being disowned by family (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Zimmerman et al. 2015; Zuhlke 2016). These discourse-level shifts and attendant interpersonal impacts make the study of religious and nonreligious identities and boundary-making complex but worth understanding.
In this study I analyzed the websites of two organizations which explicitly self-identify as atheist and which actively encourage people using other labels for nonreligion to call themselves atheists. There are many labels people use to describe their nonreligion (Lee 2015a; Smith and Cragun 2019), and various reasons for choosing one label over another (Beyer 2015; Smith 2013b; Wallis 2019). Since religious and nonreligious identities have significant interpersonal effects (Cragun et al. 2012; Galen, Williams, and Ver Wey 2014), many people whose beliefs could be characterized as atheist avoid identifying themselves with that stigmatized label (Cragun et al. 2015; Day and Lee 2014). American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International acknowledge and appreciate the variety of non-theistic beliefs while also encouraging readers to embrace “atheist” as their label.

Beyer (2015) describes a range of stances taken by nonreligious people. Based on his research in Canada, there appears to be a continuum of stances from staunch anti-religious atheism to extremely religious, who practice their religion as completely as possible, rejecting the value of any other religion. Some atheists explicitly reject the value and validity of anything religious altogether, whereas some are more open to acknowledge that religion may have good aspects. Although researchers will classify both groups simply as “atheists” they could have significant distinctions in their self-conceptions.

My analysis examines the strategies of two organizations for encouraging and legitimizing atheist identities. This study contributes to the sociology of religion and nonreligion generally by highlighting the role of discourse in understanding identities situated in relation to religion. Further, my analysis develops our understanding of the specific strategies being used to make religion seem undesirable and make atheism desirable. This work extends the existing sociological literature on identity by demonstrating the role symbolic boundaries and moral
contrasts play in processes of identity construction and legitimation for atheists, but which should apply in other contexts as well. Identity formation should be recognized as a moral process which align one’s behaviors and self-concepts to their normative judgments and values. Studying deviant identities (like atheist) is a great way to highlight these moral dimensions, since existing outside of the mainstream generally requires more visible and explicit legitimation practices, like the intentional “script-flipping” employed by atheist organizations.

There are a few strategies these organizations use to make “atheist” a desirable subject position, which I will discuss in the next few sections. Before we get into the specifics, though, there are some general points that should be made.

First, we find a general congruence between the strategies used by these organizations and those described in past research concerning atheist individuals, both those affiliated with secular organizations and those who are not (Guenther et al. 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016). The basic form used for legitimating an atheist identity includes moral contrasts (this point is related to that made by Smith (2011), that atheism appears in many cases to be a rejection identity), primarily about painting maximal distance from religious excess. In many cases, this means maximal distance from “religion” generally, but we also see in individual accounts that they are unwilling to paint too broadly, and will point to the specific evils they see arising from religions.

Second, the studied organizations tend towards a more aggressive framing of religious harm than seen in the accounts of individuals, although Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists may be outliers in this regard since their primary focus is advancing atheist rights through legal action. Initially, I was not sure if they would be more moderate in their framings because they were organizations and needed to represent large swaths – I anticipate that
organizations generally hold more conservative positions than the individuals inside – but I found that these organizations take their activistic agenda to mean an uncompromising attitude in relation to religion.

Guenther and colleagues (2013) suggest that atheist individuals do not openly demonize religious individuals (other than perhaps religious leaders) because they do not want to estrange religious family and friends or push away potential converts - and if the activistic strategy seems to be to increase the number of atheists, being kind and accessible seems a practical route. We do not find this tendency in the websites of these organizations. We know that discourses are shaped by both the speaker and the intended audience, so we can conceptualize this in a couple of different ways.

Firstly, we could hypothesize that organizations will exhibit different discursive styles and tones than individuals just by the nature of organizations and the limits of what “proper” communications from them “should” look like. Persons writing on behalf of organizations follow discourse rules of “organizational writing” in a way that individuals qua individuals do not, even when communicating otherwise similar content (Hoffman and Ford 2009).

Secondly, it does not appear that these webpages are designed to be an effective instrument of converting people to an atheistic worldview but are instead about satisfying or enriching those who are already members, like-minded, or questioning religion; the call to action seems to be to adopt the use of “atheist” as a self-identifier and to join in on activism, membership, and donations. It does not appear that religious people are the intended audience, otherwise we might expect to see more attempts at persuasive argumentation throughout the websites. Writing for people who are already like-minded will take on different attributes from writing to persuade the differently-minded. We could imagine very different messages if they
intended their websites as primary proselytizing vehicles. *By atheists for atheists* is different than by atheists for believers.

It is interesting that previous studies (Guenther et al. 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016) state that atheists are constructing moral selves without offering a description of the content of their morality. Participants highlight the immorality of the religious but do not give substantive descriptions of morality to which atheists adhere. The contribution of my study is to move beyond the construction of moral selves to the construction of moral universes and standards for atheists. This is useful because there is likely not a monolithic atheist morality and pinning it down might be difficult; substantive description of organizations’ moral universes will permit future comparisons of major themes across groups and individuals in different contexts. The atheist organizations studied emphasize the diversity and heterogeneity of atheists, making the content of their moral universes general. Although speaking for the atheist community in this regard is not simple, the ways American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International approach the construction of “an atheist morality” are almost identical and have significant overlaps with what the literature reports that individual atheists say (Guenther et al. 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016).

The ways that atheist organizations make atheist identities appear legitimate center mostly on moral contrasts. These moral contrasts create an easily understood and communicable moral universe which simplifies the range of subject positions. In essence, the message is that there are only two types of people, atheist or religious, and atheists are good whereas religious people are bad. This oversimplification of the range of subject positions to only two options forces the reader to consider which applies to them, and the framing of one position being obviously better encourages the reader to side with the author. Manipulating the options of
readers like this is a common tactic in persuasion, since, as Lincoln (1989) noted, persuasion of this kind often tends to be more about sentiment evocation than rational explanation. My analysis does not lean too heavily on this idea of manipulation, but instead focuses on describing the content and strategies found on atheist organizations’ websites.

Moral contrasts of this kind have been demonstrated to be an effective vehicle for legitimation, even for things as destructive as war. For example, Simonsen (2019) found several legitimating strategies used to justify state violence in Israel, suggesting that “legitimation of war involves discursive strategies that divide social actors into highly polarized, moralized categories of Us and Them, making the unpleasantness of social and physical violence seem acceptable” (Simonsen 2019:516). Although the article does not explicitly reference “moral contrasts”, there are clear parallels between my use of this concept and Simonsen’s descriptions of discursive legitimation strategies:

A key component in war legitimation is the linguistic construction of negative other-representation and positive self-representation… The moralized lexico-grammatical resources used to develop the semantic categories of Us and Them contributes to the kind of ideological polarization that makes the unpleasant realities of war against the ‘other’ seem necessary, which in the worst cases can make hostilities against non-combatants as well seem legitimate. (Simonsen 2019:505)

The following sections provide examples of content on these websites to illustrate why conceptualizing the strategies for legitimizing atheist identities as tactics of moral contrast is useful for the social scientific study of atheists and identities.

4.1. Moral Contrasts

A good deal of the discursive attempts to legitimate atheist identities involves maximizing their distance from religion. In this case, moral contrasts are explicit attempts to valorize the in-group by othering the out-group. This can take many forms, one of the most
common being to paint religion and religious people as ridiculous. For example, in an article about contradictions found in the Bible, the author uses ridiculing language:

What is incredible about the Bible is not its divine authorship; it’s that such a concoction of contradictory nonsense could be believed by anyone to have been written by an omniscient god. To do so, one would first have to not read the book, which is the practice of most Christians; or, if one does read it, dump in the trash can one’s rational intelligence — to become a fool for god, in other words. (AA – Biblical Contradictions)

Further ridicule insists that religious belief is based on imagination alone, like this passage from an article entitled “An Easy Way to Distinguish Real Gods from Fake Ones”:

It would be obvious which gods were real, and obvious that the others were not. But, here is the interesting thing, it is NOT obvious. Religious people all report these benefits whichever god they worship. It seems that all gods work equally well! The fact that all gods work equally well is clear evidence that they are all equally imaginary. The reported benefits of answered prayers, communion and guidance could be nothing more than imagination with a large dose of confirmation bias. (AAI - An Easy Way to Distinguish Real Gods from Fake Ones)

Many of these attempts to make religion seem stupid include appeals to the critical thinking capacities of atheists – in some passages we see the implication that logic and rationality are the possession of only atheists. This often shows up as authors portraying religious people as lacking critical thinking skills:

If you ask people why they believe in God, most will give you a reason derived from logic (however, tortured and broken it may be) but a sizable minority, ignore logic and rely entirely on their feelings. (AAI – Can You Feel God in Your Heart?)

Although this quote permits “logic” to describe theistic reasoning, the author is quick to dismiss it as invalid, calling it “tortured and broken”. This quote, along with other similar passages on other webpages, implies that even though there may be some religious adherents who engage with rational methods, they give up their true critical thinking skills by clinging to faith, and there is a robust contingent of feelings-based thinkers.
Recent research into secular organizations has discovered that there are disagreements among members about the appropriateness and effectiveness of ridiculing strategies of this kind (Blankholm 2022; Langston et al. 2017). Neither Atheist Alliance International nor American Atheists shy away from irreverent jabs at religion which depicts religious thinking as preposterous.

These atheist organizations seem to willingly adopt the “firebrand” atheist persona, exemplified by an unapologetic, uncompromising, critical stance toward religion. An example of this stark approach excludes religion entirely from logic and critical thinking:

Faith has no mechanism for distinguishing true from false, worse it has no mechanism for distinguishing plausible from absurd. That is why faith is used to justify beliefs that cannot be justified in any rational way. That is why faith can be used by two people to believe contradictory things; that is why faith can be used to believe things that are robustly contradicted by masses of validated evidence. And that is why ANYTHING can be believed on faith. (AAI - Is the Moon Made of Cheese?)

This is a typical example of the moral contrasts found in texts distributed by these organizations. The quotes discussed thus far also illustrate another aspect of the moral contrasts employed in these atheist organizations’ websites, that these contrasts do not rely on explicit side-by-side comparison of the merits of atheists to the shortcomings of religion. Moral contrasts can operate by implication, whereby calling out deficiencies in others invites the desired comparison and moral judgment.

It should prove useful to consider the specific components found in the moral contrasts these organizations employ to legitimate atheist identities. Although every author takes a slightly different approach to this, we can describe the range of strategies used in general terms while keeping in mind that specifics vary. In analyzing the websites of Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists, I identified three primary strategies for legitimating atheist identities
through moral contrasts: (1) make atheism seem natural, (2) highlight the good atheists do, and (3) condemn religious harm.

4.2. Strategy 1: Make Atheism Seem Natural

Both Atheist Alliance International’s and American Atheists’ websites include pages which suggest that atheism is the natural state for humans. This includes arguments that babies do not believe in God but are indoctrinated into that way of thinking, that ancient humans functioned in cooperative arrangements without any of the religious arrangements we recognize today, and that religious teachings are forced upon people and always entangled in their cultural context.

Appeals to “naturalness” often create a specific picture of what is normal and correct, disguising moral judgments as mere descriptions of what is. Naturalizing discourses are powerful when they successfully transform the reader’s vision of reality to include a normative element – “things ought to be this way”. Bourdieu makes this point forcefully, saying:

This [naturalizing] discourse is a structured and structuring medium tending to impose an apprehension of the established order as natural (orthodoxy) through the disguised (and thus misrecognized) imposition of systems of classification and of mental structures. (1991:169)

He further states that such discourses construct social reality by offering a common set of distinction markers which make solidarity possible and which both cause and legitimate inequality. The stakes of this discourse are nothing short of the ways people make sense of the world around them, as

the immediate meaning of the world (and in particular of the social world) depends on what Durkheim calls logical conformism, that is, 'a homogeneous conception of time, space, number and cause, one which makes it possible for different intellects to reach agreement. (Bourdieu 1991:166)
In these passages Bourdieu points to symbolic power as the legitimating force that transforms arbitrary cultural arrangements as natural and necessary, transforming our shared conceptions of reality. Naming something as “natural” is a shortcut to this reality constructing power by infusing conceptions of that object with normativity.

The logic of division in human cultures involves separating the praiseworthy from the blameworthy to infuse social distinctions with a moral loading. Distinctions between “natural” and “arbitrary” are used for social (moral and normalizing) purposes, not for epistemic (maximizing the accuracy of a description of reality) purposes (Bourdieu 1991). This is related in many ways to Durkheim’s insight about the sacred/profane distinction being central to the unifying power of religion. The “us” and “them” created by naming practices and beliefs as “natural” serves a social function rather than an epistemic function, and we see this moralizing component in the discourses promoted by atheist organizations. Bourdieu invites us to view claims of naturalness with a sociological suspicion, since this framing is morally loaded in ways not always apparent to readers.

In the literature covering discourse analysis and rhetoric we find a similar conceptualization. For example, Theo van Leeuwen (2008, 2018) suggests that persuasive rhetorical strategies frequently hide moral judgments behind adjectives which appear to be neutral descriptors, but which carry morally-loaded assumptions:

moral evaluation is linked to specific discourses of moral value. However, these discourses are not made explicit and debatable. They are only hinted at, by means of adjectives such as “healthy,” “normal,” “natural,” “useful,” and so on. Such adjectives are then the tip of a submerged iceberg of moral values. They trigger a moral concept, but are detached from the system of interpretation from which they derive, at least on a conscious level. (van Leeuwen 2008:110)

Messages can invoke moral sentiments without appearing to be moralizing and thereby persuade an audience that would not otherwise take seriously that line of thinking. Van Leeuwen describes
“naturalization” as a specific strategy which hides moral evaluation behind apparently unbiased descriptors:

‘Naturalization’ is a specific form of moral evaluation, a form which in fact denies morality and replaces moral and cultural orders with the ‘natural order.’ Morality and nature become entangled here, and discourse analytical methods cannot disentangle them. (van Leeuwen 2008:111)

Both sociology and rhetoric studies recognize discourses of “naturalness” as powerful tools for persuasion.

The moral contrast made in these organizations’ websites is to suggest that atheism is the obvious and natural state of humans and religion is unnatural. The opposite contention will be found in religious arguments, that religion is natural. This type of framing does not address the difficulties involved with assessing which elements of human behavior are to be seen as “natural”, but instead uses the simple association that natural equals good to draw their distinction from religion. We see the obvious oversimplification here which functions as a manipulation of options. But it is not enough to simply state “atheism is natural”; readers must be made to see why this is the case. The rest of this section covers ways Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists attempt to naturalize atheism.

4.2.1. *Atheists are Relatable*

Atheists are a highly stigmatized population in the US (Abbott and Mollen 2018; Hammer et al. 2012; LeDrew 2015; Smith 2013a). A significant obstacle atheists face is gaining an audience that takes them seriously – you cannot convince people of the correctness of your position if you are dismissed off-hand. This is why an important legitimation strategy for atheists is naturalizing/normalizing atheism by establishing that they are just like everyone else. The simplest part of this strategy of naturalization is to make atheists seem more relatable. Atheist
organizations highlight similarities atheists share with most people, reducing the estrangement from “everyday” people. This can be as simple as reminding the reader that atheists are human and participate in human things: “Just because atheists don’t believe in a supernatural god doesn’t mean we don’t enjoy each other’s company, music, hearing interesting speakers talk about interesting topics, and so on. We’re human, you know” (AA – A Conversation with a Christian). Additionally, we find statements that depict atheism as mundane and more widespread than one would expect:

Nowadays, we find atheists in every walk of life. From entertainers like George Carlin and Julia Sweeney to entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and Sir Alan Sugar, from novelists like Ken Follett and Philip Roth to Nobel Laureates like Linus Pauling and Peter Higgs. Atheism is no longer the reserve of the intelligentsia and philosophers, now you may find your gardener and your childminder are atheists (mine are). (AAI – About Atheism)

Atheist organizations valorize mainstream behaviors and demonstrate that atheists participate in them while inviting people to join them in an obviously marginal position. Another example, this time from American Atheists, which follows this same pattern:

Atheists are your doctors, your police officers, members of your staff, your friends and family. If you think you don’t know any atheists, you’re wrong. It may simply be that the atheists in your life are uncomfortable telling you that they don’t share your religious convictions because they worry about your reaction. (AA- Atheists Invite San Antonio Mayor to Meet Constituents after Anti-Atheist Remarks)

In essence, this strategy says that atheists are just like you and all around you, and if you fail to recognize this, it is because of the historically motivated stigma which follows atheism.

There appears to be an interesting tension between claiming maximal similarities (“I’m just like you”) and persuading an audience (“self-label as atheist”). People do not want to be labelled “unnatural”, so leaning too hard in that direction might make readers less receptive to a primary call to action in these websites, to move individuals who use other nonreligious labels to self-identify as an atheist. As mentioned before, the intended audience of these websites appears
to be like-minded people and members, not religious individuals. This fact combines with the “firebrand” character of these organizations to motivate labelling religious practices as “unnatural” in many contexts without apology. Even so, most messages which equate religion with unnaturalness target extremism and steer clear of mainstream beliefs and practices which are embedded in Western culture. Regardless the intended audience, it seems that emphasizing similarities can soften this potential offense in addition to making “atheist” a viable subject position to inhabit.

4.2.2. Children are Atheists

Another form of naturalizing discourse relies on the idea that babies are natural atheists – they have no conception of God or religion. It seems to be common practice to identify children using religious labels (a Muslim child, a Catholic child, etc.), even though their ability to participate and believe is limited – perhaps this practice functions in part to obscure the fact that young children do not believe in God and cannot explain or defend their faith. Religious ideas must be taught and reinforced. This idea is forcefully stated in a passage which describes how religions basically brainwash children to perpetuate their ridiculous beliefs:

The problem is, if you want people to believe things that are fully ridiculous and with no evidence, you have to teach them young, and teach them repeatedly and emphatically… Parents teach religious stories whilst they are still primary influencers, and before children figure out that some things are true and some are false, and learn how to distinguish between them. There is a window of opportunity with children—miss it and you may never get them to believe ridiculous things. (AAI – Christianity’s Dirty Secret)

Atheist organizations distinguish ideas which must be forced upon impressionable minds from those which fit the evidence of both everyday life and scientific inquiry. This contrast makes the naturalness of atheism and the unnaturalness of theism seem obvious. So, although at first glance the argument that babies are atheists might not seem important, it offers a clear vision of reality
which classifies natural and unnatural ideas and beliefs. It at least invites the question: what would people believe if they let evidence instead of religious indoctrination lead them? Since atheists claim the side of science and evidence, this question opens the reader to the rest of the arguments on their websites.

Atheist Alliance International provides a striking description of how children (as natural atheists) come to religious beliefs: “There is clear evidence that religions and gods are propagated through culture by infecting children, and no evidence that they are propagated by gods” (AAI- Eight Reasons Christianity is False). This passage indirectly references the nature vs. culture binary which implies that cultural impacts are not natural. More incisively, this description likens cultural transmission of religious belief to infection, with all the negative connotation this word carries. Positive cultural transmissions of technological progress are not described in similar terms; it seems that the culture causes damage theme applies only to religious thinking/traditions. This suggests that atheist organizations have a nuanced understanding of the benefits and problems culture provides and strategically choose reductionistic binary language (nature vs. culture) when it applies to religion and underscores that a lack of belief in deities is the default starting point for all humans.

Another framing used in this strategy of naturalizing atheism through pointing to the fact that people begin without religious beliefs involves labeling atheism as “neutral”:

At Atheist Alliance International, we believe children are born neutral and should not be indoctrinated into religion. If a child chooses at a later date to join a religion, that decision should be respected. All too often however, children are forced into their parents’ religion with no choice until they become adults.” (AAI- Icelandic Circumcision Ban)

This passage names the lack of religious beliefs of children as being “born neutral”. This framing not only insists upon the naturalness of atheism but allows the following phrases to draw sharp
contrast with the active and unnatural processes of religion. If we focus only on the key verbs of this passage, we see this contrast clearly – children “are born” neutral, “indoctrinated” into religion, can “choose” to join, are “forced into” religion. Moving away from a natural state appears to take effort in a way that natural atheism does not.

It is interesting to note that atheist organizations depict religious thinking as thoroughly unnatural yet in some cases a natural response to the unknown.

[Looking at religion, we] see the fingerprints of our distant ancestors asking questions no sentient beings had ever asked before. These questions were so novel and so imponderable that there was only one way to answer them—that is why the answers they found were not a product of the intellect but of the imagination. These early sapiens had evolved a brain that would be capable of integral calculus and of unravelling the deepest secrets of the universe, but they had yet to learn how to use it. (AAI – God and the Brain of Man)

This depicts religion as a more or less natural response to lacking knowledge, suggesting that in the face of the unknown, some form of religious thinking is natural. This passage implies that the state of human knowledge today should obviate such unrestrained imagination in responding to most questions, so perhaps religious thinking, although natural in humanity’s infancy, is now unnatural. This is perhaps why themes revolving around the necessity of teaching and indoctrination for the continued survival of religion show up so frequently. A passage from Atheist Alliance International illustrates this within a context of naturalizing atheism by implying that atheism is a neutral and natural state:

“Some people are atheists simply because they have never been taught to be theists. People raised by an atheist family in an atheistic society may never be exposed to the idea of gods (except in history books), so they grow up with no belief in them. Remember, people do not suddenly become Christians, Muslims, Hindus or whatever. Children raised in religious families in religious societies are trained to be Christians, Muslims or Hindus… A significant proportion of atheists in the world today are atheists because they were not taught to be anything else.” (AAI- What is Atheism?)
Religion is ubiquitous because it is trained into each subsequent generation to override the natural impulse towards naturalistic thinking and lack of belief in deity. Atheist organizations insist upon the naturalness of atheism and the unnaturalness of religion by suggesting that humans are born naturally free of religious thinking and must be indoctrinated into obviously ridiculous beliefs, and that this indoctrination has seen continued success because it begins in early childhood before critical thinking capacities develop.

4.2.3. “Spiritual” Experiences

Atheist organizations attempt to naturalize (by de-supernaturalizing) the affective components of “spirituality” used to convince many of the religious of their tradition’s correctness. Different secular organizations seem to take different approaches to states of awe, wonder, and transcendence, in some cases naming it “secular spirituality” (Frost 2017). Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists do not hold onto the idea that these experiences should be properly identified as “spiritual”, but instead keep to less metaphysical terms. The connection to reality, the deep meaning of being alive, and related experiences that would elsewhere be called “spiritual” are named and explained in purely naturalistic terms. This means that religion has no special claim to these desirable experiential states, and that they are accessible to all people by virtue of social and aesthetic means:

The difference is simply that I understand that my connection to all life on this planet is biological, not because every living thing was created by some agent. I feel a connection to this Earth in a deeply meaningful way… When you experience your god in church, you’re really experiencing something your own mind is doing to itself. The music, the lights, the repetitive driving and droning rhythms, singing along, certain familiar words and phrases all play a role in getting you into this mental state, but it is a mental state.

(AA – A Conversation with a Christian)

Identifying the natural means of inducing these “spiritual” experiences detaches them from common religious associations, thereby reintroducing these feelings of connection as simply part
of being human. This is consistent with other webpages which suggest that atheists experience these same deeply meaningful feelings because it is a natural human capacity.

The author of this post on American Atheists’ blog identifies a set of feelings and states that are analogous to the “spiritual” experiences of religion but refers to them as a “connection to all life” and “deeply meaningful” instead of naming them “spiritual”. To further distance these powerful feelings from religious associations, the author makes these transcendent experiences entirely mundane:

The thing is, since I realized that I was the source of those feelings, and not some external entity, I can have those same feelings pretty much anytime and anywhere I want to. I feel the same awe, the same sense on insignificance and humility, the same connection to something greater than myself – a connection to everything that is. (AA- A Conversation with a Christian)

This approach does not deny the meaningfulness of transcendent experiences, but also minimizes the specialness or sacredness normally attached to them. This tension between the deep meaning found in “spiritual experiences” on the one hand and their mundane and psychologized nature on the other seems to be related in many ways to the “secular paradox” identified by Joseph Blankholm (2022). Blankholm discusses how the nature of secularism as being other than religion creates “generative tension” between “what secular people do not share and what they have in common—between avoiding religion and embracing something like it” (Blankholm 2022:3). The ambivalence atheist organizations have toward transcendent experiences seems to be a good example of the tension involved in the secular paradox.

Atheist organizations strip religion of its privileged claim to the substantial legitimacy that felt spiritual experiences hold. Some secular groups, like the Sunday Assembly (Smith 2017a, 2017b), organize at least in part around these spiritual feelings of connection and
transcendence in the absence of religion (Schutz 2017). According to researcher Amanda Schutz, these spiritual secular organizations provide

a place where members can go to experience emotions traditionally associated with religion – like awe and self-reflection – where disbelief in the supernatural is not only acceptable (as it often is in Unitarian Universalist congregations), but expected. While ‘secular spirituality’ might seem counterintuitive, there are a sizable number of people in these organizations who feel that the idea is compatible with an atheist or humanist worldview. (Schutz 2017:128)

There are many ways secular organizations and individuals repackage “spiritual experiences” to disentangle them from religion, but there is not agreement on the meaning of “spiritual” nor in acceptable uses of this term (Blankholm 2022; Schutz 2017). For atheist organizations, naturalizing “spiritual experiences” allows an acknowledgement of their power while not giving ground to the religious frames traditionally superimposed on such experiences.

Naturalizing the feelings of awe and transcendence permits one to value these experiences while embracing an atheistic worldview. It seems that in order to make atheism seem natural, it becomes necessary to embrace religion-like elements of human experience in a way that we might not see if atheism were already considered legitimate – it is plausible that “spiritual experiences” would be a non-issue and seen as irrelevant or unimportant to an atheistic worldview.

4.2.4. Appeals to Common Human Decency

Further naturalization of atheism is achieved through appeals to common human decency:

I believe in treating my fellow humans with respect and preserving their dignity. I like to help people where I reasonably can, and I dislike harming people. I even try hard to avoid inconveniencing people—so you won’t find me playing loud music that disturbs my neighbours, pushing to the front of queues, or parking in a disabled spot without entitlement. But you will see me stopping in my car to let other cars pass when traffic is heavy. (AAI – Do You Think Atheists Believe Nothing?)
Minimizing the symbolic distance separating atheists and the public at large is an important part of naturalizing discourses by these organizations. This is directly related to Smith’s (2011) insight that “a great deal of atheist activism is actually about publicly demonstrating the consistency of atheists’ morals and values with those of the mainstream” (2011:154). Based on my analysis of these organizations’ websites, I see that this is largely the case, but with two noticeable departures: anti-religious sentiment and science-enthusiasm. We can conceptualize atheists’ attachment to science as a way to undermine and replace religion, so it is useful to suggest attitude about religion as the sole important distinction between mainstream and atheist values.

The other side of this moral contrast shows up in all of the accounts of religion making people violate the boundaries around common human decency. Atheist organizations frame religiously motivated terrorism as not only an affront to “human decency”, but also evidence of the unnaturalness of religion since it motivates attacks on the most basic moral principles of civilized societies.

Accounts of how religion moves people away from natural human decency show up often. Atheist organizations propose a moral contrast between natural cooperative behavior and religious beliefs/practices. A typical example of this contrast can be found on Atheist Alliance International’s website:

Instead of a peaceful world that seeks to optimize human cooperation, we are left with one driven and molded by a mythology of fear; a mythology propagated by mortal men out to gain fame, money, and power. Cooperation seeks to unite and grow; religion seeks to divide and conquer. (AAI- Moving On)

This discursive strategy depicts religion as not only damaging but also unnatural. It is not clear that religion is the main reason the world is not more peaceful with higher levels of prosocial behaviors, but this passage makes exactly this claim without qualification.
Many of the statements on both organizations’ websites lean into this dichotomy of natural cooperation and religious divisiveness. Another example, this time from American Atheists, equates religious beliefs to a virus: “I hate and am disgusted by many of the behaviors humans engage in when their brains are infected with the virus that is religious fundamentalism” (AA- A Conversation with a Christian). Using this language, that brains can be “infected” with a “virus” works to dehumanize religious people – the implication seems to be that healthy human beings would not act so unnaturally and some outside influence must be to blame for such inhuman behavior.

Claims of this kind rhetorically swap a moral order, as something subjective and contentious, with the indisputable, objective natural order, making them perfect examples of the rhetorical strategy of naturalization. Naturalization, following Van Leeuwen (van Leeuwen 2008), is a rhetorical device used to legitimate claims by offering a moral evaluation disguised as a neutral statement about the nature of people or things. Atheist organizations claim that decency is the natural state of humanity, so indecency is unnatural and, further, usually caused by religion.

4.2.5. Growth of Atheism

Appeals to the naturalness of atheism sometimes take a more subtle form. Combined with the naturalization techniques described above, atheist organizations use statements about the growth in numbers of atheists to implicitly suggest that people are “returning” to the natural state. An example of this strategy can be found in a quote from David Silverman, who was President of American Atheists at the time:

We’re seeing a marked shift in the religion bias of our country. Many atheists are ‘coming out’ and openly declaring their non-belief to friends, family, and co-workers. The prejudice still exists, but the statistics prove that the stranglehold of religion is
quickly fading away, and being replaced by a more tolerant, secular society. (AA-American Atheists Jubilant Over Latest Religion Report)

This passage highlights how what on the surface appears to be a simple claim about the growth of atheism and acceptance of atheists can be made into a naturalizing claim which situates “the stranglehold of religion” as the primary barrier to the tolerance and secular values which characterize human nature.

Of course, this interpretation could stray too far from the manifest meaning of the text and overlay meanings that are not there. I contend that this interpretation is not an unnecessary stretch, and that this subtextual form of naturalization is operating in passages such as this. When I first began to analyze the instances of appeals to the legitimacy of atheism due to growth/large numbers, I felt there was more to this approach than an instance of modified bandwagon fallacy. In many cases, appeals to growth/size contain or are adjacent to normalizing discourse, which shows up as explicit attempts to reduce the distance of atheists from “normal” people. Some examples will serve to illustrate this. A first way this works is evident in a quote offered already. It points to famous and successful people who are also atheists:

Nowadays, we find atheists in every walk of life. From entertainers like George Carlin and Julia Sweeney to entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and Sir Alan Sugar, from novelists like Ken Follett and Philip Roth to Nobel Laureates like Linus Pauling and Peter Higgs. Atheism is no longer the reserve of the intelligentsia and philosophers, now you may find your gardener and your childminder are atheists (mine are). (AAI- About Atheism)

Well-known and culturally influential individuals who are atheists are not noticeably different from other famous people – there is no obvious difference in the success and reputation between atheists and religious folks. This quote also introduces the second type of normalizing discourse, namely, making atheism seem mundane. This suggests that in some cases normalizing means showing how extraordinary it is that famous people are atheists, while in others it means making atheists entirely ordinary.
A more obvious example of how appeals to size/growth carry normalizing messages which extend beyond what the bandwagon fallacy provides comes from a page from American Atheists which discusses the importance of “coming out” as atheists:

While it can be risky to come out, it’s also essential to normalizing our identity, which allows others recognize our shared humanity. According to the Pew Forum, 87% of adults in America know someone who is gay or lesbian, and 30% know someone who is trans. Pew’s research also shows that among those who have become more accepting of LGBTQ people, most say that they have LGBTQ friends or family members. Despite the fact that there are at least twice as many atheists in the US than there are LGBTQ people, only 60% of adults say that they know someone who is atheist. Pew also reports that people who know at least one atheist feel much warmer about our community than those who do not. (AA- Coming Out as LGBTQ, Coming Out as Atheists)

Here we see survey statistics combined with a plan to normalize atheist identities and the stakes involved. Visibility is legitimating because it makes very real changes in popular attitudes toward atheists. Normalization occurs in this passage by reassuring atheists, who know that they are otherwise normal people, are surrounded by people just like them even if they are not visible. This form of normalization is important because without it, appeals to the size of a group can function as otherizing discourse used to amplify perceptions of threat. If atheists threaten the moral fabric of society, as many American believe (Edgell et al. 2016; Edgell and Tranby 2010), then their prevalence and growth rate are alarming rather than humanizing. Atheist organizations offer different forms of normalizing discourse to go along with a celebration of the growth of the atheist community at large to counteract the “atheist as threat” discourses which would translate this growth as a negative phenomenon.

If we consider again the first quote in this section which identified a “stranglehold of religion” which keeps people from following their natural inclinations, we can see that these normalizing discourses represent the unnaturalness of religion declining in the face of atheism’s growth. Taken together with the previous naturalizing strategies, appeals to size/growth imply
that humanity is returning to the more natural nonreligious state and that all of the stigma and negativity around atheism comes from an unnatural imposition of religious thinking. To treat statements by these organizations about the size and growth rate of atheism as purely appeals to popularity would be to ignore the surrounding context which normalizes and naturalizes atheism by depicting religion as a de-naturalizing force which alienates humans from their natural state.

Unsurprisingly, the legitimacy due to size appeal functions very differently when describing religion:

Followers of large, world religions might console themselves that a billion or more people share their morality, and that must account for something. But it does not. For a start, truth is not a democracy. The fact that many people accept an idea does not make it true. (AAI – Can Atheists be Moral?)

Although at first glance it would appear that this is simply a double standard, but if we consider the greater context of these claims, a different picture emerges. The moral universe created by these atheist organizations make it reasonable to use increasing numbers of atheists as legitimizing while discounting the obviously larger numbers of religious adherents. This can make sense because of their framing of atheism as natural – without this idea, the contradiction in using numbers as rubrics of positive or negative evaluation based on who is doing it would be visible to readers.

Atheist organizations attempt to make atheists appear the same as everyone else except for a single dimension: religion. This is about repair; atheists are demonized and recognize this fact, so part of legitimating an atheist identity is reducing the distance people feel from that stigmatized label. We see this operating in the next section too, where atheists point to the obvious good they do to reduce stigma and valorize their position.
4.3. Strategy 2: Highlight the Good Atheists Do

After naturalizing and destigmatizing atheism, the next step in legitimating atheist identities is to highlight the good that atheists do. The organizations are essentially saying, “not only are atheists not as bad as you were told, but we do a lot of obviously praiseworthy things”.

4.3.1. Positive Retellings of Atheist History

The first way American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International illustrate that atheists do good things is by describing the contributions of atheists in the past. This involves claiming that many important figures in history were actually atheists, even if they did not use that word to describe themselves.

These retellings of history where atheists are valorized counter the religion equals good association in mainstream culture. These alternate histories provide a new moral lens so that readers can see the contrast between the advancements of science and atheism and religion’s clinging to outdated traditions. In some cases, these organizations draw explicit attention to this reframing to guide the reader to replace the culturally taught demonization of atheists, like in this quote:

These baseless allegations against atheists have been made for so long that the word atheism is now seen as tarnished and many people avoid it, even though they have no belief in gods. Consequently, some atheists self-identify as freethinkers, skeptics, secularists, agnostics, non-believers and more. That is a pity. Atheism has a long history and it describes an intellectually honorable viewpoint simply and precisely. We vote to use it with pride. (AAI – What is Atheism?)

Acknowledging the stigma of atheism throughout history helps readers see why people have opted not to self-identify as atheists to make the postmortem labeling of important historical figures feel appropriate. In essence, this strategy communicates that atheists are not only capable of doing good but have repeatedly made life better through many significant advancements.
Both organizations generally repackage history by reframing the common historical narratives about the people that they are retroactively claiming as atheists. Whereas the atheistic views of important people have been ignored or intentionally hidden, the task of legitimating atheism in this way involves naming them explicitly as atheists. Neither organization seems apologetic for labeling historical figures after the fact in this way. Instead, these organizations draw attention to prominent thinkers who expressed ideas which they see as consistent with atheism as we now conceptualize it. The following quote from Atheist Alliance International illustrates this well:

There have been atheists throughout history… Given the times in which they lived, some on this list might not have called themselves atheists, but all expressed at least significant doubt about the efficacy of religion and/or the existence of all-controlling deities and wrote something clever or revealing about their position. This is but a sample of what could be a much longer list. (AAI - Famous Atheists)

This “sample” includes 67 individuals, many of whom are among the most influential thinkers in Western thought. The list spans the entire length of written history, from Aristotle to Christopher Hitchens. Many names that are associated with the origins and significant advancements of science appear as well. To give you a sense of the range and significance of scientific and proto-scientific thinkers included, consider the following: Ancient Greek thinkers who originated the practices of skepticism and critical empirical inquiry which paved the way for science (Aristotle, Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Heraclitus), influential Enlightenment writers and early scientists (Kant, Kepler, Montaigne, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin), philosophers who shaped modern thought (Nietzsche, Marx, Sartre, Schopenhauer, Freud), and recent inventors and scientists (Thomas Edison, Richard Feynman, Isaac Asimov, James Watson). Culturally significant writers from the last two hundred years also have a strong presence: Tolstoy, Vonnegut, Shelley, Twain, Hemingway, Chomsky, Emily Dickinson, Joseph Campbell, Gloria
Steinem, Margaret Sanger, Gene Roddenberry, Stephen King, and Woody Allen. They include a quote for each of these figures which illustrates their alignment with atheistic thinking.

Atheist Alliance International uses this list of famous atheists to make it impossible to deny the important contributions of atheists throughout history. They acknowledge that these thinkers did not use “atheist” to label themselves or their ideas while still making it seem like this omission is a historical accident - implying that if the term were understood as it is today and not extremely dangerous, all these figures would probably identify as atheist, and so it is natural that we should include them in discussing atheist history. There is, of course, no way to determine whether these thinkers would self-identify as “atheist” if history were different or if they lived today, making it an unfalsifiable claim that still carries significant power when presented in this way.

American Atheists’ positive retelling of atheist history is more modest in scope. Their description of the good done by past atheists mostly centers on the US. Even though American Atheists’ historical narratives are less ambitious than that of Atheist Alliance International, they are still powerful in their own right. The shift in narrative frame they provide is that the very foundation of US values and government were laid down by atheists.

In a page entitled “American History”, American Atheists describes the Founding Fathers as “likely” Deist, which they then anachronistically associate with atheistic views. They quote The Godless Constitution, a book by Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, describing Deism as: “a nondoctrinaire religion that rejected a supernatural faith built around an anthropomorphic God who intervened in human affairs, either in answer to prayer or for other inscrutable reasons”. The webpage brings attention to the fact that figures like George Washington notably “never used terms like Jesus or Christ”. American Atheists also includes a quote by their
founder, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, stating that Thomas Jefferson “was so disenchanted with organized Christian religion that he attempted to create his own Bible. He introduced it as a ‘wee little book,’ and called it ‘The Philosophy of Jesus Christ.’”

This claim that America’s democracy was founded upon Deist and skeptical principles which best align with atheism prompts the reader to consider that devotion to the country basically equates to agreement with atheistic principles. To further bolster this claim, they invalidate the idea that our founding documents refer to religious concepts by insisting that they sometimes appear to have religious overtones because they were intentionally written in terms acceptable to religious people. American Atheists point to the critical stance many important founding figures took toward religion to solidify their argument, in some cases using incisive quotes, like Jefferson’s: “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man”. This reference to God should be understood ironically since Deism’s concept of God is frequently used as a symbol of nature and natural laws.

Legitimating atheist identities in a context of ubiquitous theism requires significant reframing of history through reclaiming the important contributions of figures that these organizations claim should be rightfully called atheists. This serves two functions: (1) it combats common discourse by refuting the idea that all good people are necessarily religious and (2) it valorizes “atheist” as a subject position by making it undeniable that atheists have done significant good in the world.

4.3.2. Caring for Community

Atheist organizations assert that we all have a responsibility to fellow humans and point to the ways atheists care for others. Demonstrating goodwill toward others through narratives recounting the good deeds atheists do is an important part of these organizations’ work to
counter dominant discourses which depict atheists as immoral criminals or materialistic cultural elites (Edgell et al. 2006), in either case characterized by vices rather than virtues. These discourses, which are widely believed in at least the US, deny nonreligious actors any claim to goodness by restricting prosocial behavior to religious people (Galen 2012; Gervais et al. 2011).

Studies have demonstrated that distrust of atheists is common in different contexts (Edgell et al. 2016; Gervais 2011; Gervais et al. 2011), and generally this distrust is imputed to an imagined atheist as a symbolic threat to society (Edgell et al. 2006). “It is important to note that our respondents did not refer to particular atheists whom they had encountered. Rather they used the atheist as a symbolic figure to represent their fears about those trends in American life—increasing criminality, rampant self-interest, an unaccountable elite—that they believe undermine trust and a common sense of purpose” (Edgell et al. 2006:228). It is understandable that organizations representing a largely distrusted minority feel the need to recount positive contributions they have made to society in order to repair the negative perception most people have of them.

Repeating stories of atheists caring for the community is an important part of making atheists visible and valued contributors to society. “Community” in this context refers to the relevant group being cared for and can range from a small group (atheist meetup groups in the Middle East) to all of humankind. Unsurprisingly, most of the prosocial behaviors atheist organizations recount are aimed at nonreligious individuals and groups. In-group altruism is a basically universal trait of groups, and usually members of the group are prioritized when it comes to resource allocation (Galen 2012). However, I believe that atheists recount good deeds for out-groups to bolster their legitimacy – I am not aware of any systematic study comparing the rates of reporting out-group altruism across organizations which differ in general social
acceptance (i.e., perceived legitimacy), but I imagine that fewer references to out-groups altogether follows perceived legitimacy. If this hypothesis were true, we should see that Catholic Charities could feasibly feature only stories of helping Catholics in need and would face virtually no criticism for doing so whereas a Neo-pagan or Satanist group would need to prove that they contribute to the wider community to have any chance of wide-spread positive regard. This idea is outside the purview of my study, so I will leave it as speculation.

References to charity work by atheists remind readers that good works are not the privileged possession of religion. The character of this “see what we did!” tendency is shaped by social context – it is not simply listing good deeds for self-aggrandizement, it is a necessary act of legitimation which struggles against religio-centric conceptions of goodness. Again, if we hypothetically compare the Catholic Church with these organizations in this regard, it becomes clear that the Church can list good deeds as a feel-good strategy to energize members, whereas atheist organizations rely on these accounts to claw their way out of pervasive negative evaluation. This is an interesting hypothetical comparison, because the main objection I see to this oversimplification is that the Catholic Church has needed to engage in repair work following the backlash concerning sexual abuse of children – doing good works (and telling people about it) is repair work that is about gaining public acceptance rather than boasting.

Prior research has emphasized the importance of interpreting atheist activism as collective stigma management (Smith 2013c). Conceptualizing this strategy of highlighting the good atheists do for their community as repair work and stigma reduction permits an interpretation of these accounts as an attempt to bolster the legitimacy of atheists rather than self-importance (although there is very likely some of that in play as well here).
Breaking the discursive connection of religion and goodness is a difficult yet essential task for atheist organizations trying to improve the social standing of atheists. The association of atheists with immorality is strong and has been shown to be deeply rooted in people’s intuitive moral sense (Mudd et al. 2015).

Both organizations state that they work hard to take care of people who are threatened by religion and mobilize resources to aid atheists and other religious minorities. Atheist Alliance International describes several campaigns focused on caring for the nonreligious, including funding the Kasese Humanist School, which provides secular education in Uganda, a book drive to make texts covering skepticism and science available in places where it is hard to access them, and supporting a program debunking magicians and religious tricksters in India. Atheist Alliance International makes it clear that they take this work very seriously:

Randomly stick a pin in a map of the world and, chances are, you will land on a country where atheists are excluded, disparaged and discriminated against—maybe worse. Or you will find a country run by religious people, for religious people, where religious dogma sets the standard for public policy.

So now it is time for us to change. We are going into battle. We will focus our resources on helping those who need us most—atheists in places where you are not free to speak your mind or where disastrous policy decisions are made in the name of a god.

We aim to become the ‘go-to’ organization for our atheist brothers and sisters anywhere in the world who have few resources and a mountain to climb. Nothing less will do. (AAI – Time to Change)

Conceptualizing this type of care for community as a “battle” provides an adversarial frame which forefronts the moral contrast between religions which threaten the rights and wellbeing of outgroups and atheists who are there to defend those exposed to religious discrimination and domination. Atheist Alliance International indirectly attacks organizations which are meant to provide aid for those in need but use their resources on things like conferences which do not help the community:
Every time we spend money, we will make an assessment of what it will achieve for the people we care most about, atheists anywhere in the world whose lives are blighted by religious dogma and traditions. This will mean we will spend far less time and money attending conferences and far more working directly with atheist groups who need our help. (AAI – Time to Change)

This attack might be leveled at religious organizations which use donations for self-enrichment and social programming, or perhaps it is designed to combat a perception some might have that atheist organizations spend too much time and money on conferences – there is not enough context on their website to determine which of these, or both, purposes this passage is meant to serve. Either way, it is clear that Atheist Alliance International works to appear as a focused and effective helper of atheists.

A typical example from American Atheists’ website highlights the importance of solidarity generally across religious minorities in the US as well as the unique contribution they made in protecting the nonreligious community:

American Atheists is pleased to announce that it is partnering with the Women’s March on Washington, joining a coalition of more than 300 groups, to advocate for the rights of women, LGBTQ people, and religious minorities in the Trump Administration.

“The incoming administration has given us cause for great concern and we must ensure that the voices of atheists are heard by the President-elect, members of Congress, and other officials,” said Amanda Knief, national public policy director of American Atheists. “We stand in solidarity with women, LGBTQ people, and other religious minorities who are alarmed by the rhetoric of the President- and Vice President-elect and their cabinet nominees.” (AA- Atheists Declare Support for Women’s March on Washington)

This list of victims of American religious extremism (women, LGBTQ people, religious minorities) shows up in several other webpages, including an official statement bemoaning then-President Trump’s 2018 nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court:

From day one of this administration, the President has bent over backwards to do the bidding of religious ideologues. So it comes as no surprise that the nomination of Judge Kavanaugh continues this pattern of elevating the religious views of an extreme minority above the rights of women, LGBTQ Americans, atheists, and religious minorities. (AA – Trump’s Supreme Court Pick a Disaster for Religious Equality)
American Atheists seeks to protect Americans from religious overreach in government through statements like these and calls to political participation. Since they identify the social and legal defense of “the absolute separation of religion from government” (AA- Home) as a primary goal, it is unsurprising that American Atheists reports leveraging their resources to protect religious minorities in the US.

American Atheists invites visitors of their website to get involved in various initiatives. These initiatives feature calls to action which simultaneously function to highlight the active work they do to benefit the wider community. An example of this shows up in a webpage inviting readers to call Senate Judiciary Committee members to urge them to reject the nomination of Jeff Sessions for Attorney General:

President-elect Donald Trump’s nominee for Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, has a troubling record with respect to his understanding of the Establishment Clause, the separation of religion from government in general, and his support for religious groups engaging in politicking from the pulpit in violation of federal law…

We are asking you to call the Senate Judiciary Committee members at 877-959-6082 to voice your opposition to Senator Sessions’ nomination…

Senator Sessions has a long track record of injecting religion into his policymaking, including on LGBT issues, women’s reproductive health, and government endorsement of religion. (AA- Take Action – Urge the Senate to Reject Attorney General Nominee Jeff Sessions)

While the manifest reason for posting content of this kind is to increase political participation in relevant matters, the framing provided depicts American Atheists as an organization that cares deeply for not only atheists, but for the freedom and wellbeing of all Americans.

An important part of atheist organizations’ strategy for legitimizing atheism and atheist identities involves drawing attention to actions atheists perform out of care for their communities. In this legitimation strategy moral contrasts are ever-present, even when implicit – highlighting the good that atheists do is not simply celebrating achievements and the like, it is to
claim that not only is the script of *good works are the domain of religions* wrong, but the opposite is true. In an upcoming section (4.4), I describe the ways atheist organizations condemn the wrongdoings motivated by and committed in the name of religion. This last piece will complete the picture of how atheist organizations legitimate atheism through strategic moral contrasts. Condemning religious harm works alongside making atheism relatable (and religion alien) and natural (and religion unnatural) to complete the moral contrast set up in this section, namely that atheism is generative of good works. Before discussing the strategy of condemning religious harm, it would be useful to cover one more example of atheist organizations drawing attention to their good works.

4.3.3. *Combatting Godmen Campaign*

Atheist Alliance International highlights a particular campaign for educating the people of rural India about critical thinking and debunking the “miracles” of religious charlatans. Since this is the most extensive description on these websites of the good deeds atheists do, I include longer, uninterrupted quotes.

Professor Narendra Nayak hates superstitious beliefs. He has seen firsthand the harm they cause. More than that, he hates the poor being cheated by contemptible people who use the culture of superstition so prevalent in India to trick people into giving away money and possessions they cannot afford. (AAI – The Master)

Nayak is painted as heroic, a person who has good prosocial values and lives by them, helping many people who are easy prey for tricksters and promoting skepticism. An important strategy these organizations use to make “atheist” a desirable subject position involves dispelling the perceived ignorance of naturalistic explanation which religion promotes. Debunking “spiritual” or “miraculous” practices through science depedestalizes religion. Nayak demonstrates the
power of this strategy, moving people away from accepting supernatural causes to distance them from religious thinking and make room for conceiving atheism as legitimate:

With ‘miracles’ busted in front of their very eyes, and the science behind them being explained, these workshops may be the first time these young people were encouraged to ask questions. Our bag of tricks included water containers with falsified bases that give the illusion to produce water out of midair, which we pushed the audience into thinking of miracles performed by Jesus to conjure wine from water. Each trick was first showcased not as a magician, but as a spiritual person would. (AAI – The Program)

And, in a special program designed for younger people:

The kids repeated the slogan that extraordinary miracles require extraordinary proofs, and with clear excitement and fascination on the kid’s faces, we hoped we had inspired at least some of them to be more skeptical in future. (AAI – The Program)

In these quotes Atheist Alliance International draws explicit comparisons between the goodness of skepticism and the deceitfulness of religion; the moral contrast is bolstered by a preference for truth over lies. Even though this campaign is not explicitly about promoting atheism, the skepticism and critical thinking taught are seen as high-value activities.

These admirable values are being fostered in these audiences, highlighting Nayak’s effectiveness – effectively saying that the good that atheists do actually makes a difference (and, taken together with the other messages found on their website, implying that religious “good works” are inferior or shallow).

Although they are not claiming that any attendees became atheists as a result of their work, it is clear that they believe that debunking religious explanation and replacing it with naturalistic explanation allows participants to see the value of skepticism and move one step closer to atheistic thinking.

Additionally, this campaign is seen as a way to protect vulnerable people from religious deception, which is good in and of itself. This actually appears to be the primary goal of one of Nayak’s “apprentice”, who makes reference to the damage religion causes and the campaign’s
role in saving people from that but does not suggest that recruitment plays any part in his motivation. The focus is solely on combatting religious harm to protect the many people who fall prey to the deceit which religion brings with it:

I have seen the rise of falsified data, completely irrational concepts preached as factual truths, glorification of religious texts and miracles touted as historical facts. These regressive and damaging practices have become mainstream in India in just the past few years. Such narratives are presented as facts by political figures in India, who openly support and promote the godmen who use these beliefs to extort money from people. Currently, there are no mainstream organizations speaking out against this, it is left to small scale NGOs and individual activists, such as Professor Narendra Nayak. (AAI – The Apprentice)

This framing depicts the campaign as being motivated by compassion and altruism, countering the potential suggestion of self-serving motives of recruitment or payment. To further bolster the image of good intentions, there is an appeal to personal fulfilment in doing this good work:

“Having the honor to help even one child to ask questions, to speak out against social norms, to identify miracles and seek a rational explanation for them, inspires me to rise to the challenge to keep this work going” (AAI – The Apprentice). The idea that helping people is its own reward makes it clear that atheists require no supernatural promise of reward or punishment to motivate good behavior. Building on this theme as well as the previous strategies discussed, the next section describes the moral contrasts American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International use to depict atheists as morally superior to religious people.

4.3.4. Not only Good without God, but Better Without

Previous research has identified the “Good without God” slogan frequently employed by atheists to succinctly reject the common belief that morality requires religion (Homan et al. 2016). Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists go even further to insist that atheist morality is superior to its religious counterpart. The next chapter discusses how atheist
organizations claim moral superiority in greater detail. In this section, I present findings which highlight their use of moral contrasts to make being an atheist more desirable.

These organizations acknowledge that religion sometimes organizes people around helpful and charitable behavior but depict this as either a fear-based activity (avoiding hell through good works) or self-serving (God rewards charitable acts and I want to be rewarded). Atheists, on the other hand, choose to be good people without the coercion of divine judgment nor any expectation of eternal reward - atheists are good because they choose to be good. A representative example of how this moral contrast works comes from American Atheists’ founder, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, as quoted in their webpage entitled “History”.

An atheist loves his fellow man instead of god. An atheist believes that heaven is something for which we should work now – here on earth for all men together to enjoy. The moral contrast here is clear, that atheists are motivated by a love of people to increase the wellbeing of all in this life, whereas religions focus on deities as the primary object of love and deprioritize material conditions in favor of spiritual striving and concern with the afterlife. This invites the reader to consider which approach is more praiseworthy, while offering a frame that makes the “correct” answer obvious.

Further invitations for comparing the moral good of atheists and religions involves reporting the relative effectiveness of actions, in sometimes more implicit ways. O’Hair provides us an example of this implicit contrast in effectiveness involves suggesting that hospitals are more helpful than places of worship and that action to make things better far exceeds the benefits of imagination and wishful thinking:

An atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said.
O’Hair’s framing brings to mind for the reader the way resources are allocated and efforts directed. There is no question that atheists will see the utility of hospitals as surpassing that of churches. The implication is that the hospital is a place where active work is constantly being done to help people, whereas a church, even operating at its highest capacity, will not provide as much real help to people. The second sentence mocks the religious tendency to solve problems through prayer rather than actually effective actions; there is no question that direct and active helpful deeds improve the situation while prayer is not demonstrably efficacious.

O’Hair offers a list of moral contrasts to criticize religious escapism while demonstrating the atheist’s commitment to leading a good life and working to benefit all people:

An atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter. He believes that we are our brother’s keepers and are keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and the job is here and the time is now.” (AA – History)

This comparison depicts atheists as responsible and compassionate people and the religious as disconnected and ineffectual.

The goal of atheist organizations in describing charitable deeds and good intentions is not simply to seek praise. We find that accounts of the good that atheists do almost always relate to religion: by being more rational, by having better intentions, by being more efficacious, or by undoing the damage caused by religion. This suggests that the message is, in some cases, more about being better than religion than about being good simply because that is what is right.

Common across claims that atheists hold the moral high ground, the use of moral contrasts involve an intentional script-flipping, where atheists are depicted as good people in opposition to the demonization found in common discourse. Inverting the “religious people are good, atheists are bad” script involves two stages, where highlighting the good that atheists do is
the first step and condemning the harm religion causes is the second. This second step, denouncing religious harm, is described in the next section.

4.4. Strategy 3: Condemn Religious Harm

The third way these organizations legitimate atheist identities is by condemning the harm caused by religion. This third strategy builds on the first two: after making atheism seem natural and then painting atheists as morally superior, pointing to the destructive consequences of religion for people and societies makes “atheist” the only tenable subject position. Although there are elements of this condemnation appearing in the prior strategies of naturalizing atheism and valorizing atheists, I conceptualize this as a distinct category of approach.

Naturalizing atheism involves minimizing differences and renaming “religious” experiences as simply common human experiences, which in some places includes making religious seem unnatural, but this is not a necessary component of that approach. When these organizations highlight the good atheists do, most of the emphasis is on describing their praiseworthy contributions, which in many cases does not require devaluing religion explicitly. This final strategy, condemning religious harm, reduces the desirability of religious identities and attempts to move the discussion from “maybe atheists are not all bad” or “atheists might have done good things” to “atheism is the only defensible option”.

This strategy problematizes the “religion = good” framing that has dominated popular discourses. Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists are providing a new moral universe in an attempt to shift the cultural valuations of atheists and the religious by offering a new lens to evaluate the desirability of these two identities. The contours of this moral universe are shaped in part through the moral contrasts discussed in the previous sections which elevate atheist identities and make them appear habitable and desirable. However, to complete this new
moral universe, atheists also denounce the evils of religion to switch the relative placements of atheist and religious subject positions and make religious identities less desirable. In other words, not only do atheist organizations combat stigma and invite more people to self-identify as atheist by speaking positively of atheism, but also depict religion poorly to reduce willingness to embrace a religious identity.

4.4.1. Motivating Violence

Many acts of violence throughout history have been justified using religious reasoning (Wellman and Tokuno 2004), and atheist organizations use this fact to discredit religion generally. In a very general sense, it can be said that religions motivate the worst forms of violence, including terrorism, honor killings, and torture for blasphemy. Atheist organizations make religion seem less desirable by targeting the religious motivations given for violence which are almost universally condemned, even by followers of the same tradition.

This approach is especially powerful to the extent that the reader is made uneasy by the apparent gratuity of the violence. For example, this quote decries the harm caused by appeals to “divine commands” while using examples which offend modern Western sensibilities: “Divine commands are also the warrant for radical groups, such as ISIS, to hurl gay men from high buildings and to take girls captured in battle as slaves” (AAI – Can Atheists Be Moral?). Religion is depicted as dangerous and outrageous using descriptions of violence which seem incomprehensible in terms of motivation yet obviously harmful.

Atheist organizations draw attention to the apparent pervasiveness of religiously motivated violence, that it is not just done by the radical fringe but also is built into the normal functioning of mainstream religions. The process of religious socialization is seen as a site of both emotional abuse and physical violence:
If children question or, doubt, any of these stories, they will be warned not to think such things—questioning incurs parental disapproval. Young children may even be threatened with torture if they don’t believe. (AAI – Christianity’s Dirty Secret)

Atheist Alliance International uses the audience’s assumed abhorrence of violence against children to invite the reader to condemn religion. Although the contingent modifier “may” is used, one could easily get the impression that torture and emotional abuse is commonplace for children who do not believe in their parents’ faith.

Atheist organizations depict violence as not just the domain of radical extremists, but as a mundane consequence of religion doing what religion does. This framing alludes to and in some ways constructs an “essence of religion” which situates violence as an inextricable part of religion - the very nature of religion gives rise to occasions for violence.

The form of explicit condemnations of specific instances of religious violence is a dimension of difference between Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists. Atheist Alliance International’s website contains many references to religious violence occurring at the global scale, whereas American Atheists bring it up a single significant time (but might reference it indirectly and generally). We will leave consideration of this solitary instance of condemning specific violent events motivated by religion found on American Atheists’ website until after coverage of the ways Atheist Alliance International describes such violence.

Atheist Alliance International depict religious violence as senseless, as is seen in this quote recounting news of an attack by Muslims against Christians:

‘Suicide bomber kills 7 at church in Pakistan’ shouts the CNN headline. Their report tells us that more than twenty other people were injured and taken to hospital… Given that the target was a Christian (Methodist) church and the perpetrators were Muslim it’s obviously an example of a religiously inspired attack. This is so unnecessary, considering there is no evidence for any god. I fear that, if we were to set up an Atheist News channel, we would need a scrolling text banner at the foot of the screen constantly updating with breaking news of religious atrocity after religious atrocity. (AAI- Muslim Attack on Christian Church in Pakistan)
Naming this event as a “religious atrocity” and implying that these atrocities are constant frames religion as indefensible. Interreligious terrorism can be depicted by atheist organizations as senseless since, as stated above, “there is no evidence for any god.”

American Atheists’ blog post entitled “We are Not Ashamed of Blasphemy,” draws further attention to religiously motivated violence in its response to criticism of their social media post of a cartoon. The image shows Muhammad getting out of the shower, and upon seeing his face reflected in the mirror, shouts “BLASPHEMY!”, which makes reference to the pronounced iconoclastic stance of Islam. A commenter suggested that it was “More immature inflammatory nonsense from American Atheists,” and calls for “respectful decorum that is expected in western [sic] society in this day and age”. American Atheists’ unapologetic response:

People were KILLED because a Danish newspaper dared to publish some funny cartoons. Of course we are angry… with people being murdered because they dared offend someone’s imaginary friend…When people are being actively defrauded, physically and emotionally abused, and systematically traumatized, we cannot in good conscious be respectful or decorous. We do NOT respect religion and it is that simple. Respect is earned, and religion has not only done nothing to earn it; it has actively moved in the opposite direction. (AA – We Are Not Ashamed of Blasphemy)

Although this is the only major reference to physical violence caused by religion on American Atheists’ website, the force of this quote suggests that this is not because they are shying away from calling it out. This fact is most likely due to their focus on protecting the separation of church and state; interpersonal religious violence, although contemptible, has less to do with promoting secular policies and protecting the rights of (non)religious minorities. Unsurprisingly, both organizations spend a significant amount of energy condemning instances where religion has undue influence in policy decisions and in governments generally, which we cover in the next section. Before we move on to depictions of religion corrupting governments, we will
conclude this section with an account of how atheist organizations frame the religious motivations of state violence.

In addition to the other ways religion promotes violence, atheist organizations draw attention to cases where religion is used to justify state violence and threats of force. One example of this can be found in Atheist Alliance International’s report of how Malaysia’s government actively persecutes atheists:

In August 2017 the Malaysian group known as the Atheist Republic Consulate of Kuala Lumpur, held its annual gathering… When the group published a photo of the young atheists ‘having a blast’, it went viral. Malaysian officials were not pleased.

Malaysian parliamentarian, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim, called for atheists to be hunted down. “The Federal Constitution does not mention atheists. It goes against the Constitution and human rights... I suggest that we hunt them down vehemently and we ask for help to identify these groups.”

The photo sparked an uproar leading to threats of death and violence against the group on social media…

Malaysia maintains a narrow concept of human rights, having signed only two of the eight legally enforceable human rights treaties derived from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Even then the state asserts constitutional exemptions to these treaties and to the Universal Declaration itself, rendering its signature to the Declaration little more than an empty gesture. (AAI–Malaysia)

This story provides an unambiguous image of how religion prompts a state to threaten violence. Although Atheist Alliance International does not provide extended analysis of how Malaysian officials threaten atheists, the inclusion of Kassim’s quote advocating to “hunt them down” provides sufficient evidence for anti-atheist hatred. It is unclear how influential this particular parliamentarian is and whether his words had violent impacts. Atheist Alliance International’s narrative could have delved into the association drawn in the quote between Malaysia’s Constitution, human rights, and religion to make a more incisive point with more general implications instead of focusing only on the specifics of the atheist meetup and following reaction.
Religion also promotes violence at a level above the state as well, including influencing the workings of the United Nations, as Atheist Alliance International points out in their description of some of the major problems with the religious character of Saudi Arabia’s government. “To allow Saudi Arabia – a country that beheads and crucifies protesters ISIS-style – to head [the UN’s] panel on Human Rights is seen in many circles as scandalous…” These and other examples identify the ways states use religion to justify violence against religious minorities. This phenomenon is directly related to the content of the next section, which describes how atheist organizations condemn religious harm in the world by drawing attention to the insidious ways religion influences and interferes in governments.

4.4.2. Corrupting Governments

Atheist organizations provide a moral contrast that situates religion as regressive and oppressive whereas atheists are the champions of progress and fairness. To make this comparison clear, they point to instances where religious institutions are influential in the decision-making processes of governments in terms of allocation of resources, policymaking, and religious favoritism. Atheist Alliance International provides a list of categories of problematic religion/government entanglements:

Symbolic government support for any religion – including but not limited to the existence of state-established religions or religious positions in legislative bodies; the display of crucifixes, the star and crescent or menorahs on public property; government statements of religious doctrine, commandments or scriptures; endorsement of religion by government officials; religious references in government documents or on currency; government proclamations of days of prayer, worship or other religious activity; prayers or religious incantations at government events or within legislative bodies – is an act of state-sponsored proselytism as it implicitly endorses particular religions above all others and above no religion.

Financial government support for any religion – such as the availability of tax-exempt status on the basis of religious faith; the provision of grants for faith-based activities, employment or sponsorship of persons who provide religious support to individuals or
groups; sponsorship of missionary activity; the funding of social welfare programs that incorporate religious elements or entities that require a declaration of religious affiliation as a condition of membership – effectively involves the distribution of tax revenue from all state citizens to those who benefit through their religious affiliation.

Both symbolic and financial support for religion by governments necessarily favours certain citizens through the exclusion of those with different viewpoints. (AAI – Position Statement: Government Support for Religion)

This list highlights that the ways religions garner financial and symbolic support from governments are many and represent a serious threat to religious minorities, including and especially atheists, in many places.

American Atheists identify instances of religion’s encroachment into policymaking in the US throughout their website. Since a primary goal of this organization is “to protect the absolute separation of religion from government” (AA – Home), it is unsurprising that this issue shows up frequently. American Atheists draws instances of religion’s influence on American government from history as well as current events. An example of the way they use historical events to illustrate that religion has had undue influence is found in a discussion of prohibition:

The prohibition movement was led by Protestants and grew out of the temperance movement of the 19th century. The New Testament has stern things to say about drunkenness and saloons were thought to be destroying American families, not just because of alcohol but because of things like dancing, music, and sex workers, as well… [R]eligious morality as a basis for secular law is unconstitutional and always has been. Although the Twenty-First Amendment has been in effect for, as I said, 80 years now, the idea that biblical moral values should influence the rest of us still holds fast in many parts of the country. (AA - December 5 the 80th anniversary of the 21st amendment)

This example highlights that the origins of prohibition were clearly religious and in no way represented the will of the majority of Americans, suggesting the power Christianity has had in lawmaking procedures.
Current hot-button issues in politics also provide many examples of religious influence over American government, as highlighted in American Atheists’ webpage discussing issues they see as being of greatest importance:

Religious beliefs should not be used as the primary justification for any policy. Just as religion can be used to justify good things (such as serving the hungry with a soup kitchen or building homes for those in need), it can be used to justify terrible acts of discrimination (denying LGBT couples the right to marry or taking away a woman’s right to control her own body). For that reason, all public policies should be based on the best scientific evidence available to policymakers and humanistic principles which cross lines of religious beliefs. (AA - Issues)

This passage acknowledges that religiously-inspired altruism can be praiseworthy while pointing to the problems of using religious justification for policy. The examples of religious good works are both individual-level decisions to engage in helping others – they offer no cases of macro-level benefits from religion’s efforts. This framing, that religion can be good when it promotes prosocial behaviors in individuals but is bad when it influences decisions above the individual level, offers a contrast between the modest benefits gained through small acts of service and the society-wide damage of religious intolerance. American Atheists carefully acknowledge the common argument that “religion makes us charitable” while not giving too much room for praise. On most other webpages, they offer no redeeming qualities of religion in terms of social outcomes:

Religion has caused—and continues to cause—immeasurable harm to vulnerable people in the United States and around the world. From attacks on LGBTQ rights and access to reproductive healthcare, to the gutting of public education and the refusal to confront climate change, religion continues to be an effective weapon for injustice in American politics. (AA- A New Chapter)

Rhetorically, this comparison of religion to a weapon and the suggestion that its aim is to cause injustice leaves no room for defending or identifying with religion.
Religion impacts the political system through the religious values of elected figures who engage in various forms of religious privilege. Governments demonstrate religious privilege when they provide symbolic or financial support to a particular religion or to religion over nonreligion. American Atheists decry government participation in religious rituals and prayer as marginalizing the nonreligious and preferring the religious expression of Christianity over others. One example of this is the denouncement of Congress’s decision to honor Billy Graham, whose fame is solely due to his status in religious circles:

On Thursday, February 22, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell announced that the remains of evangelical pastor Rev. Billy Graham would lie in honor in the United States Capitol Rotunda on February 28 and March 1. Graham would be just the fourth private citizen to be so honored, after Rosa Parks and two U.S. Capitol Police Officers who were killed in the line of duty… “Honoring a religious figure with a government-sanctioned memorial is a completely inappropriate use of our tax dollars and is the very sort of entanglement of religion and government that our founders warned against,” said David Silverman, president of American Atheists. “For the leaders of our government to elevate a purely religious figure in this way is religious privilege at its worst.” (AA - Civil Rights Groups Urge Against Government Honors for Rev. Billy Graham)

The religious preferences of elected representatives manifest in many ways which threaten the secular character of government.

There are less obvious ways religion reduces the integrity of the political system, including exercising undue influence on the views of voters through donations and preaching. American Atheists point to the unchecked erosion of church/state separation occurring in the US:

Since 2008, “more than 1,600 churches” have made a coordinated effort to break the law by endorsing political candidates as part of an event marketed as “Pulpit Freedom Sunday.” Despite this, the IRS has not revoked the tax-exempt status of any of the churches involved. (AA - Government Endorsement)

Political choices and voting behaviors are transformed by imbuing them with religious import – if the salvation of your soul and the fulfillment of God’s will are on the line, disagreement switches from simple differences of personal views to disobedience of divine commands.
Further, the financial resources of churches are being used to promote political outcomes through donations, often without transparency:

“Churches and other houses of worship are not required to disclose their funding to the federal government… [so] churches can become political mouthpieces of candidates without any financial disclosures to the public,” said Knief. (AA - Atheists Declare Support for Women’s March on Washington)

According to American Atheists, Christianity exercises problematic influence on the American political system by unfairly leveraging the authority of the pulpit as well as the financial resources churches wield.

Atheist Alliance International offers more extreme cases of religious influence over civil governments from across the globe. Their descriptions suggest that places where civil rights are most threatened tend to be the most highly religious and that governments in these regions openly use religion to justify these restrictions. For example, Malaysia strips atheists of rights and the government actively marginalizes secular people and ideas:

State agencies openly incite hatred against atheists. They are barred from many public offices. They may be prohibited from holding land and often face significant social marginalization or stigma if they express anything remotely associated with atheistic ideas. Religious instruction is regularly taught in state-funded schools with no secular alternatives. (AAI - Malaysia)

Atheist Alliance International invites the reader to evaluate the relative moral positions of religion and atheism by depicting religion as an oppressive and regressive force which corrupts governments and suppresses the laudable progress made possible by secular ideas and policies.

Atheist Alliance International denounces the misallocation of tax revenue for religious projects, as seen in their description of legal action taken in Nigeria. The Nigerian constitution disallows the establishment of a state religion, but the governor of the Akwa Ibom State allocated taxpayer funds to build a Christian worship center. Atheist Alliance International describes their
collaboration with Atheist Society of Nigeria to take legal action. The moral contrast they offer in this account is clear:

It is all too common for governments of extremely religious countries to act with impunity on religious issues. After all, there is no one to challenge them. But there is now. (AAI – Atheists Sue State Governor in Nigeria)

Contrasting the corruption of governments by religion, which often occurs without serious challenge, to the valiant efforts of Atheist Alliance International to fight for the rights of all creates an unambiguous moral universe where the sides battle over human rights.

Unsurprisingly, the ways atheist organizations denounce religious influence over civil governments are frequently framed in terms of violations of the basic rights and protections of the people. These accounts of religion’s attack on human rights are the focus of the next section. Although there is significant overlap in the themes of religion’s corruption of governments and religion’s reduction of human rights, these should be treated as analytically distinct elements which have important relationships. Not all instances of condemning governmental corruption also include a reduction of human rights and vice versa – this is why themes with high levels of overlap should not necessarily be collapsed into a single category.

4.4.3. Reducing Human Rights

Atheist organizations indirectly suggest that most human rights violations are motivated by religious reasoning. They tell stories of how the intolerance of many religions creates unlivable conditions for outgroups. In this line of thinking, in circumstances where religious groups wield considerable power in a society and when religious reasoning can be given for policy decisions, institutional discrimination and in-group favoritism become normalized. A specific example of how American Atheists identify this tendency centers on racial discrimination, although they make this point to draw comparison to court cases determining
civil rights protections for the LGBTQ community: “Religion has historically been used to justify segregation, slavery, and misogyny, and was repeatedly used in the 1960s to challenge civil rights laws” (AA – American Atheists Statement on Supreme Court’s Order in Arlene’s Flowers Case).

American Atheists’ website contains several pages which take a stand against the recent changes in the membership of the Supreme Court, suggesting that then-President Trump was installing religious ideologues. They issued a letter in response to the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh, who is identified as a threat to civil rights, saying that,

“Judge Kavanaugh and his distorted views on religious freedom have no place at the Supreme Court,” said Alison Gill, legal and policy director of American Atheists. “Someone who views the separation of religion and government as ‘useless’ rather than as the foundation of religious equality in our nation is dangerously out of step with the majority of Americans… If confirmed, his record makes it crystal clear that he will continue his crusade to undermine civil rights protections for atheists, LGBTQ people, and minority religious groups to appease the Christian supremacists who have pushed his nomination from day one,” Gill added.” (AA - Atheist Groups Issue Letter Opposing Kavanaugh Nomination)

Kavanaugh is depicted as being “dangerously out of step with the majority of Americans” in his views concerning church/state separation, which puts at risk the civil rights protections for religious minorities and the LGBTQ community. Taken together with similar messages throughout their website, American Atheists are essentially saying that religious in-group favoritism and institutional discrimination limits access to resources and opportunities to outsiders, which in this case is especially dangerous for atheists and the LGBTQ community. Further, this exclusion is made possible only through the erosion of civil rights protections which has been the focus of religious groups.

As we have seen for the other strategies, Atheist Alliance International draws from more extreme cases of the damage that religion causes because its concern extends across the globe.
This holds true for religion’s attack on human rights as well. I am going to quote at length from Atheist Alliance International’s page on Saudi Arabia, since it is rich with examples of how human rights are ignored:

The Saudi writer Hamza Kashgari published three tweets addressing the prophet Muhammad. One read, “I will not bow to you. I shall not kiss your hand. Rather, I shall shake it as equals do.” He was imprisoned without trial for almost two years for his tweets.

Ashraf Fayadh, poet and artist, was sentenced to death in 2015 by beheading by sword for “spreading atheism”, insulting “the divine self”, insulting the Prophet Muhammed, discrediting the Quran and objecting to the concepts of fate as an act of God. Despite being denied a lawyer, he is appealing.

In 2017 Ahmad Al Shamri was sentenced to death on charges of “atheism and blasphemy” for uploading a series of videos on social media. He made an insanity plea claiming he was under the influence of alcohol and drugs at the time of making the videos. The court ruled against him upholding the death sentence. He remains in prison.

Raif Badawi, a blogger and creator of a liberal Saudi blogging platform intended to foster debate on religion and politics, was accused of apostasy. In 2013 he was sentenced to 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes and a fine of 1 million Saudi riyals ($266,700 USD) for “insulting Islam”. To date it is believed he has received 100 of the prescribed lashes.

Ahmed Benchemsi, writing in The New Republic argues that perhaps it would be fair to assert that atheism per se is not the problem. Anyone can be an atheist in Saudi Arabia and many are. Announcing it out loud is the problem. Those who publicize their atheism are fighting less for freedom of conscience than for freedom of speech. (AAI- Saudi Arabia)

Rights to free speech and to basic criminal justice related needs (speedy trial, access to lawyer) are denied to anyone who challenges Islam. As mentioned in the previous section, Saudi Arabia does not subscribe to many of the human rights outlined in the UN’s “Universal Declaration of Human Rights”. In this discourse, religion seems to be the primary barrier to the protection and advancement of human rights across the globe.

Another example from Atheist Alliance International uses a narrative style which invites the reader to picture themselves under threat in Sudan. I include three consecutive paragraphs as an example of how this style of writing differs from much of their other content:
Stoning is a judicial punishment. You read in the paper of several women sentenced to death by stoning. Flogging, too, is a legal punishment and many people have felt lashes across their backs. The local paper carries a story of several Sudanese men who died in custody after being flogged. Many people have been hanged because of violations of Sharia law. Even crucifixion is a legal punishment, although you never come across any stories of that actually being carried out. Who knows, though? Perhaps they keep it a secret.

In 2017, Mohamed Al-Dosogy, a young Sudanese man living and working in Khartoum was arrested two days after he wrote to the Sudanese court explaining he wanted to change his religious status because he had become an atheist. He was charged with apostasy which meant a death sentence.

He would have to be crazy to ask for that, the judge decided. The man is too mentally incompetent to stand trial, he declared, so the case was dismissed, and Al-Dosogy was released. (AAI – Sudan)

The mixing of perspective-taking with simple statements of fact about the brutality of Sudan’s legal system for atheists conveys the human rights violations vividly while imparting a sense of urgency in descriptions of the difficulties faced by atheists there.

Even more modernized nations restrict the rights of religious minorities, although sometimes the restrictions apply only to atheists. Atheist Alliance International describes how atheists continue to be marginalized within the tension between secularizing and religious forces in the history of Jordan:

Since its independence from the United Kingdom in 1946, Jordan has had a civil constitution, yet some of its legislation is based on Islamic teachings… The atheist loses most of his civil rights. Besides dissolution of their marriage, giving up their children and inheritance rights, they may also be considered as “incompetent.” This means that a guardian must be appointed to take care of the nonbeliever, as would be the case with a minor or an insane person. The atheist can’t register ownership of property, or build any project within the country, or sign contracts. (AAI – Jordan)

Atheists are stripped of most civil rights in Jordan, making life extremely difficult – and the only reason this marginalization persists is the social power and intolerance of religious institutions.

Atheist Alliance International points to the limits of secularization globally, where governments with civil constitutions still have laws on the books based on purely religious reasoning.
There is significant overlap in the content condemning religion’s curtailment of human rights and content denouncing the ways religions corrupt governments to wield state power. This is to be expected, since definitions and enforcements of rights are often the domain of the state – or international bodies like the UN, which are still comprised of officially appointed representatives of national governments. Either way, governments seem to be an effective battleground for control of the discourses, infrastructures, and execution of rights, whether of citizens or humans generally.

However, religion impacts access to resources and opportunities in ways not as directly tied to the state, such as discrimination. The last two aspects of atheist organizations’ strategies to legitimate atheism by condemning religious harm, promoting/enabling bigotry and applying social pressure interpersonally and institutionally, are also implicated in the capacity individuals have to exercise their rights. This means that atheist organizations conceptualize the ways religion harms societies and individuals as all-encompassing and interconnected in complex ways, complicating the creation of analytic distinctions and categories. Complexity and interconnection should not discourage social scientific attempts to describe social realities, but it is important to acknowledge the messiness of analytical categories in these cases. Worldviews and moral systems are never entirely clarified, coherent, and complete – the best we can hope for is a nuanced and sufficient description. My analysis identifies conceptually separate elements of atheist organizations’ construction of morality, but overlap across categories is unavoidable, and determining where to draw the line is sometimes difficult. Despite these difficulties, I contend that the categories developed in my analysis are valid and will prove useful for social scientists attempting to make sense of atheist constructions of morality.
4.4.4. Enabling Bigotry

According to atheist organizations, religious teachings promote hatred for many marginalized groups, encouraging violence and discrimination which threaten the foundation of civilized societies.

This week, Rep. Raul Labrador (R-ID) will re-introduce the so-called First Amendment Defense Act (FADA) in the U.S. House of Representatives, a bill that would legalize and permit discrimination—including discrimination at the hands of federal employees—against LGBTQ people and unmarried parents on the basis of religious beliefs.

FADA would prevent the federal government from taking any action against a person who acts on a religious belief that marriage must be between one man and one woman or that sexual relations must be confined to marriage. This would, effectively, gut federal protections for LGBTQ people, single parents, and others…. [FADA] elevates one particular religious view held by a small minority of Americans above all others under the smokescreen of religious freedom. (AA - Atheists Decry Federal Right to Discriminate Bill)

In this quote, American Atheists demonstrate that religions not only permit but, in some cases, seem to actively promote discriminatory behaviors. In this framing, it appears that religious beliefs function as a trump card to permit violations of civil rights. Here we see the significant overlaps across the categories of religious harm used to discredit religion and legitimate atheism – in a single quote, we see religion corrupting governments, reducing human rights, and enabling bigotry all seamlessly woven together.

Atheist organizations are not alone in their assessment that religions promote bigotry. Studies suggest that “religious practice may lie at the heart of prejudicial attitudes toward sexual minorities” (Cragun and Sumerau 2015:830). To the extent that prejudicial attitudes lead to discriminatory behaviors, we can expect that religious reasoning will be a primary driver of the marginalization of at least sexual minorities, but probably religious minorities as well.

In its coverage of the court cases centered on whether cake makers refusing to bake cakes for same-sex weddings, American Atheists criticizes how religion makes bigotry more palatable:
These bakers and others now trying to claim religious protection from equal protection laws think their religion trumps our laws—but it doesn’t. They think their bigotry is somehow made “better” or less awful because they put it in religious terms—but it isn’t. They pass the buck to their god rather than be accountable for their own prejudices. Shame on them. (AA- Bake a Cake and Be Religious Too)

Although religious people might resist labeling their behaviors and beliefs “bigotry”, this passage suggests that they lean on the near-universal acceptance of religious-belief-as-motivation to avoid culpability and guilt for discriminatory practices.

Atheist Alliance International provides the following quote to sum up the importance of education and critical thinking to counteract the religious messages of hatred and bigotry:

As one anonymous atheist living in Jordan has written, “It is crucial to support the concept of reading new books, getting to know different views and understanding the beauty in being different. This only can be achieved after modifying the educational courses that the children consume, diverting their interests to music, art and philosophy, instead of teaching them religious courses that commands them to hate anyone who’s different. If this happened, people in Jordan wouldn’t look at an atheist person as a demon.” (AAI- Jordan)

That religion “commands them to hate anyone who’s different” is the idea at the heart of this section. Prejudice, intolerance, hatred, and discrimination seem to be actively promoted by religions, and atheist organizations point to this fact to discredit them.

4.4.5. Breaking Free from Religion

Atheist organizations describe the difficulty for nonbelievers to leave the religion they were raised in – both socially and psychologically. In doing so, they denounce the religious harm resulting from being forced to believe or participate.

Religious indoctrination impacts both macro and micro levels – personal turmoil and deprogramming are required to get past the deep and damaging impact of religious inculcation, and societal changes are slowed by religious organizations who benefit from the status quo.
A great example of a condemnation of religious socialization is found on Atheist Alliance International’s blog. Entitled “Moving On: My Journey into Atheism”, the post tells a story describing one person’s struggle with the psychological harm and social struggles arising from religious indoctrination and being ostracized by family. The author describes family struggles which pushed his mother to become “fanatical” in her practice of Mormonism. He married a Mormon while studying at Brigham Young University, even though his deep study of the Bible had left him with doubts. The author served several years in the Army, finding “insight into the ingrained sociopolitical and religious schemes of people from all over the US and the world” which made him abandon his prior religious beliefs. After leaving the military, the author made his exit from religion final, stating: “I finally found the courage to tell my wife that I was done with our religion. I stopped going to church.”

A few months later, his wife of nine years left suddenly. This caused such immense mental turmoil that he set out to end his life. He was moved by an experience with his dog to not follow through with his plan. After all of this, the main takeaway the author offers the reader is that religion is damaging and escaping its grasp is challenging. The concluding paragraph illustrates the difficulty of moving away from religion:

The true challenge of life is to figure out how to unshackle oneself from the prison of temporally created and divisive mythologies. Each day we must struggle to overcome our conditioned inner dialogue and rid ourselves of the corrupting voice of organized religion. Seek deep inside your mind, the true self that is being hidden by the fear-built walls of dogma and mysticism. Only then will you truly be free. (AAI – Moving On)

By using the language of being a prisoner seeking freedom, Atheist Alliance International offers the reader a strong visual representation of feeling trapped by religious socialization.

This strategy of condemning religious harm to discredit religions and make atheist identities more desirable involves denouncing physical violence, emotional abuse, bigotry,
discrimination, undue political and cultural influence, and inner turmoil caused by religion.

Although much of my analysis focuses on the most egregious cases these organizations describe, there are also less grave framings of religious harm. For example, consider this quote:

Life is so short and it breaks my heart to see people wasting away their time, money, energy, and passion on something so damaging and so childish and so ridiculous as religion. (AA - A Conversation with a Christian)

This less grave framing of religious harm reflects a paternalistic stance, suggesting that believers would not participate in religion if they only knew better.

4.5. Moral Contrasts, Frames, and Legitimizing Atheism

Atheist organizations legitimate atheist identities using strategies of moral contrast which seek to valorize their position and discredit religion. This chapter has identified three overarching strategies in this process of legitimation: (1) make atheism seem natural, (2) highlight the good atheists do, and (3) condemn religious harm. These three legitimation strategies work in tandem and are seamlessly woven through most of the content found on American Atheists’ and Atheist Alliance International’s websites. Moral contrasts emphasize the praiseworthiness of the in-group and the blameworthiness of at least one identifiable out-group. In this analysis, atheists are the “good guys” and religion and its followers function as the “bad guys”. By simplifying the range of types of people to just two options, these moral contrasts create a moral universe which situate atheism as not only legitimate, but also desirable.

These discursive legitimation practices of atheist organizations can be conceptualized in terms of “frames” within social movements. The reductionistic nature of moral contrasts follow a similar logic as collective action frames, which, as Snow suggests, “focus attention by punctuating or specifying what in our sensual field is relevant and what is irrelevant, what is ‘in frame’ and what is ‘out of frame,’ in relation to the object of orientation” (Snow 2004:384).
Atheist organizations offer collective action frames which present a more or less coherent vision of the social world where the most important elements have to do with the struggle between religion and secularism in order to promote atheism and spur the secular community to greater involvement. The moral contrasts I identify in this chapter are an important part of these collective action frames.

Although my approach and conceptual framework was aligned with the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse, analysis grounded in the social movement literature would yield a similar picture. One example of a direct parallel between a moral contrast framing and social movement framing is encapsulated by the following quote: “Every social movement identifies one or more devils and then heaps abuse upon them in the form of name-calling, ridicule, negative associations, and metaphors” (Stewart, Denton, and Smith 1989:125–26). To put my contention briefly, there should be no reason that my findings could not be adapted to related approaches within sociology. One example would be that sociologists focused on labeling theory could examine how atheists seek to transform the connotations of their self-label from negative to positive to resist the damaging impact of stigma and stereotypes.

The next chapter describes the moral foundations and values of atheist organizations. Most of the examples of moral contrasts in this chapter have centered on relatively uncontroversial value judgments – that natural equals good, that having a history and current track record of helping others is good, and that violence, hatred, and human rights violations are bad. The obviousness of these judgments makes them good candidates for salient moral contrasts, since moral contrasts invoking marginal concerns are likely less effective because they would lack resonance. Systems of morality are concerned with more than just the simple application of moral contrasts; claims of good and bad extend to many domains and often
contain more nuance than the binary choices involved in moral contrasts. The next chapter expands beyond moral contrasts to provide an account of the many ways atheist values are communicated.
5. ATHEIST VALUES & MORAL FOUNDATIONS

In the previous chapter, we considered the strategies used by the atheist organizations in question to make “atheist” a desirable subject position. In this chapter we describe the moral foundations and values found in atheist organizations.

Atheist organizations, like individuals (Guenther et al. 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016), attempt to legitimate and even valorize atheism as a response to stigma both in the US and across the world. In doing so, they construct appealing subject positions through moral contrasts (as discussed last chapter) and identify a set of values which situate atheists on a moral high ground. The findings presented in this chapter extend the research done to investigate how atheist individuals construct moral selves (Guenther et al. 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016) by moving beyond an account of strategies to providing a description of the content of an “atheist morality”.

Although the purpose of this chapter is to describe “atheist morality” generally, atheist organizations rightfully draw attention to the diversity of atheists. American Atheists’ description of the uniqueness of each atheist may be overstating this point, since almost everywhere else in their website it is assumed that atheists share the values found on each page.

The only common thread that ties all atheists together is a lack of belief in gods. Some of the best debates we have ever had have been with fellow atheists. This is because atheists do not have a common belief system, sacred scripture or atheist Pope. This means atheists often disagree on many issues and ideas. Atheists come in a variety of shapes, colors, beliefs, convictions, and backgrounds. We are as unique as our fingerprints. (AA – What is Atheism?)

This statement allows for considerable diversity, which can feel welcoming to anyone who doubts the existence of gods, while also emphasizing a lack of the hierarchy, which is a common critique of religion. Despite this stated awareness of the diversity of atheists, most pages on American Atheists’ website claim to speak for “atheists” as a demographic in statements of values as well as denouncements of religiously motivated political action.
One of the base assumptions held by both organizations is that atheists are philosophical naturalists. Philosophical naturalism holds that empirically verifiable objects and phenomena are the only things we should treat as existing – usually following the state of contemporary science for clues as to what exists. In this view, supernatural phenomena are not to be taken seriously as no scientific evidence suggests anything but natural explanations. Philosophical naturalism is not the only epistemological or ontological position which an atheist might hold, but for the purposes of atheist organizations, it seems that it is an important commonality for atheists generally. The only passage which provides space for diversity in this regard is found in Atheist Alliance International’s page titled “What is Atheism?”:

In principle, an atheist could believe in fairies, although the thinking that leads to unbelief in gods, in most cases leads to unbelief in other things that cannot be shown to be real. Consequently, atheists most likely will not believe in Satan, demons, angels, karma, heaven, hell or anything else that relies on the supernatural but, in principle, they could. (AAI - What is Atheism?)

It is unclear how many atheists espouse beliefs in empirically unverifiable entities or forces. Even so, this assumption (that the logic which causes unbelief in gods extends to other non-empirical realities) may be a safe one for atheist organizations. The New Atheist re-framing of atheists as being oppositional and anti-supernatural has made it less likely that one will adopt that label if they have sympathies for supernatural thinking. Further, for those who believe in supernatural phenomena but self-label as atheist, how many would seek out a major atheist organization? Unfortunately, there are no studies which give us an indication of how common supernaturalist atheists are, and no reliable method exists to determine how often this demographic would be dissuaded from participating in atheist organizations due to the assumption of philosophical naturalism.
Even with an understanding of the intellectual diversity of atheists generally, these organizations still construct a coherent vision of what atheist morality is and should be. Social movement organizations create and distribute a specific vision of what values are important and what action must be undertaken, even though participants will have otherwise dissimilar beliefs and attitudes about the range of other social, ontological, and epistemological issues. Benford and Snow identify these processes as generating *collective action frames*, and *frame bridging*, which is “the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Benford and Snow 2000:624). Constructing unity in a diverse coalition requires a framing which manages the tension between specificity and generality of tactics and goals while maintaining cultural resonance (Benford and Snow 2000). Atheist organizations construct atheist unity by offering a specific vision which participants find compelling. This is accomplished through an acknowledgement of the diversity of atheists to allow for independent thinking and uniqueness within the ranks while also providing a set of common assumptions which act as the jumping-off point for collective action and the foundation for collective identity.

This chapter covers the common moral foundation and values offered by atheist organizations which describe and constitute atheists as a unified community. These points of agreement allow individuals to recognize the commonalities shared by atheists nationally or globally to constitute the basis for collective identity formation and an “imagined community” (in the sense introduced by Anderson 1983) of atheists. Atheist organizations construct an atheist morality by (1) insisting that morality is independent of religion, (2) by pointing to the superior motives and outcomes of atheist goodness, and (3) by providing recurring and diverse moral frames reinforcing the values of secularism, human rights, critical thought, science and
empiricism, human cooperation, diversity and equity, and the affirmation of the value of human life.

**5.1. Morality is Independent of Religion**

The discourses concerning religion and morality have been interconnected across history (Norenzayan 2013). This association of religion and morality has reached a taken-for-granted status in many contexts – in some places over 90% of people say that belief in God is necessary for a person to be moral and almost half of Americans say the same (Pew Research Center 2020). It is in this cultural context which atheist organizations make claims that morality is entirely independent of religion.

In line with the findings of previous studies which explored individual stances on morality’s relationship to religion (Guenther et al. 2013; Smith and Halligan 2021; Sumerau and Cragun 2016), both American Atheists’ and Atheist Alliance International’s websites suggest that morality is independent of religion. Disentangling the morality-religion knot is essential for atheists to make any claim to moral praiseworthiness, let alone moral superiority. This means that the core values identified by atheist organizations rely on this “good without God” framing (Homan et al. 2016) for legitimacy, even if those values are shared by some religious communities.

Recent multinational survey research investigated the content of secular beliefs held by 996 non-religious individuals in 10 countries, using an open-ended approach to avoid motivating or forcing participants to use preset categories determined by social scientists (van Mulukom et al. 2022). Van Mulukom and colleagues (2022) discovered several clusters of beliefs which constitute major components of global secular worldviews. The findings most relevant to my work involve the categories of morality framing found and how often respondents use them. The
researchers outline five major frames for secular understandings of morality: acquired morality, intuitive morality, rational morality, unspecified morality, and secular morality.

*Acquired morality*, the idea that “moral behavior is the result of cultural or social transmission of norms, or processes of cultural evolution” (van Mulukom et al. 2022:41) showed up in 2.9% of responses. *Intuitive morality*, the idea that moral behavior is an inherent human trait, was referenced by 4% of participants. *Rational morality* suggests that moral behavior is founded in “explicit philosophical or scientific or rational reflection” (van Mulukom et al. 2022:42) and was mentioned by 3.3% of participants. *Unspecified morality* emphasizes “the importance of doing good/not doing bad, but without specifying what that means” (van Mulukom et al. 2022:42) and was found in 5.3% of responses. Secular morality was referenced most often (5.5% of respondents) and simply describes a moral stance which states that morality does not rely upon religion.

The conceptualizations of the first four frames do not necessarily exclude religious foundations for morality, but example quotes from their data suggest that they are used in some cases to point out that morality is not dependent on religion: “Ethical and moral behaviours are social rather than religious conceptions”, and “Being moral is not owned by religion” (van Mulukom et al. 2022:41–42). Although it is unsurprising that nonreligious people reject that religion has a monopoly over morality, it is still important for social scientists to investigate the ways secular individuals understand and express the relationship between religion and morality. Before we explore how Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists deny religion any place in discussions of morality, I would like to specify how moral contrasts and values are joined in the construction of morality.
5.1.1. Moral Contrasts Always Invoke Values

Unsurprisingly, there is significant overlap in the legitimation strategies discussed in the previous chapter and statements of atheist values. For example, the strategy of naturalizing atheism involves noting the common human traits shared by atheists and non-atheists alike. This allows them to highlight the key differences that set them apart (and above) religious people.

Atheists are humans and you will find good and bad, but if you compare atheistic countries with very religious ones, you are likely to see atheistic countries have lower crimes rates and less dysfunctional behavior. (AAI – What is Atheism?)

Atheist Alliance International here states the obvious – that atheists are humans – to set up a contrast between more religious and more atheistic countries, allowing for instances of bad behavior by atheists without detracting from the society-level benefits of atheism. To err is human, but we can compare types of people by what social outcomes they create. This is an example of a moral contrast which is strategically constructed to make atheism desirable that also hints that atheist morality leads to desirable outcomes as well.

This passage does double duty in terms of my analysis: (1) it legitimates atheism through moral contrasts and (2) it gives an indication of atheist values. Moral contrasts rely on shared values, even if implicit – what does a text accomplish when condemning something another person approves of? A moral contrast that has persuasive power necessarily builds on shared assessments of what is good and bad. The moral foundations and values of atheists are framed as part of the appeal of taking on “atheist” as one’s self-identifier. So, although my analysis treats the moral contrasts which legitimate atheist identities and the accounts of moral foundations and values as distinguishable parts of atheist discourse, such a strong line separating these categories does not exist. After reading this chapter, one could reread the previous and see that every
instance of moral contrast involves a statement or implication of values. Put simply, moral contrasts always invoke values, so legitimation strategies rely on shared values.

5.1.2. Why Morality Should Never Rely on Religion

Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists both include several explicit explanations of how morality is independent from religion. Firstly, science is said to be a path to discovering what is moral. Drawing on concepts from evolutionary biology, morality is seen as objective and deriving its force from social and genetic history - the behaviors which aided the survival of our species are seen as good, and actions which harm community bonds are bad. This can be extended to govern interpersonal relations as well:

Actions that unnecessarily cause suffering or harm to humans are morally wrong, and actions that contribute to human wellbeing are morally right. Once we have criteria for right and wrong, we can say that some actions, such as randomly hitting a person with a hammer, are objectively morally wrong and other actions are objectively morally right. (AAI – Can Atheists Be Moral?)

This passage does not explicitly refer to evolutionary biology, but shares the assumption that morality is oriented towards the survival and wellbeing of humans as a species. In other places we find explicit reference to humans’ evolutionary past, which provides the first key to understanding morality which is supplemented by culture (as a mechanism of adaptation):

As human beings, we are social animals. Our sociality is the result of evolution, not choice. Natural selection has equipped us with nervous systems which are peculiarly sensitive to the emotional status of our fellows. Among our kind, emotions are contagious… By transmission of culture – passing on the sum total of the learned behaviors common to a population – we can do what Darwinian genetic selection would not allow: we can inherit acquired characteristics. The wheel once having been invented, its manufacture and use can be passed down through the generations. Culture can adapt to change much faster than genes can, and this provides for finely tuned responses to environmental disturbances and upheavals. (AA – Ethics Without Gods)

This quote illustrates the adaptation of major concepts in evolutionary biology to make a case for objective and discoverable moral principles. We find similar arguments throughout both
organizations’ websites, which boil down to the idea that cooperation and prosociality are essentially human traits which are evolutionarily promoted for our survival and can constitute a species-wide moral code.

The use of science in discovering an objective morality does not rely solely upon concepts from evolutionary biology. The many fields of science increase our understanding of how things work, including the consequences of human behaviors and social arrangements. In one case, it is suggested that we should look to the findings of social scientists who study patterns of behavior and their impacts on social wellbeing in order to determine general principles of morality:

The behavior of Atheists is subject to the same rules of sociology, psychology, and neurophysiology that govern the behavior of all members of our species, religionists included… Ethical behavior – regardless of who the practitioner may be – results always from the same causes and is regulated by the same forces, and has nothing to do with the presence or absence of religious belief. (AA – Ethics Without Gods)

In this view, moral guidelines should follow what we know about interpersonal interaction through the social sciences rather than coming from an ancient prescriptive text. This quote comes from American Atheists’ post titled “Ethics Without Gods”, which identifies the author as that organization’s former president and current board member, Frank Zindler. The text concludes with a high-level summary of the arguments found within, which revolves around this idea that morality is discoverable through the observation of the nature of things, including humans:

Thus it happens, when the Atheist approaches the problem of finding natural grounds for human morals and establishing a nonsuperstitious basis for behavior, that it appears as though nature has already solved the problem to a great extent. Indeed, it appears as though the problem of establishing a natural, humanistic basis for ethical behavior is not much of a problem at all. It is in our natures to desire love, to seek beauty, and to thrill at the act of creation. The labyrinthine complexity we see when we examine traditional moral codes does not arise of necessity: it is largely the result of vain attempts to accommodate human needs and nature to the whimsical totems and taboos of the demons.
and deities who emerged with us from our cave-dwellings at the end of the Paleolithic Era – and have haunted our houses ever since. (AA – Ethics Without Gods)

If “nature has already solved the problem” of morality, religion has no place in deliberations of morality. This is not the only reason atheist organizations give for excluding religious input in morality.

It is argued that religion cannot be a reliable source for moral guidance on logical grounds as well. Morality must be based on objective criteria to be truly knowable. The problems involved with assuming divine sources for morality have been discussed at least as far back as Plato; in fact, both organizations reference Plato explicitly in the webpages which deal with morality’s independence from religion (Atheist Alliance International’s “Can Atheists Be Moral?” and American Atheists’ “Ethics Without Gods”). “Can Atheists Be Moral?” summarizes Euthyphro’s dilemma posed by Plato in no uncertain terms:

Theists who say their morality comes from God face an unpalatable conclusion. They must either accept that they follow an arbitrary morality from an arbitrary god and an arbitrary religion, or they must accept that their god is not necessary for humans to understand morality. (AAI – Can Atheists Be Moral?)

In this view, if a god is the source of morality, then it is arbitrary and subjective, in which case its unknowability makes it useless (because which god?). If some god is the judge based on objective standards which are not of that god’s choosing, then we don’t need that god to discover these standards, so religion would only be useful in speeding our process of discovery (if it is true). “Can Atheists Be Moral?” concludes with a concise example of how atheists frame why morality not only is independent of religion, but that it must be:

God cannot be the source of objective morality. If objective morality exists, it exists independently of any gods. A god could be the source of an arbitrary morality, but this approach enmeshes theists in a web of intractable problems; it is a barrier to genuine moral progress and leaves theists with a disparate assortment of values, some of which are an affront to common sense.
Atheists, far from having no basis for moral values, can base their values soundly on reason and science. These same tools that have been used with spectacular success to discover the physical world can be used to understand the moral realm. We can be moral without gods.

It’s time for atheists to change the narrative and demand that theists explain how they can be moral when they deny a role for reason, and rely instead on books written by Iron Age men whose morals have long since been superseded. (AAI – Can Atheists Be Moral?)

Religious morality has been superseded because now we know better. This way of describing atheism as a more mature stance which better reflects the stage of human development we have achieved brings us to another major theme in atheist organizations’ discourse: that atheism is more moral than religion.

5.2. Atheism’s Moral Superiority

In the previous chapter, the theme of “not only good without God, but better without” was described in the context of the moral contrast strategies for legitimating atheist identities.

This chapter deals with the moral foundations and values found on the websites of atheist organizations. The aim of this section is to re-emphasize the importance of moral superiority for atheist discourses while illustrating that it constitutes a major part of the foundation of the construction of atheist morality. My analysis suggests congruence between atheist organizations and the findings of past research focused on famous authors (Peterson 2010) and individual atheists (Guenther et al. 2013; Sumerau and Cragun 2016), namely that not only are they capable of being good in the absence of religious reference, but almost universally atheists are depicted as morally superior.

“The new atheists almost uniformly claim that it is modern atheists who hold the moral high ground, and that it is the practitioners of the world’s religions that are immoral, both in historical practice and in fundamental commitment.” (Peterson 2010:159)

Atheists claim moral superiority for several reasons, including having better motives for doing good.
This kind of argument for why atheist morality is superior contends that *any goodness an atheist does comes from genuinely wanting to do good instead of desire for heavenly reward or fear of divine judgment*. Although different systems of moral thinking do not agree on how important motives are in determining the goodness of an act, atheists highlight how bad it looks being kind out of fear or in expectation of eternal bliss. Assuming that religious people are motivated by fear and a desire for reward makes their good behavior selfish, putting the idea that good and evil are defined in relation to “God’s will” aside to apply more purely behaviorist principles to religiously-motivated behavior. Atheist organizations depict religious people’s understanding of morality as immature and shallow. For example:

One of the first questions Atheists are asked by true believers and doubters alike is, “If you don’t believe in God, there’s nothing to prevent you from committing crimes, is there? Without the fear of hell-fire and eternal damnation, you can do anything you like, can’t you?” (AA – Ethics Without Gods)

This passage serves to point to a deficiency in moral logic on the part of religious people. If the only thing keeping you from committing heinous crimes is fear of supernatural judgment, what room is there to say you are a good person? A truly good person would not harbor antisocial desires in the first place. This line of thinking reinforces the moral superiority discourse for atheist organizations by focusing on the inherent goodness of a person and their motives.

Social psychologists have demonstrated the limits of religious prosociality, providing some evidence that this framing of religious morality as self-serving is not without merit:

The preponderance of the evidence points to religious prosociality being a bounded phenomenon. Religion’s association with prosociality is most evident when the situation calls for maintaining a favorable social reputation within the in-group. When thoughts of morally concerned deities are cognitively salient, an objectively anonymous situation becomes nonanymous and, therefore, reputationally relevant. (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008:62)
If prosociality is driven by reputational concerns, especially when concerning God’s assessment of you, then the primary motivation for doing good for others is selfish. Doing things to look good is arguably inferior to helping out of genuine concern for others.

Previous studies have found that atheists claim their moral superiority is also grounded in a more universal concern for human wellbeing, rather than the in-group, parochialist tendencies of religion. For example, in a descriptive study of the ways prominent atheist authors depict the relation between out-group altruism and religious belonging, Peterson suggests that “new atheists claim that religious moralities are faulty in part because they are said to reject out-group altruism” (Peterson 2010:172). If religious communities engage in prosocial behaviors solely aimed at members of their group and ignore the needs of outsiders, this would be easily condemnable, and any group that exhibits universal concern for fellow human beings could be argued to be morally superior. This appears to be a part of the strategy of atheists to flip the script for the relationship between morality and religion. If atheist communities can demonstrate sustained prosocial behavior to promote the wellbeing of atheists and non-atheists alike, then this can be counted as evidence for moral superiority over religions.

Not all claims to moral superiority rely on sophisticated argumentation. In some cases, it is as simple as stating it, like in this passage from a statement by American Atheists reacting to the anti-transgender policies proposed by the Trump administration in 2018:

Science, medicine, morality, common decency, and the law are on all our side. We will do everything in our power to elevate the voices and experiences of all trans atheists, and indeed all trans people, in public discourse to ensure that this administration’s galling attempts to define millions of Americans out of existence will not succeed. (AA - American Atheists Statement about Proposed Anti-Transgender Policies)

Suggesting that all relevant social domains, from science to common decency, are all on the side of atheists speaks to a moral and knowledge-based superiority. This is in many ways similar to
discourses which suggest that “history is on our side” or that one should be on the “right side of history” which sidestep critical examination to rhetorically force taking a side while manipulating the options to make only one choice defensible. If science, medicine, law, and common decency are in agreement, who would disagree?

Atheist organizations depict atheism as morally superior, turning the historically dominant association of religion with morality on its head. In order to make this radical departure from traditional thinking possible, atheist organizations offer a set of values which are consistent with modern sensibilities while lacking religious reference. Atheist organizations need to balance the familiar and comfortable with the script-flipping and disruptive aspects of secular values to make atheism a desirable subject position. With an understanding of these moral foundations offered by atheist organizations, we can now move to a description of atheist values as they appear on the websites of Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists.

5.3. Atheist Values

So far in this chapter, we have outlined an atheist morality’s foundational assumptions and general arguments. The rest of this chapter will describe the values found on American Atheists’ and Atheist Alliance International’s websites.

5.3.1. Secularism & Rights

This section’s title might seem to be combining what should be two distinct types of atheist values. In the initial stage of constructing my coding frame I had separate categories for secularism and rights (including civil rights and human rights), but in the process of subsuming categories it became increasingly clear that the two were intertwined in interesting ways. The value of secularism seemed to lie in its inclusive construal of and defense of rights. I did not find
“progress for progress’ sake” or similar framings which imagine secularization as an end in itself. Instead, secularism is said to improve society by ensuring that religions’ outdated values do not reduce any individual’s rights or human dignity. The following chapter provides a more thorough treatment of this idea; this section will illustrate the ways atheist organizations communicate secularism and rights as important atheist values.

When atheist organizations discuss rights there are two framings: (1) Religion poses a threat to or restricts rights/liberties and (2) Atheism and secularism protect and advance rights/liberties. This is unsurprising, since social movement communication creates an unambiguous moral universe which oversimplifies the impacts of the various actors in the world, often in order to create injustice frames (Benford and Snow 2000). In the social movement literature, this process would be understood in terms of diagnostic framing, which operates through an “identification of the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents” (Benford and Snow 2000:616). Identifying the role of atheists in protecting human rights is an example of part of atheist organizations’ prognostic framing, which lays out “a proposed solution to the problem, or at least a plan of attack, and the strategies for carrying out the plan” (Benford and Snow 2000:618) which frequently involves identifying relevant agents of change.

From a discourse research perspective, we see the discourses on secularism and human rights as forming a “discursive knot”. The overlap of content in these categories is significant, and it seems that the meaning of secularism is bound to the concept of civil and human rights, at least for these groups. Of course, not everyone would agree that human rights are founded in or best defended by secularism, but for atheist organizations this seems to be a running assumption. There were no instances where this connection is explicitly spelled out across the content of the websites analyzed, but many statements imply a necessary connection. For example, Atheist
Alliance International seamlessly weaves their denouncement of religion exerting undue influence on culture and politics (as an indication for why secularism is important generally) with an account of the discrimination and rights restrictions atheists face:

Every day around the world atheists are discriminated against in overt and covert ways. Even in countries that have legal protections for the religious and non-religious alike, these protections are often undermined by a social and political atmosphere in which the non-religious are made to feel like lesser citizens. It is unfair, unnecessary, and too often ends in tragedy.

But worse than this, many countries have legislation that discriminates against atheists and criminalizes atheism. In several countries, the discovery by family or friends that you do not believe God exists can bring the wrath of the state upon you. The consequences can be dire. Atheists may lose their employment, their education, their children, their liberty and their life. They can be denied their right to own property, their right of inheritance, and can be subjected to merciless physical violence. (AAI- Universal Declaration of Atheist Rights)

In these two paragraphs we can see how discourses of secularism and of rights are tied together in a way that makes it nearly impossible to consider the two as distinguishable. This discursive knot explains why neither organization felt the need to make the explicit claim that secularism advances and protects human rights – it is an assumption built into the way they communicate. So although I had initially hoped to keep these generally analytically-distinct categories separate for my analysis, it became increasingly implausible to provide an adequate description while keeping them separate.

American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International both decry the rights abuses done in the name of religion. Reading through these organizations’ websites, one might get the impression that all civil and human rights violations occur because of religion. Messages distributed by social movement organizations of this kind tend toward a focus on the primary elements of the diagnostic and prognostic framing to the exclusion of all else (Snow 2004). Atheist organizations may comment on current events and issues, but almost exclusively when
they relate to the dangers of religion in society or the benefits of atheist action and values. I suspect that different organizations also present an over-simple moral universe where the entities to be blamed seem to be the source of almost all relevant problems. This oversimplification of social problems like human rights violations as uniquely caused by religion (i.e., being the result of *religions doing what religions do*) strengthens the idea that a primary legitimizing strategy for atheist organizations involves moral contrasts.

Much of the time their declamations suggest that secularism is the best defense against most encroachments on people’s rights. This topic gets more extensive treatment in the next chapter. Of course, this insistence that secularism is the remedy to rights violations is the second aspect of the moral contrast involved in the creation of their moral universe. This is the best explanation for why these analytically distinct concepts (secularism and rights) are combined in the discourses distributed by atheist organizations.

The marginal status and stigmatization of atheists necessitates this concern with rights, since that community perceives discrimination at a high rate (Cragun et al. 2012; Hammer et al. 2012). This gives a specific focus to how civil rights are discussed by atheist organizations, understandably centered on atheist rights, like the very first sentence in American Atheists’ “About Us” page: “Since 1963, American Atheists has been the premier organization fighting for the civil liberties of atheists” (AA – About Us).

Human rights function as a foundational principle for modern societies, so its rhetorical uses generally carry significant weight (Valocchi 1996). Human rights violations are seen to be among the gravest evils in modern society. By rhetorically attaching themselves to the defense of human rights, atheist organizations make a powerful statement and invite the praise and admiration such action deserves. Consider this passage from Atheist Alliance International’s
home page, which describes the activism they engage in to defend atheist rights and advance secularism generally:

Atheist Alliance International works to combat discrimination against atheists and to make the world a safer and more rational place for everyone. We support, fund, and advise on campaigns around the world to defend atheists and resist the encroachment of religious dogma into public policy. (AAI-Home)

The phrase “a safer and more rational place for everyone” illustrates the secularism-rights connection while attaching themselves to the work being done to achieve that outcome. This message could be paraphrased in a way that more directly speaks to the point I am making, that atheists advance and defend human rights directly through legal and financial support as well as by advancing secularism generally. Reading this passage while keeping in mind the secularism-rights assumption yields the idea that the advancement of secularism leads to “a safer” because “more rational” world.

As discussed in the preceding chapter, the rhetoric of legitimation frequently centers on moral contrasts. We find that both American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International use the twin approach of (1) religion is a threat to human rights, especially when given input in governments and (2) secularism defends human rights.

Since previous studies have provided no significant description of atheist values, the necessary connection between human rights and secularism has not been noted to my knowledge. Although this is perhaps not a groundbreaking discovery (since it is generally unsurprising), this insight may prove useful in future studies of the ways secular individuals express values. Specifically, it would be interesting to see how widespread this assumed connection between secularism and human rights is and which “secular” or “nonreligious” identities and/or worldviews might take a more nuanced approach. If our field is to shift from the focus on a lack of religion to a rich description of the substantive and positive aspects of worldviews constructed
in relation to secularism and religion (following, for example, Blankholm 2022; Cragun and McCaffree 2021), we need to investigate the range of “typical” expressions of values and beliefs in order to make sense of the variety of secularisms and the determinants of different stances and identities. A specific example of this would be to assess the importance of secularism to human rights across differently identifying individuals to discover if one’s stance on the secularism-rights connection motivates specific self-labels.

Since religion is depicted as the greatest threat to human rights, atheist organizations provide a set of values which can (in their view) facilitate a substantive cultural shift towards secular principles and loosen the grip of traditional religious thinking. The following sections outline the values promoted by atheist organizations which should liberate humanity from religious domination.

5.3.2. Critical Thought & Skepticism

A second major theme found in much of the content of both organization’s websites is an emphasis on the importance of critical thought and skepticism. This emphasis is reinforced by simply stating the importance of critical thought as well as telling stories of how skepticism was freeing for individuals.

Many of the statements about rationality and evidence are frequently framed with ridiculing language, suggesting the authors are attempting to maximize distance between atheism and religion. For example, AAI’s webpage titled “Eight Reasons Christianity is False” states:

Christian theology is incoherent to the point of absurdity. God killing his son so he can forgive our future sin is like me breaking my son’s legs so I can forgive my neighbor in case she ever parks her car on my drive. It is quite ridiculous. (AAI- Eight Reasons Christianity is False)
As noted in the previous chapter, this strategy – calling religious belief absurd, ridiculous, and incoherent – is a way to discredit religious identities and justify atheist identities. This moral contrast also communicates that critical thinking is an important value. This othering strategy shows up in different ways across the organizations’ websites. In some cases, making religion seem outdated bolsters the appearance of ridiculousness, like Atheist Alliance International’s “God’s IQ” post:

> The Bible is full of discredited explanations, superstition, and Iron Age morality. No, the Earth is not flat, no the sun does not revolve around the Earth, no the Earth is not stationary and no, it does not rest on pillars. Nor is it moral to hold slaves or to sell your daughters as sex slaves or to stone disobedient children to death. (AAI- God’s IQ)

This quote combines mockery of beliefs discredited by science with a suggestion that religious morality is outdated, suggesting the importance of critical thinking to avoid errors in thinking and to question traditional thinking. The best example of the combination of valorizing critical thinking while ridiculing religion comes from “The Hardest Truth of All”, a post on Atheist Alliance International’s website: “The hardest truth of all is, with respect to your faith, you have more in common with a performing dog than with a rational, intelligent human being” (AAI- The Hardest Truth of All). The intensity of this quote puts Atheist Alliance International on the far end of a spectrum of stances related to ridicule, which is not universally agreed-upon among secular people and organizations.

Langston and colleagues (2017) found that among the secular individuals they studied “a majority said that whether mockery and ridicule should be applied to religious people and religious beliefs simply depends on various considerations… [Even those participants] who took an accommodationist stance did not opt out of circumstantially attacking, mocking, or ridiculing religion and religious beliefs” (Langston et al. 2017:217). It appears that the effectiveness of ridicule is debated in the secular community, even if most individuals engage in it in some
contexts. American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International use ridicule without apology to bolster their legitimacy and uncompromisingly express their values.

Atheist organizations do not rely only on ridiculing religion to communicate that critical thinking is an important value. In other cases, we find positive framings which make no explicit reference to religion. For example, American Atheists include this phrase in the page titled “Our Vision”: “Atheism involves the mental attitude that unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason”. An example from Atheist Alliance International comes from an explicit list of their values which includes: “Reason and rational thought are the basis of logical decision making and essential to address the issues faced by humanity.” (AAI – About Us) Even without explicitly referring to religion in these statements, it is still evident that these things only need to be said because of religion. Statements of this kind would be common sense if religion did not exist – who else would oppose the idea that reason should be the basis of decision making?

The relationship between critical thinking and religious belief is a subject of debate across the religious-secular spectrum. Social scientists have been working to determine this as well, and there seems to be disagreement about whether different cognitive styles and capacities make one less likely to hold religious beliefs (Geertz and Markússon 2010; Pennycook et al. 2012; Zuckerman, Silberman, and Hall 2013). An interesting recent example comes from the work of Ståhl and van Prooijen (2021). They argue that “because religious beliefs are frequently supported by powerful existential motives, people are unlikely to engage their analytic faculties in an objective pursuit of the truth when evaluating the plausibility of deities and other supernatural agents.” (Ståhl and van Prooijen 2021:7). When one engages in motivated thinking, objective truth is not the primary goal. This means that even individuals who are adept at analytical thinking will not necessarily use these skills when assessing religious ideas. Ståhl and
Prooijen found that “analytic thinking should promote disbelief in deities, and the rejection of various other epistemically suspect beliefs, more strongly when people are motivated to recruit their analytic faculties in an objective pursuit of the truth”. (Ståhl and van Prooijen 2021:8 emphasis added). Their research identifies the limits of the notion that analytic thinking leads to (or is at least correlated with) atheism and skepticism. Even though this area is hotly debated, it is unsurprising that atheist organizations take a straightforward, unnuanced stance which aligns rationality and critical thinking with atheism.

Atheist organizations tell stories that clearly promote critical thinking as a primary value. A powerful example of this is found on Atheist Alliance International’s website, in a description of the work of Narendra Nayak in India. Nayak travels among remote villages debunking the “magic” of godmen (religious miracle workers), showing them all to be illusions and teaching critical thinking skills to replace magical thinking. Atheist Alliance International devotes three separate webpages to their description of Nayak’s work, underscoring its importance. The pages valorize critical thought and skepticism throughout a description of Nayak’s work by depicting him as heroic, condemning the godmen’s tricks, and reporting that Nayak’s demonstrations are well-received by people who do not have access to science education and who may never have been permitted to question religious ideas. The nature of their description makes it clear that for atheists, the promotion of critical thinking is a morally praiseworthy activity:

“Professor Narendra Nayak hates superstitious beliefs. He has seen firsthand the harm they cause. More than that, he hates the poor being cheated by contemptible people who use the culture of superstition so prevalent in India to trick people into giving away money and possessions they cannot afford…He is an outspoken atheist, rationalist, and skeptic who has spent the past 12 years conducting grassroots level campaigns on myth busting, debunking superstitions, and promoting science and critical thinking all across the country. He has conducted more than 3,000 seminars in city schools and colleges and many in the open air in remote villages where a warm bath, good food, and a soft bed are luxuries that can only be dreamed about…”
Nayak is described as having the correct attitude (“hates superstitious beliefs”, “the poor being cheated”), beliefs (“atheist, rationalist, and skeptic”), and actions (“myth busting, debunking superstitions, and promoting science and critical thinking”), even at personal cost (see description of “remote villages”) to make him a heroic example of critical thinking advocacy.

Further, they describe a cultural context where critical thinking skills are lacking due to religion’s influence to make the importance of critical thinking very clear:

“There are many reasons for my own critical thinking abilities, including my privilege to go to a top-notch school, and specialized further education. The vast majority of Indians would never even know of the existence of logical reasoning, the scientific method or rational explanations for the ‘miracles’ they are exposed to. They become easy targets for exploitation by local godmen, cults, nationalistic organizations, and hateful xenophobic propaganda.” (AAI – The Apprentice)

This depicts the negative social impacts for populations without adequate critical thinking skills as many and dire. The importance of this value is unambiguous, since critical thinking skills can free people from “exploitation, … cults, nationalistic organizations, and hateful xenophobic propaganda”. Add to this the quotes about Nayak discussed in the previous chapter, and it becomes clear that Atheist Alliance International wants to emphasize that critical thinking is one of their most important values.

Another example, this time from American Atheists’ website, of stressing the importance of critical thought and skepticism comes from a page called “Biblical Contradictions”. This webpage contains a brief account of the contradictory accounts found in the Bible, providing scriptural passages which appear to convey opposite messages, like “…I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30) and “No man hath seen God at any time” (John 1:18). In all, American Atheists provide 15 instances of apparently contradictory messages, covering topics from the power of God, incest, human sacrifice, and the end of the world. The conclusion sets critical thinking and faith in opposition:
“What is incredible about the Bible is not its divine authorship; it’s that such a concoction of contradictory nonsense could be believed by anyone to have been written by an omniscient god. To do so, one would first have to not read the book, which is the practice of most Christians; or, if one does read it, dump in the trash can one’s rational intelligence — to become a fool for god, in other words.” (AA- Biblical Contradictions)

This account disallows the possibility of rational faith, or religious thought which adequately employs critical thinking. One thing that struck me during analysis is that these atheist organizations did not feel the need to explain why critical thinking is good, but instead proceeded with the assumption that “critical thinking” and “skepticism” are unambiguous concepts which are (or should be) universally praised. To appeal to critical thinking as a primary value, these organizations simply point to the apparent lack of it in religion. Values can be communicated through condemnation as effectively as through positive substantive declarations, and atheist organizations convey theirs in both ways.

This idea, that one becomes “a fool for god”, is reflected in many of the pages of both organizations’ websites. Atheist organizations highlight how religion in general does not seem to have adequate evidence to support it as well as how specific religious ideas fail to hold up to critical analysis. Although most of the criticism is leveled against Christianity in specifics, I think the authors intend their messages to be generalizable to all religions. This means that the previous quote about the Bible should be equally true if we discuss other sacred texts. Sometimes the distinction between attacks on religion in general and specific religious ideas might not be obvious. Some examples will illustrate how these categories of general-specific criticism show up on atheist organizations’ websites.

First, consider examples of confronting specific religious ideas. American Atheists have a lengthy page which claims that historical evidence for Jesus’ existence is “without substance”, where the author eviscerates the reliability of the documents which have been previously used to
prove that Jesus existed. “I began to reexamine the evidence for the historicity of Jesus. I was astounded at what I didn’t find” (AA- Did Jesus Exist?). The historicity of Jesus is a non-issue to non-Christian religions, so this looks like a good example of attacking specific religious ideas. The conclusion minimally complicates this designation by denoting that religious output (even beyond Christianity) shares a common delusional character:

The publication of many examples of so-called wisdom literature, along with the materials from the Essene community at Qumran by the Dead Sea and the Gnostic literature from the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt, has given us a much more detailed picture of the communal psychopathologies which infested the Eastern Mediterranean world at the turn of the era. (AA- Did Jesus Exist?)

Suggesting that Christianity spawned from a milieu of “communal psychopathologies” both serves to discredit Jesus’ existence and jab at religion more generally by implying it is a product of insanity. This is why the distinction between general and specific religion critique is both useful and not straightforward; they serve to contrast the critical thinking capacities of atheists to the irrational faith of religious folks. General and specific critique aim at the same goal, and highlighting absurdities and irrationality follows a unified logic: discredit one to discredit them all.

Atheist Alliance International also exhibits this strategy of criticizing specific religious ideas to invalidate religion. Muslim conceptions of iconoclasm and blasphemy are represented as obviously ludicrous but dangerous.

Ashraf Fayadh, poet and artist, was sentenced to death in 2015 by beheading by sword for “spreading atheism”, insulting “the divine self”, insulting the Prophet Muhammed, discrediting the Quran and objecting to the concepts of fate as an act of God. (AAI- Saudi Arabia)

Insulting the Prophet Muhammed is punishable by death, both in Saudi Arabia and Iran: “The Supreme Court of Iran upheld the death sentence of blogger Soheil Arabi for the charge of ‘insulting the Prophet Muhammad’ on Facebook” (AAI- Universal Declaration of Atheist
Rights). These passages are meant to illustrate how the extreme attachment to iconoclasm and anti-blasphemy in Islam are obviously wrong and dangerous to the point that no reasonable person should even consider taking Islam seriously. Discrediting specifics to invalidate entire religions and in some cases religion as a whole is an important strategy for atheist organizations, and each instance communicates the importance of critical thinking.

There is a common thread running through these examples of how atheist organizations communicate that critical thinking is an important value they hold: the binary opposition of rational critical thinking and irrational faith. When these organizations rhetorically reduce the range of stances relating to religion to just two positions, they make a clear statement about atheist values while simultaneously overlaying a moral dimension to styles of thinking. The representation of religious thinking found on their websites would likely offend the sensibilities of religious people.

For example, one account of the deficiency of theological reasoning contains obviously contentious assertions: “if I need to jump through massive logical, physical, biological, etc. hoops in order to make my worldview seem plausible, that worldview is deeply suspect and should be abandoned or reexamined” (AAI- Christian Time Travel). The idea that non-atheistic worldviews necessarily entail a “jump through massive…hoops” would certainly raise objections by non-atheists. When we consider the messages on American Atheists’ and Atheist Alliance International’s websites as a whole, we see that this quote is making a point that extends beyond epistemological reflection – the larger context allows such sentences to also function as moral statements. The stakes are not simply better or worse ways of thinking because the irrationality of faith leads to all sorts of bad outcomes. For atheist organizations, critical thinking and reason itself have moral significance.
The emphasis atheist organizations place on critical thought and skepticism operates alongside the previously discussed concern with human rights and secularism to depict religions as not only illogical and irrational, but also dangerous in its consequences. Atheist organizations condemn religion in both thought and action to not only legitimate but insist upon the superiority of atheist morality. We see that both organizations assert the superiority of atheist morality by claiming that reason is on their side and by highlighting the absurdities found in religion. This points to a two-prong approach for praising skepticism: first, illustrate the good critical thought can do for individuals and entire societies, and second, paint religion as obviously absurd and worthy of critical analysis. The emphasis on critical thinking and reason appears so often because no one disagrees that reason should be the basis for decision-making. The nature of “reason” will differ across individuals, making its definition and methods a vital battlefield in cultural struggles. Atheist organizations define reason in opposition to faith and claim that religions cannot engage in real critical thinking while holding onto supernatural belief. With this definition, religion will appear as entirely undesirable for anyone who wants to be seen as reasonable.

This section described how atheist organizations valorize critical thought and skepticism using several discursive strategies. The next section will discuss a closely related value promoted by atheist organizations: science and empiricism.

5.3.3. *Science & Empiricism*

Building on the emphasis on critical thought and skepticism, a more specific subset of texts reference science specifically. Holding “science” as a primary value may seem strange, since science itself is a method for the quality control of knowledge and not a positive or
substantive set of propositions to agree with. But “science” can also function as a placeholder for currently accepted concepts and beliefs within scientific fields. This often involves reifying or personifying science, like when a proposition begins with “Science says…” This “science” is not simply the method used to prevent avoidable errors in knowledge production, but a community of experts who make positive claims about the nature of reality. Atheist organizations claim that science, in both senses, is on their side.

It has become increasingly difficult to challenge the success of science while also seeming reasonable in most cultural contexts (Wuthnow 2012). Atheist organizations capitalize on this by pointing at religion’s uncomfortable position: in many cases opposed to science but also trying to make scientific discovery bolstering to faith. In a study of secular individuals, Langston et al. (2017) found that only 20.8% of respondents thought that science and religion are compatible, whereas 53.6% chose the option suggesting that “…endorsing the unity of science and religion only enables delusion” and 25.6% opted for a stance that “science and religion are not truly compatible but we should pretend that this is the case so as not to lose public support for science”.

Atheist organizations claim the successes of science as vindicating their position while universally depreciating religion. Here is a typical example:

“Here’s a test for those pastors who claim they can work miracles through God; take them to a hospital to pray for 30 patients. Ten patients have aortic valve failure and need replacement heart valves. Ten are almost blind, suffering from advanced cataracts—their eyes need replacement lenses. Ten have chronic osteoarthritis in their knees and need artificial knee joints. In a modern hospital, surgeons will achieve a 100%, or near 100%, success rate healing these 30 patients. God will be unable to heal ANY of them. Any pastor can feel free to prove me wrong but we have never seen God do ever, what surgeons do every day.” (AAI- Believers Make Extraordinary Claims)
Comparing the success rate of cutting-edge medicine to that of prayer and faith healing clearly situates science above religion. This quote should illustrate why “critical thinking” and “science” are treated as separate categories in my analysis. It is possible that in another context these categories would be best combined, but in a discussion of the values of atheist organizations, it is good to keep them distinct. We see a comparison of what faith and science can do, not faith and critical thinking.

Of course, there is not such a hard distinction between science and critical thinking as one might get the impression from my treatment of these categories, but the distinction highlights the fact that “science” is a contested concept which might be opposed by religious people at a higher rate than “reason” or “critical thinking”. If science were universally valued and defined the same way across contexts, then there would be no reason for organizations to spend time praising it in this way. It is only because it is a point of difference between the religious (who are seen as anti-science or at least in denial) and atheists (who embrace science precisely because it undermines religion).

Atheist Alliance International has an entire webpage devoted to this contrast, named “Comparison of the Value to Mankind of Theology and Science”. This post offers the clearest signal of how atheist organizations conceptualize the relative utility of religion and science, and is succinctly encapsulated by the last five sentences:

[I]n less than 500 years science has transformed our understanding of thousands of deep questions that held our ancestors in ignorance since the emergence of our species.

But theology has revealed nothing. Theology has allowed ignorance to masquerade as knowledge. Theology is worthless.

Science is the key that is unlocking the universe. (AAI- Comparison of the Value to Mankind of Theology and Science)
Theology appears to denote the epistemic operations of religions in this context, which makes it the more directly comparable equivalent to science over “religion”. It is unclear whether the author of this post pits science against theology specifically because common conceptualizations of theology include that it is the application of logic and reason to religious questions and, more simply, “faith seeking understanding”. If so, this post would be a pointed message resisting the ideas that religious thinking actually uses logic or reason and that the product of theological inquiry should be called “understanding”. Even if not, it still functions to compare the knowledge production of religion and of secular inquiry.

In other cases, we see descriptions of or references to scientific explanations for phenomena frequently connected to religious ideas. Atheist organizations communicate that science is an important value by (1) directly saying “science is valuable”, as with the above example, and (2) demonstrating its importance through narrative. In addition to appreciating the advantages the scientific method confers on the quality of human knowledge generally, these organizations often emphasize the idea that *science is valuable because it allows us to move past religious explanations*. This can be seen in what seem to be simple asides, as in a biographical description of one of the members of the Board of Directors at American Atheists, which suggests that they “ultimately escaped the bonds of superstitious thinking to embrace the more satisfying explanations that science provides” (AA- Board of Directors).

There are also more extended treatments of this idea, where *science superseding religion* is the sole point of entire webpages and blog posts. In a post titled “Can You Feel God in Your Heart?”, Atheist Alliance International provides naturalistic explanations for the supposed supernatural proofs of God’s presence. One passage relies on a relatively recent understanding of
the human brain (achievable only through science) to problematize the validity of “spiritual” experiences as a common misattribution our brains are known to make:

A person might say something like, “I know God exists, I feel him in my heart.”

I have no reason to doubt that this person really does experience feelings, but what are feelings, and what conclusions can you draw from them? There is quite an extensive scientific literature on the subject…

The release of chemicals is triggered by the brain, specifically by what the brain believes is happening. But there is a problem—the brain is rather easily mistaken. For example, the brain might believe you are about to have sex and trigger all the right hormones but actually you are only dreaming or watching pixels change color on a PC monitor!

…There are two points here: feelings are triggered by beliefs and the brain is easily fooled into believing things that are not true… We must conclude that feelings are not evidence for the existence of God—they are only evidence of your belief in the existence of God. (AAI–Can You Feel God in Your Heart)

The fact that there are simple scientific explanations for the feelings which are associated with “spiritual experiences” completely invalidates this interpretation of those feelings, at least for materialists. For those who believe in the supernatural, all these explanations might have some relevance in other contexts, but do not invalidate their experience in the way that atheist organizations might think it does. That atheists think that these arguments land a death blow to the idea of spiritual experiences illustrates just how important science is for them. This line of thinking does not seem to invalidate the sense of spirituality discussed earlier that focuses on wonder and awe, since such transcendent experiences would seem an appropriate response to the power of art, literature, poetry, nature, and scientific discovery.

In the previous section, I described how epistemic values are transformed into moral values when atheist organizations discuss the importance of critical thinking. The same can be said for science – to say that science might improve the quality of our knowledge does not go far enough for atheist organizations in terms of its importance. Science and critical thinking are
transformative, bringing humanity from ignorance and irrationality to knowledge, rationality, and goodness. In the next few sections, we move away from these epistemic-moral values to discuss the more human-centered (and potentially more traditionally-recognized as “moral”) values.

5.3.4. Cooperation

The rest of the core values I identified for Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists can be called “humanistic values”: cooperation, humanity, affirmation of the goodness of life, and diversity, equity, and inclusion. My analysis identified two major clusters of values, relating to (1) science and (2) humanism. As with other categories discussed so far, there is no way to separate these categories that could garner universal agreement. This is especially salient since for many definitions of humanism, a trust in science figures prominently. Although it would be possible to lump together all atheist values under the category of “humanism”, there are advantages to treating them separately. One reason for keeping them distinct is that there is a range of possibilities within this idea of “trust in science”, ranging from scientism (science = Truth) to critical skepticism (Truth is impossible epistemically, but science is useful in that it minimizes avoidable errors). Further, there are other researchers who have acknowledged the overlap of these categories but nonetheless opted to consider them independently.

Van Mulukom and colleagues (2022) found that in an international sample of secular people, Humanism is the second most frequently mentioned category identified as being “most important or meaningful worldviews, beliefs, or understandings of the world”, being surpassed only by Science. This mirrors the findings of my analysis. Since science and humanism are overarching descriptors for the values I encountered in my analysis, this suggests that the views of Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists are largely aligned with those of atheist
individuals across the world. There are also historical reasons to distinguish humanism from science in studies of atheism.

Stephen LeDrew suggests that contemporary atheism has been shaped primarily by two discourses, namely scientific atheism and secular humanism, which have been in “ideological tension” (LeDrew 2015:53). According to LeDrew, the New Atheism, which he identifies as a distinct phenomenon largely constituted by the writings of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, draws on “a Darwinian framework… grounded in the natural sciences” and sees religion as “a product of ignorance, a false ancient explanation of nature that is superseded by modern science” (LeDrew 2015:55). Victorian Darwinism opened the possibility for “a teleological view of social evolution that situated Europe at the summit of a universal process of civilization, a position it occupies by virtue of its defining characteristic—the triumph of reason” (LeDrew 2015:55). In contrast, humanistic atheism draws from the social sciences and humanities, and follow Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in suggesting that

religion is not a rational pursuit of knowledge that can be eradicated by science, but a fundamentally irrational response to social conditions and existential anxiety…

Humanistic atheism focuses attention on social justice for people, while scientific atheism is more interested in the freedom and authority of science and reason, from which social progress is expected to flow. (LeDrew 2015:56)

Like Atheism+, as LeDrew describes, both American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International seem to draw upon both scientific and humanistic values (as a group advancing social justice).

Although one gets the impression that LeDrew considers scientific and humanistic atheism to have irreconcilably conflicting goals which complicates unity across the atheist movement generally, I see Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists as providing a relatively coherent set of values and goals which could likely have resonance with most self-labeling atheists. Although the stridency of some of their messages might alienate people who
more closely align with secular humanism, there are certainly narratives which mirror humanistic approaches. If a potential member feels they need to agree with every part of an organization’s website, this would represent an obstacle to growth; if instead we assume that atheists will find messages that resonate with them regardless of what type of atheist they are and will more likely consider membership on the basis of stated goals (an empirical question yet to be explored), the range of both scientific and humanistic values provides a large tent for growth in the atheist movement.

Cooperation, whether due to individual goodness (especially without threat of damnation) or as a result of human evolution, is a core value for these atheist organizations. As mentioned in the previous chapter, their websites have passages which try to destigmatize atheism by insisting that “atheists are humans too” usually meaning “we are just like you in the ways that matter”. Drawing on the universal agreement that things are better when people work together, atheist organizations valorize prosocial behavior. There are two basic types of prosociality described in their websites: what I call “individual merit prosociality” and “evolutionary prosociality”. Individual merit prosociality focuses on the importance of choosing to be a good person, which is exemplified in this example:

I believe in treating my fellow humans with respect and preserving their dignity. I like to help people where I reasonably can, and I dislike harming people. I even try hard to avoid inconveniencing people—so you won’t find me playing loud music that disturbs my neighbours, pushing to the front of queues, or parking in a disabled spot without entitlement. But you will see me stopping in my car to let other cars pass when traffic is heavy. (AAI- Do You Think Atheists Believe in Nothing?)

This framing suggests that cooperation is good at the individual level because it promotes harmony and respects the dignity of everyone involved. This is a good example of individual merit prosociality since its emphasis is on cooperative choices by each person being important for positive social relations.
Evolutionary prosociality suggests that cooperation and good behavior is a natural part of what it means to be human by virtue of our evolutionary history. This involves directly connecting the ways that evolved traits of other animals explain their behavior to a parallel process in human development:

Wolves, like humans, have evolved into pack, or group-oriented, social societies. Unlike some sharks or snakes, they depend on a social structure for their very lives. They hunt together allowing them to take on larger and more capable prey (as did early humans). They, to some degree, share child-rearing duties within the pack (like humans). They’ve evolved to bond with loved ones and neighbors (just as humans have). Within these social groups, order exists—evolution passed rules of social conduct, if you will. (AAI-Moving On)

Suggesting that prosocial behavior is genetically encoded into our species serves to naturalize “cooperative” atheists and remove any need for religious referent for cooperation. Again, naturalization is a rhetorical move which makes it difficult to disagree with the contention, making evolutionary prosociality not simply a description of humans as animals, but also a powerful challenge to the cultural logic that suggests religion is necessary for goodness.

When atheist organizations invoke this concept of evolutionary prosociality, cooperation is framed as a universal human value that is subverted by religion. By this I mean that atheist organizations insist that the mechanisms of evolution and the traits of “successful” societies, specifically prosocial behavior, aided in survival and are to be seen as genetically encoded. In this view, cooperation and solidarity are part of human nature (although there are social scientists who contend that religion was a primary driver of human cooperation, such as Ara Norenzayan). In some instances, it is suggested that religion and cooperation are binary opposites, as in this example:

Instead of a peaceful world that seeks to optimize human cooperation, we are left with one driven and molded by a mythology of fear; a mythology propagated by mortal men out to gain fame, money, and power. Cooperation seeks to unite and grow; religion seeks to divide and conquer. (AAI-Moving On)
Atheists’ insistence that a moral code is natural and evolutionarily encoded relies on arguments of the similarities of all people. “Evolutionarily learned cooperation is as central to humanity as is walking upright and having complex language” (AAI- Moving On). Religion is then painted as a pernicious virus of human minds and cultures which disrupts the natural moral order.

This is an example of symbolically maximizing distance from religion, but in this case the specifics of the strategy involves highlighting a significant point of similarity (humanity and our evolutionary morality) and then using this line of thinking to make visible as moral boundaries what might before have been seen as simply differences of belief – “agree to disagree”. These organizations seem to be aware of the lack of trust the public holds in atheists and understand that this is due demonizing depictions which do not leave room for similarity, making it important for them to both decenter religion’s claim to goodness and illustrate how much in common atheists have with everyone else.

5.3.5. Life-Affirming

Atheist organizations frequently affirm the importance of living life to experience all the good it has to offer. The reason this message shows up so often is likely to counter the view held by many people that sees atheists as not only lacking a moral compass, but also uncaring nihilists (Gervais et al. 2017; Simpson and Rios 2017). Lacking a belief in deities does not necessitate a life-affirming stance, but atheist organizations emphasize it because of cultural connotations. Like other values and moral contrasts already discussed, the prominence of life-affirming messages serves to counter the dominant religious discourses which deny atheism the possibility of having relatable and positive values.

If this assumption, that atheist organizations emphasize a life-affirming stance on their websites to counter negative stereotypes, is true, then this strategy should extend beyond self-
labeled atheists. There is evidence that secular groups employ similar strategies; the Sunday Assembly, for example, is described by Jesse Smith as having “congregational activities effectively cultivat[ing] a setting in which a this-worldly, temporal-focused life is celebrated in communal, secular terms” (Smith 2017b). Further, at one gathering of Sunday Assembly in the UK, one of its founders began the service by saying: “In case you’re new here...it’s pretty simple, we are a secular congregation devoted to celebrating life!” (Smith 2017a:85). Communal secularity, as Smith describes, offers the social and emotional benefits of religious congregational activity while maintaining strictly nontheist language and symbols, thereby challenging the assumption that religion has a monopoly on these experiences and expressions of belonging and transcendence. Atheist organizations also seek to decenter religion as the primary, if not sole, path to these positive experiences and, more importantly, to having meaning in one’s life.

One important message for these organizations is that you can find purpose for your life outside of religion. Atheist Alliance International states this in a bulleted list of values found in their “About Us” page. “Purpose: This life is the only life we know we will have and it is up to each of us to utilize it meaningfully” (AAI- About Us). Similarly, American Atheists suggest in their “Our Vision” page that “humankind, finding the resources within themselves, can and must create their own destiny. It teaches that we must prize our life on earth and strive always to improve it” (AA- Our Vision). Atheist organizations need to change the discourse about atheists lacking a source of meaning or morality to become respected and equal participants in society, and emphasizing a life-affirming stance appears to be a significant part of their efforts to do so.

This category (life-affirming values) also encompasses moving aesthetic experiences and a sense of awe. The sense of our connection to the universe or of our insignificant smallness
brings our attention to the preciousness of life. Feelings of awe are sometimes communicated by imbuing specialness to otherwise mundane objects, like the night sky:

When I look at the night sky, and I think about the fact that the light I see has been traveling for millions and millions of years, and finally ends its achingly long journey on my retinas when so many other things could have come in the way first, it amazes me. (AA- A Conversation with a Christian)

In many cases, people treat the sky as unremarkable and do not give it much attention, but this description invites the reader to experience the wonder of (scientifically verifiable and understood) extraordinary phenomena.

This category most closely aligns with Lois Lee’s concept of “existential cultures” (Lee 2015b). Lee suggests that,

Existential cultures incarnate ideas about the origins of life and human consciousness and about how both are transformed or expire after death - what have been called ‘ultimate questions’ in the literature before now. These existential beliefs are bound up with distinctive notions of meaning and purpose in life, as we as with epistemological theories about how it is that humans are able to take a stance on existential matters. (Lee 2015b:159–60)

The ways that secular individuals construct meaning without reference to religious concepts are diverse (see, for example, Smith and Halligan 2021), but one common thread across the variety of non-religious worldviews is the importance of imbuing life with purpose and meaningfulness.

It is possible to conceptualize secular notions of the grandeur of existence and the importance of filling our lives with purpose in terms of a nonreligious “sacred”. Jay Demerath, following Durkheim, draws a distinction between the sacred and “religion” proper, and suggests that there has been a move toward “secularizing the sacred and sacralizing the secular” (Demerath 2009:259). To the extent that it is appropriate to identify experiences of “transcendence” as sacred phenomena, we see the religious and the nonreligious alike expressing the importance of these moments of sacredness. I am not convinced that using terms so loaded
with religious connotations as “sacred” is the best route forward in the social sciences, but
Demerath’s point finds evidence even in the messages of atheist organizations, where we might least expect this sort of thing. Consider the tone of American Atheists’ description of materialism:

Materialism declares that the cosmos is devoid of immanent conscious purpose; that it is governed by its own inherent, immutable, and impersonal laws; that there is no supernatural interference in human life; that humankind, finding the resources within themselves, can and must create their own destiny. It teaches that we must prize our life on earth and strive always to improve it. It holds that human beings are capable of creating a social system based on reason and justice. Materialism’s ‘faith’ is in humankind and their ability to transform the world culture by their own efforts. This is a commitment that is, in its very essence, life-asserting. It considers the struggle for progress as a moral obligation that is impossible without noble ideas that inspire us to bold, creative works. Materialism holds that our potential for good and more fulfilling cultural development is, for all practical purposes, unlimited. (AA- Our Vision)

The aura of sacredness this type of language invokes elevates these ideas to a special status which situates them above everything else. Materialism in this sense appears to be a significant source of meaning that organizes the ontological, axiological, epistemological, and praxeological views of atheists, covering the major categories of worldviews as outlined by Ann Taves (2018).

5.3.6. Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

The final major value communicated on atheist organizations’ websites revolves around the related concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Concerns with inclusiveness, tolerance of diverse identities/beliefs, and fair treatment are usually more pronounced in marginalized groups, since their access to resources and opportunities cannot be taken for granted. Since atheists perceive high levels of discrimination (Cragun et al. 2012; Doane and Elliott 2015; Quinn and Earnshaw 2011; Weiller-Harwell 2011), it should be unsurprising that recognition and inclusion are a priority.
The substantial concern with diversity, equity, and inclusion is interesting, given these organizations’ hostility towards religions and the religious. Tolerating differences of opinion/beliefs seems to be a central aspect of this value, but as we have seen in the analysis thus far, ridicule and sharp moral contrast does not indicate respect and tolerance for religious thinking. It could be argued that this follows the form of the paradox of tolerance as described by Karl Popper (1945/2013), where maximizing tolerance usually requires intolerance of the intolerant: religion breeds intolerance and must therefore not be tolerated. This defense relies on a reduction of the range of religious beliefs to simply intolerance of others, which is certainly not how religions would understand their principles. The fact remains that most humans are in some ways religious, so the acceptance of difference involved in valuing diversity, equity, and inclusion does not extend too far if religion is outside the boundaries of acceptable differences. If most people are excluded, how can it be honestly claimed that inclusion is an important value?

Another reason this value appears to be simultaneously both completely unsurprising and puzzling is the gap between words and outcomes. Specifically, the fact that atheists in the West have tended to be well-educated, middle class, white men (Zuckerman et al. 2016), although this is changing. This fact in itself does not indicate that atheists are intolerant of differences, since one’s social position and interests/tastes are interconnected, it would be reasonable to assume that a maximally tolerant group could nevertheless be comprised of similar individuals. However, the evidence suggests that the stances and behaviors of atheist groups make women and nonwhite individuals less willing to join and even to self-identify as atheist (Guenther 2019). For example, women are less likely to join secular groups “because of how focused such groups were on attacking or criticizing religion” (Langston et al. 2017:215), and because they feel like unseen outsiders, since
the culture of the New Atheist Movement operates as if sexism does not exist in the absence of a religious basis for it, thereby minimizing the problems of sexism and misogyny that secular women experience and contributing to a culture in which sexism is assumed away, even in the presence of glaring evidence of its presence. (Guenther 2019:52)

In an analysis of how gender inequality is reproduced in the New Atheist Movement, Katja M. Guenther found that atheist women feel estranged and excluded:

Among respondents and women I met at local and national events, the gender gap in participation in the New Atheist Movement was less about women's biographical availability or commitment to atheism or the goals of the New Atheist Movement than about their feeling un-welcome, silenced, or even pushed out of movement, in spite of the claims by movement leaders to be casting a wide net and even actively seeking out more women participants. (Guenther 2019:54)

Although atheist organizations emphasize the importance of equal access and participation in society, this appears to be motivated more by a desire to improve their own social position (e.g., reduce discrimination and exclusion) than a commitment to challenging systemic and historical structures which disadvantage other marginalized groups.

Does this insistence on diversity and inclusion owe only to the fact that atheists are a minority currently? If they were in a position of relative power, would they deny religious voices access to public spaces? It seems that promoting the inclusion of diverse voices – in some cases siding with theistic groups which suffer similar discriminations and exclusions – could be a result of their dominated position rather than a core value that would hold true in different power relations. Do they advocate inclusiveness in public discourse precisely because they need to be given access to public spaces/audiences? My data does not provide answers, but perhaps future research can investigate the relationship between what atheist groups intend, say, and do. We will put these questions aside for now to describe the ways atheist organizations communicate their values relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
Both Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists make claims about the importance of promoting equality and accepting diverse voices. In some cases, this means communicating in a tone that marks the issue of diversity a no-brainer, like this passage from Atheist Alliance International: “I believe it is important to be tolerant of differences in lifestyles, dress codes and so on, so long as no-one is being harmed” (AAI- Do You Think Atheists Believe Nothing?). Other times, diversity and inclusion are framed as dire issues that require steadfast advocacy, even being identified as the “core” of American Atheists’ activism and goals:

“At its core, our fight is about equality… we must be thoughtful and purposeful about building the sort of community that not only meets the needs of those who are already members of American Atheists, but also the needs of those who have yet to become members. That means being inclusive and accessible with our programming and building community groups that are safe and supportive for all.” (AA- A New Chapter)

Atheist advocacy is conceptualized as creating a better future for marginalized people, especially atheists and others whose beliefs are at odds with dominant discourses:

We aim to make the road to authenticity, openness, and honesty about the things we believe and don’t believe easier for the next person who travels it by being outspoken about our atheism and by ensuring that the voices of atheists are always heard in communities throughout the nation, in politics, and in the media. (AA- Our Vision)

In this case, being open and honest about beliefs is about being included in the wider community. For a demographic which feels excluded, it is unsurprising that the values of diversity and inclusion are important.

Another way atheist organizations communicate the value of diversity and inclusion is by emphasizing the importance of free speech and debate, even between religious people and atheists:

While people of faith might have strong—and at times even heated—disagreements with those of no faith, both sides can agree that we do need to work together for a better civil society. (AA- Atheists, Pastor, and Imam Go Head-to-Head in Public Panel)
Of course, if such disagreements between people of faith and atheists were not publicly aired and debated, then atheists would lose out on opportunities to reach otherwise impossible to access audiences (e.g., religious individuals might view a debate with an atheist in a way they would not seek out atheist-produced media). To what extent atheists value lively public debate about religion may be unclear since these debates are an important platform for promoting atheism; their interest in that platform by itself necessitates their positive appraisal of such events.

Another way atheist organizations communicate the importance of equity and inclusion is through statements which instruct the reader how they should feel about current events because of their implications for equality, like in this quote issued by American Atheists after the Supreme Court nomination of Brett Kavanaugh:

“[Kavanaugh’s] confirmation to the Supreme Court is a sad day for all Americans who value equality, justice, and fairness.” (AA- American Atheists Statement on Confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh)

In the context of the whole statement made by American Atheists, this quote implies that most Americans, and certainly atheists, value equality, justice, and fairness, and that the religious ideology of Kavanaugh represents a real and direct threat to those values. By pointing to Kavanaugh’s past actions and statements as they relate to his skewed interpretation of religious freedom in the Constitution, American Atheists situate his confirmation to the Supreme Court as a step backward. In doing so, they align themselves with those threatened values relating to equality.

Atheist organizations express that they value diversity and inclusion by highlighting the diversity of people involved in their events, like in this passage from American Atheists:

Presenting one of the most diverse collections of atheist speakers for any national event, you’ll hear from activists, community leaders, academics, and some of your favorite people from the atheist community. (AA- American Atheists – 2018 National Convention)
Conversely, on Atheist Alliance International’s website we find that they communicate the importance of diversity by pointing to the marked gender gap in atheist involvement and self-identification:

Atheist Alliance International has been running an Atheist Census project for the past several years. One of the striking results of this project has been the gross gender imbalance in participation (and, presumably, self-identification) that the project has consistently shown. AAI believes that this gender imbalance is a problem within the atheist movement and community that needs to be rectified. (AAI- Position Statement – Gender Balance)

These nearly opposite framings of the diversity of the actively engaged atheist community both send essentially the same message about the importance of diversity and inclusion.

Recent studies of atheists and other non-believers have identified equality and left-wing political causes as important for secular individuals (Blankholm 2022; van Mulukom et al. 2022). As mentioned in the beginning of this section, stating a value and making choices that are consistent with that value are distinct – it is possible to act consistently with a value without verbally expressing it or to identify one’s values without following them. The extent to which intention and action are aligned across the atheist community generally, and for atheist organizations specifically, has not yet been systematically studied to my knowledge. However, if we assess my findings in light of Joseph Blankholm’s (2022) or Katja M. Guenther’s (2019) ethnographic studies of secular people, especially findings about the experiences of minorities, we see an obvious gap between values and actions relating to diversity and inclusion. Atheist organizations are not unaffected by the assumptions and prejudices of our cultural history that reproduce gender and racial inequality. As Blankholm puts it,

Women, people of color, and people converting to secularism from religions outside mainstream Christianity have to find ways of being secular that feel right for them while working from within a cultural inheritance that often marks them as more or inherently religious. (Blankholm 2022:60)
Minorities face obstacles to inclusion even within a secular community which professes a progressive, tolerant worldview which celebrates diversity. For as long as the secular community uncritically blames religion for all obstacles to diversity, equity, and inclusion, (and therefore view themselves as blameless) they will continue to unreflectively engage in actions that perpetuate racial and gender inequalities. Processes of secularization have not universally improved the lives of women and racial minorities. Katya M. Guenther concludes her report on secular sexism with this point:

Much like women in religious communities who atheists view as oppressed by religion, women in the New Atheist Movement navigate constraints and opportunities to carve out identities for themselves that enable them to be part of the atheist community. As we know from the broader society, secularization is not a straight-line path to women's emancipation; this analysis contributes to understanding the complexity of secularism and gender. (Guenther 2019:54)

Secularism’s relationship to gender and race is neither simple nor obvious. The modernist discourses which insist that growth in scientific knowledge and increasing challenges to religion will inevitably lead to increases in freedom, equality, and human flourishing blindly ignore the complexity of social stratification.

5.4. A Sense of Shared Fate

By demonstrating concern with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, atheist organizations align themselves with all marginalized groups. It appears that atheist organizations see their position as analogous to that of racial and sex/gender minorities and frequently employ the strategies and discourses that have successfully increased recognition and acceptance for those groups. From claims that their “fight is about equality” for more than just atheists to using the “coming out” concept, atheist organizations seek to leverage other forms of social inequality to increase trust in and tolerance of atheists.
The atheist value of inclusion may receive the emphasis it does because atheists often feel excluded and discriminated against. Even in social contexts where such feelings of exclusion are likely overstated, atheists are keen to suggest similarity with marginalized people, invoking a “shared fate” of being excluded. This idea of a shared fate figures prominently in atheist discourses, particularly in analogies between overt religious persecution in non-western contexts and the mild inconveniences and subtle exclusions of first-world atheists. Lumping together all atheists across the world, the discourses of atheist organizations overstate the unity and similarity of members of an imagined atheist community. This fact is related to a key insight about collective identities in the social movements literature, which conceptualizes the basis of an individual’s identification with a group as

the extent to which identity is based on perceived similarities in the personal characteristics of members, and on awareness of common fate, defined as perception of commonalities in the way group members are treated in society. (Gurin and Townsend 1986:140)

If we conceptualize identity as a political resource for social movements, we can see why it is important for atheist organizations to construct an imagined community of all atheists, everywhere. Further, if that imagined community sees itself as sharing a common fate – the idea that “all atheists are in the same boat” – obscuring the significant differences in how atheists are treated in different places becomes a necessary process for the continuance of that imagined community. Atheist organizations play an important role in fostering a sense of interdependence of all atheists, more so for Atheist Alliance International than for American Atheists (for obvious reasons).

Beyond an imagined community of all atheists, there appears also a sense of interdependence for all oppressed and excluded people on the studied websites, perhaps creating a collective identity category (or subject position) of “the marginalized”. This new category is
never named explicitly but is operating subtextually. One example of this can be found in American Atheists’ “Statement About Proposed Anti-Transgender Policies”, which was made in response to Trump administration policy changes concerning discrimination on the basis of gender:

No one should have to worry about losing their job, losing their home, being denied service in a public place, or being harassed because of who they are. The trans community has fought too hard to achieve those basic protections and to advance the cause of inclusive civil rights laws to turn back now… Science, medicine, morality, common decency, and the law are on all our side. We will do everything in our power to elevate the voices and experiences of all trans atheists, and indeed all trans people, in public discourse to ensure that this administration’s galling attempts to define millions of Americans out of existence will not succeed. (AA - AA Statement About Proposed Anti-Transgender Policies)

American Atheists is aligning itself with the trans community, fostering a sense of shared fate which is based in religious intolerance.

As I was analyzing the explicit and implicit imagined communities found in atheist discourses distributed by the studied organizations, it became increasingly clear that the relationships between social categories, self-identification, and interdependence were essential for understanding why significant social differences between groups were being swept aside in favor of a monolithic construction of “the marginalized”. Guided in part by Ashmore, Deaux, and McLaughlin-Volpe’s (2004) framework for conceptualizing collective identity, I recognized how atheist discourses activate a sense of interdependence beyond those who self-identify as atheist:

[The] connection between group and self is much more than simple self-categorization or the perception of self as similar to other members of the group. It contains more elaborated cognitive elements, such as the perception of interdependence or a shared fate with other group members, as well as affective elements, such as felt closeness to and concern about other group members… The development of a sense of interdependence requires more than the perception of others as belonging to the same social category… Interdependence is fostered by an awareness of a common or shared fate… People develop a sense of mutual fate when they become aware that they are treated as a group
member rather than as an individual, that their fates and outcomes are similar despite individual differences, and that individual mobility depends, at least in part, on group membership. (Ashmore et al. 2004:90)

So although both organizations urged readers to adopt “atheist” as their identity label, their overall message and agenda does not seem to hinge upon self-identification. Encouraging people to blame religion for the problems of basically all marginalized people creates the largest possible coalition with which atheists would happily work. When we account for the twin dynamic of the perceived interdependence of atheists and the perceived interdependence of all marginalized groups, we can better understand how atheist organizations construct collective identities and communicate values.

This chapter described the foundations of atheist constructions of morality and the values atheist organizations identify on their websites. The descriptions provided here can serve as the basis for comparative work, whether across organizations and individuals or across distinct nonreligious communities. It is likely, however, that the ways atheist organizations elaborate on morality and values will shift in response to changing attitudes, both of members and of the general population. As David Snow aptly notes,

> framing is an ongoing process in that frames are continuously articulated and elaborated during the course of conversation and debate among the interactants within a discursive field as they go about the business of making sense of the events and issues with which they are confronted. Thus, rather than being static, reified entities, collective action frames are the product of ongoing interaction that involves both frame articulation and frame elaboration within discursive field. (Snow 2008:403)

It seems likely that the ways that atheist organizations frame issues of diversity, for example, have been shaped by a growing awareness of the gender gap in participation at atheist events and that the culture of atheist groups has made many women feel “unwelcome, silenced, or even pushed out of the movement” (Guenther 2019:54). The emphasis atheist organizations put on the importance of gender in the various discussions of rights and participation is likely to be in some
ways a reaction to this phenomenon. The dynamic and emergent nature of how organizations adjust frames also makes accounts of changes within a single organization over time a worthwhile research activity.
6. RELIGIOUS THREAT, ATHEIST SALVATION

This final analysis chapter explores how atheist organizations depict evil. In religious traditions, the field of theology which grapples with “the problem of evil” – how can good and loving deities create and allow so much evil in the world? – is called theodicy. To mirror this concept, I will be labeling the ways that atheists discuss evil as “atheodicy”. The goal of this chapter is to point out aspects of moral selves and of morality in general which were not captured by my initial research questions and were therefore absent in the preceding analysis chapters.

So far, I have laid out my findings concerning (1) strategies of moral contrast which legitimate atheist identities and (2) atheist moral foundations and values. These chapters answer my initial research questions concerning whether morality is an important concept in atheist discourse, which criteria represent “good” atheists and “good” people, and what strategies legitimate atheist identities. These questions focus on how atheists construct a positive self-image and positive values, or what constitutes “good”. It is important for social scientists to also consider how a social group conceptualizes and communicates about negative values as well. Although we have seen how interconnected positive and negative values are in the preceding discussion of moral contrasts, it is still worthwhile to distinguish and identify the content of both “good” and “bad”.

The social movements literature identifies two concepts, diagnostic framing and prognostic framing, as significant for understanding the problem orientation and the corresponding sets of goals for social movements. These concepts can be useful for analyzing the moral contrasts involved in the construction of symbolic boundaries. Diagnostic framing identifies the primary problem that a movement opposes. Prognostic framing proposes a solution.
to ameliorating that problem. The ways sociologists have used these concepts are compatible with approaches centered on the discursive construction of morality.

A major theme of many of the webpages was that religion and its adherents cause suffering, often pairing this with an implication that atheist values would solve all these problems. This flips the script of the idea that religions provide the only path to salvation – here we see that religion is the source of suffering and that secular and particularly atheistic values are the only path to progress.

It is unclear to what extent individual atheists blame religion for essentially all evil. As stated before, the extreme position taken by atheist organizations might reflect the constraints of social movements, namely the identification and elaboration of a problem and the strategies and tactics appropriate for its solution. This means that organizations may feel pressured to offer a coherent, which in many cases means oversimplified, vision of evil and its remedies. If this is the case, we cannot infer from organizational discourses anything about the atheodicies of individual atheists.

Christians have at different points attempted to attribute all evil to the activities of the Devil – sometimes taking logical leaps to this worldview work. Blaming all human shortcomings on the Devil seems like a stretch for anyone not entirely committed to that worldview. To what extent is something similar operating for atheist organizations? Both Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists insist that religion has its hand in all the dysfunctional elements of society, though they never come out and say it that simply.

The conception of what it means to be human found in atheist discourses appears to be definitionally opposed to religion. Evolutionarily advantageous prosociality is subverted by religious concepts to divide and conquer:
Our human system of cooperation has itself evolved to accommodate for other changes that affect the species, and how that cooperation is applied varies regionally and historically. One thing that has in many ways regressed the positive evolution of cooperation is religion and mysticism. Instead of a peaceful world that seeks to optimize human cooperation, we are left with one driven and molded by a mythology of fear; a mythology propagated by mortal men out to gain fame, money, and power. Cooperation seeks to unite and grow; religion seeks to divide and conquer. (AAI – Moving On)

In this view, humans would be essentially cooperative and peaceful if it were not for religion.

6.1. Epistemological Justification

How can we know what is evil? This is the question for any epistemological justification for a worldview. Although this question does not need to have coherent and defensible answers (i.e., “evil is self-evident”) in all cases, it can be useful for social scientists to explore how moral communities approach such questions. So how do atheist organizations say that we can know what is evil?

Firstly, as mentioned before, these organizations insist that the content of morality is given to us by nature itself. This includes both human nature specifically and an appeal to a natural order which attaches rewards and consequences to different actions, thereby increasing human suffering or decreasing it.

Thus it happens, when the Atheist approaches the problem of finding natural grounds for human morals and establishing a nonsuperstitious basis for behavior, that it appears as though nature has already solved the problem to a great extent. Indeed, it appears as though the problem of establishing a natural, humanistic basis for ethical behavior is not much of a problem at all. It is in our natures to desire love, to seek beauty, and to thrill at the act of creation. The labyrinthine complexity we see when we examine traditional moral codes does not arise of necessity: it is largely the result of vain attempts to accommodate human needs and nature to the whimsical totems and taboos of the demons and deities who emerged with us from our cave-dwellings at the end of the Paleolithic Era – and have haunted our houses ever since. (AA – Ethics Without Gods)

“Evil” is that which generates suffering and goes against evolutionarily developed prosocial traits. This answer does not consider that evolutionary changes might lead to outcomes that are
less moral. It would seem that, at least in some cases, the evolved traits of humans equals the moral in atheist discourse.

The second way atheist organizations suggest we can know what is evil is using reason and science. The best example of this way of thinking is found on Atheist Alliance International’s “Can Atheists Be Moral?” page:

[B]ehavior can only be moral or immoral if it affects other humans. No matter how you treat a rock, your actions are neither morally right or wrong. Actions have a moral dimension only when they affect other humans (or other sentient beings). Nor is a moral dimension attached to actions that are the result of chance or the natural world. For example, if lightning or a tsunami kills people, we do not say these events are morally wrong…

But what is right and what is wrong? Some actions seem to be clear-cut. It would be perverse to argue that bathing your baby daughter in battery acid is morally right. No doubt, we could think of a long list of actions that are equally wrong. It would also be easy to make a list of actions that are unequivocally good…

Atheists, far from having no basis for moral values, can base their values soundly on reason and science. These same tools that have been used with spectacular success to discover the physical world can be used to understand the moral realm. We can be moral without gods.

It’s time for atheists to change the narrative and demand that theists explain how they can be moral when they deny a role for reason, and rely instead on books written by Iron Age men whose morals have long since been superseded. (AAI - Can Atheists Be Moral?)

This passage defines immorality, which here is a placeholder for evil, then provides a summary of how humans can know right and wrong. It is interesting that the author of this text sees no potential problem in assuming that science will be equally suited to understanding the “moral realm” as the physical world. This enthusiasm about the vast potential science holds will be discussed later. For now, it will suffice to point out that there appears no hedging nor hesitation about the suggestion that science and reason are adequate to identify and explain good and evil.

Having described the way we can identify evil, we next need to outline the specific content that atheist discourse situates as instances of evil. Atheist organizations are motivated by
their own internal logic to depict religion as a primary cause of instances of evil in the world. Because “atheist” is the salient identity label which unifies such groups, the driving concerns they express will tend to be those most directly related to atheism. If atheism and religion are understood as inherently oppositional, it follows that opposing religion should be a primary driver of atheist activism.

Contrast this with organizations whose goal is poverty reduction and aid to the poor. Of course, their activities are oriented toward that goal, and when people act in that organization, they will be enabled and constrained to find ways to help the poor. Religion will not be considered the primary enemy for such groups in most cases. Even if many important players in such a group were self-identified atheists, organizational pressures might modify the way they communicate (even about religion) such that the relevant “enemy” should remain poverty. If those members were also in atheist activist groups, their driving concern (in terms of a problem orientation) would shift back and forth based on which organization they were acting through.

This does not mean that such a person (involved in poverty reduction and atheist organizations) simply vacillates between oversimple moral universes, in one case identifying religion and the other poverty as the most important thing to oppose. The moral universes of individuals can be much more complex than that of activist organizations. The most important idea here is that the internal logic of activist organizations creates simplified problem orientations and moral universes in order to be effective in coalition building and in tactics. This means that the atheodicy portrayed here should be understood as a description of how organizations conceptualize and communicate about evil and not how atheist individuals actually think.
There are two types of oversimplification occurring to make an unambiguous and coherent problem orientation and atheist moral universe. Firstly, as already discussed, is the tendency to assign blame to religion for all evil and non-naturally caused suffering. The second oversimplification of morality we find in atheist discourse is in reductionistic treatment of religious beliefs and values. More specifically, atheist organizations primarily attack strawmen and go after the low-hanging fruit of religious irrationality.

Atheist organizations describe religion in hostile and ridiculing fashion, attempting to discredit values, practices, and beliefs that would likely strike some believers as unfair caricatures of their faith traditions (or strawmen). Take, for example, this quote about the rate at which different religions’ prayers are answered: “Believers in fake gods would be constantly complaining their prayers are never answered whilst believers in a real god would be jubilant over their amazing success rate” (AAI – An Easy Way to Distinguish Real Gods from Fake Ones). The notion that prayer instrumentally causes the prayed-for effects or that deities should bend to the will of believers simply because they prayed is not a tenet of any religious tradition that I am aware of. One would be hard-pressed to find religious adherents of any sort who would suggest that this framing is an accurate depiction of prayer. In this way, atheists employ strawman arguments to oversimplify moral and epistemological issues. Unfortunately, it often proves effective to invent a ridiculous position and attributing it to one’s adversary to discredit outgroups, whether or not it is honest or logically sound to do so.

Besides attacking strawmen, the other oversimplifying strategy is focusing considerable attention on extreme examples of religious irrationality. I make the distinction between strawmen and this “low-hanging fruit” of extremism to highlight that some depictions of religious belief are merely absurdist reductions while others are perhaps accurate descriptions of beliefs that are
nonetheless only held by a few. When atheists denounce the excesses of religious extremism, they are in many cases aligned with many religious people – for example, religiously-motivated terrorism is condemned by the religious and the nonreligious alike.

Is it fair to discount an entire worldview system because of the conduct of some adherents? If some despicable individuals can render ways of thinking evil or unthinkable, what system shall be spared? The big questions of the existence and knowability of evil are not found in the writings of atheist organizations. In other words, the foundational work of epistemological justification about the nature and knowability of evil are absent. Without an explicit and coherent account of evil, it seems that atheist organizations rely on the “I know it when I see it” approach. To summarize the implicit argument of these organizations: religion can be shown to be evil simply by accounting for the atrocities and damages it has caused. There is no nuance to the depictions of religion as being the cause of suffering and being irredeemable and indefensible. This approach relies upon black and white thinking, which reduces the impact of the entire range of religious practices and beliefs to the most blameworthy cases.

Religion is said to create evil because of the atrocious behaviors it justifies for believers and for the irrational beliefs which alienate people from their nature. Of course, there is considerable disagreement about how irrational and indefensible theism is. In a study of how Americans see themselves as simultaneously religious and reasonable, Robert Wuthnow (2012) found that for most Americans, science and rationality do not rule out theism and religion in the way these atheist organizations proclaim. Wuthnow suggests that:

well-educated, thoughtful Americans have found a way of having their cake and eating it too: of affirming their faith while also maintaining their belief in reason. There is no other way to explain the fact that Americans can be as intelligent, thoughtful, and well-educated as they are and believe in God at the same time. (Wuthnow 2012)
The ways atheist organizations depict religion does not align with how the majority see it. The inadequacy of atheist descriptions of religion has been noted by other researchers as well. For example, Gregory R. Peterson (2010) suggests, in opposition to atheists, that modern rational and scientific thinking has not made religion obsolete. Instead, Peterson suggests that religion and science are not antagonistic, and atheists have a distorted view of religion:

[If the new atheists] were correct that religious commitment is unfounded and best replaced by a philosophical naturalism, then they might well expect that religion would indeed wither away in the face of reason. But they also might discover that religious commitment is different from the caricature they have drawn, and that rational reflection on those things which are ultimate, lead down different paths than the ones they have trod. (Peterson 2010:177)

This idea of the non-antagonism of science and religion seems to be a view held even by many scientists (Ecklund and Long 2011).

We cannot discern from an analysis of atheist texts whether the strawmen they discredit are intentionally poor representations or if these authors genuinely believe that their depictions are fair and accurate. Regardless of whether atheist authors believe that their treatment of religion is truthful, it seems that they are creating an imagined other to score points against a real other. To what extent are they intentionally and rhetorically reducing religious positions vs. they actually believe there is no defensible element of religion whatsoever?

The caricatures of religion we find on atheist organizations’ websites offer two reasons to avoid religion: (1) because religion is wrong, and (2) because religion causes harm. Atheists seamlessly move between these two modes and do not make any attempt to distinguish epistemic from the pragmatic/moral concerns. In an oversimplified moral universe, there is no need to arrange arguments and concerns logically. Joseph Blankholm (2022) makes a related point about nonreligious groups more generally:
Systematizing a worldview is difficult, probably impossible work, and leaders of nonbeliever groups often act as shepherds, helping people become more thorough in their secularism and letting them know when certain beliefs are unacceptable. (Blankholm 2022:31)

Worldviews, secular or otherwise, are not fully systematizable, but they offer guidance and a meaningful framework for a community to work out what is believable and what should be done.

Now that we have laid out the foundations of how atheist organizations conceptualize evil and its knowability, we can move to a discussion of the specific problem-solution pairs which are found in the diagnostic and prognostic framings offered on their websites.

6.2. Salvation as Rescue from Religious Harm

Atheist organizations identify religion as a primary enemy - most of the framings of what it means to be atheist is in specifying contrasts with religious folks and institutions. As the big “other”, religious harm appears as the most egregious or unforgivable. By labeling religion as irrational, it makes the evil it does completely unjustifiable and perpetrated by immoral ideologues.

One important theme here is that religion seems to make the individual morally inculpable for their actions done in the name of God - or that obviously horrible actions are willed by God. That one can perform atrocities without reservation because they believe it is God’s command to do so makes religion incomprehensible and reprehensible. The atheodicy offered by atheist organizations combines a naturalistic view of the cosmos, in which no agency is purported to the universe, and that non-natural causes of suffering can mostly be blamed on religion.

Given this atheodicy, it makes sense that atheists see their mission as combatting religion. Although it appears that recruiting members does not appear to be an important goal for many
participants of secular organizations (see Mastiaux 2017; Smith 2017b), helping religious people realize the errors and dangers of religion to deconvert them. Of course, getting someone to abandon their religious beliefs does not transform them into self-identified atheists who are willing to join an atheist organization. This suggests that even if increasing membership is important to atheist organizations, their goals can still be furthered by reducing the number of religious people and increasing the number of people critical of religion. Atheist Alliance International’s “Six Things Atheists Do Wrong” describes a strategy for convincing believers that their faith is misplaced which ultimately boils down to a description of the Socratic method with politeness mixed in. This is not a statement of values - like politeness - but describes a strategy for legitimating atheism to believers by undermining religion and is therefore important to my analysis in a way that sits outside the realm of “subject positions” and “morality” as such. “Be scrupulously polite no matter how infuriatingly irrational believers appear to be. Remember, you are talking to a victim of childhood indoctrination so you should be sympathetic” (AAI – Six Things Atheists Do Wrong).

Atheist organizations see themselves as rescuing people from the evil of religion through (1) setting them free of religious dogma and division, (2) reuniting people with their humanness, and (3) helping believers grow out of ancient belief systems that hold them back.

6.2.1. Being Free

One important assertion of atheist organizations is that atheism is freeing. Religion is conceptualized as holding people back, being like a “prison” for the mind, as in this quote from Atheist Alliance International:

"The true challenge of life is to figure out how to unshackle oneself from the prison of temporally created and divisive mythologies. Each day we must struggle to overcome our conditioned inner dialogue and rid ourselves of the corrupting voice of organized
religion. Seek deep inside your mind, the true self that is being hidden by the fear-built walls of dogma and mysticism. Only then will you truly be free.” (AAI – Moving On)

This passage identifies a fear-based system of conditioning which religion uses to keep people in check. The author here defines true freedom as transcending dogmatic and mystical thinking. This quote also serves as an example of the tendency of atheist organizations to align with human nature and suggest that religion alienates us from our true nature – the “true self” is hidden by the “corrupting voice” of religion. To paraphrase this idea, the author suggests that rejecting religion is the path to reconnect to your natural human state of freedom.

As discussed earlier, it is also important to help others to break free from religion. Part of this goal involves challenging dominant discourses which marginalize atheism. The then president of American Atheists is quoted as saying:

“It is important for people to know religion has nothing to do with being a good person, and that being open and honest about what you believe—and don’t believe—is the best gift you can give this holiday season,” said David Silverman, president of American Atheists. “More and more Americans are leaving religion, but we still have work to do when it comes to fighting the stigma many atheists face.” (AA – Atheist Billboards Say Skip Church for a Merrier Christmas)

There are several points to be made about this quote. First, atheist organizations see themselves as important cultural innovators who challenge common beliefs and offer a message of freedom. By suggesting that “we still have work to do when it comes to fighting the stigma many atheists face”, Silverman is inviting atheists to combat anti-atheist attitudes to improve the status of atheists. This would make it less risky to invite religious people to think critically about their beliefs as well as reducing the social costs of self-labeling as atheist. These impacts would diminish religion’s sway over the minds of believers and demonstrate what freedom of thought looks like. Atheist organizations should thus create new cultural resources which legitimate atheism and invite all people into the freedom of thought found outside of religion.
Secondly, Silverman’s quote invites readers to be “open and honest about what you believe”. Being able to express your thoughts without fear of stigmatization is a salient form of freedom for atheists. Creating more social spaces where free expression can safely happen is important for marginalized groups. In this view, being honest can be freeing. Although this specific quote focuses on the freedom to express one’s atheism, it makes sense that it is also implicitly advocating for greater tolerance more generally. Escaping the divisive dogmatism of religion would thus have wide-ranging impacts on freedom across society.

There is an interesting tension concerning the freedom found in atheism: Often atheism is framed as being freeing, but also often framed as being persecuted and restricted. This complicates the “become an atheist for freedom” argument, since in most places in the world your rights are restricted if you are an atheist. This illustrates the importance of situating messages within the overall problem orientation of a group. To become an atheist to experience greater freedom means to reject the dogmatic restrictions of religion. Religious thinking is the obstacle. So, atheism frees your mind from religious damage, but socially it will not advance your freedom because religion restricts you. Again, religion restricting freedoms, but this time it is social rather than psychological forces at play. Religion can thus be depicted as evil at both the individual and the societal levels by restricting freedoms, and atheists are the good guys who promote freedoms. The overall problem orientation, that religion is the primary source of evil and is to be opposed, keeps the question of whether atheism is freeing answerable in simple terms: *atheism frees you, and when religion is defeated, this will extend freedom to everyone.*

Atheist organizations may be indirectly creating “savior narratives” in which they rescue people, and eventually the world, from the evils of religion. At the very least, these organizations frequently highlight the work they do to fight for freedom by opposing the religious restrictions.
6.2.2. Being Fully Human

The beginning of this chapter already discussed how, for atheist organizations, human nature is equated with “the good” and that religion disconnects us from our basic natures. This means that opposing religion means reclaiming our true selves and living more in line with the evolutionary prosociality religion stole from us. In this view, atheist organizations can see themselves as the saviors of our species, saving us from the ultimate corruption of our essence. This set up can be seen in a quote, part of which we have already discussed, on American Atheists’ website, which valorizes evolutionary human nature and demonizes religion’s corruption thereof:

As human beings, we are social animals. Our sociality is the result of evolution, not choice. Natural selection has equipped us with nervous systems which are peculiarly sensitive to the emotional status of our fellows. Among our kind, emotions are contagious… The labyrinthine complexity we see when we examine traditional moral codes does not arise of necessity: it is largely the result of vain attempts to accommodate human needs and nature to the whimsical totems and taboos of the demons and deities who emerged with us from our cave-dwellings at the end of the Paleolithic Era – and have haunted our houses ever since. (AA – Ethics without Gods)

If this quote were a single isolated case of this line of thought, it might not be clear that atheist organizations see themselves as reuniting people with their humanity by rescuing people from religion. If we situate this text in relation to the preceding analysis, we find a clear throughline of implicit argumentation that religion corrupts and atheism returns us to being fully human.

Religion is begrudgingly ceded some ground for having good aspects, but only in those cases of them facilitating humans doing what humans do. If religion brings people together into communities and promotes prosocial behavior, it does so in spite of the flaws of religion – it appears that human tendencies push even the worst social forms to have some praiseworthy traits.
6.2.3. Outgrowing Superstitions of the Past

The third way atheist organizations see themselves as saving people from the evils of religion is by helping religious individuals get past the obsolete superstitions passed down through the centuries by religious traditions. This is where the strategy of using ridicule shows up in force. Atheist organizations appear to think that highlighting religion’s absurdities is an important part of their work to rescue society from religion. An example of this which most clearly illustrates this idea comes from Atheist Alliance International’s “Is the Moon Made of Cheese?”:

Faith has no mechanism for distinguishing true from false, worse it has no mechanism for distinguishing plausible from absurd. That is why faith is used to justify beliefs that cannot be justified in any rational way. That is why faith can be used by two people to believe contradictory things; that is why faith can be used to believe things that are robustly contradicted by masses of validated evidence. And that is why ANYTHING can be believed on faith… Nothing is too absurd for faith—faith imposes NO limits on what can be believed… So here is the real issue; not only can faith lead you to false beliefs and even absurd beliefs, but it can make you reject any evidence that falsifies your belief. Faith is like a virus that infects you and then makes you resistant to any attempt to dislodge it… If all you have is faith, you have nothing. If you expect things to be true because you believe them on faith, you are a fool. I’m sorry, but I can’t put it more simply, or more politely, than that. You are a fool. (AAI – Is the Moon Made of Cheese)

This attack on faith makes it clear that religious belief is indefensible if you consider the evidence. Suggesting faith is “like a virus” pathologizes religious thinking in unambiguous terms. The superstitious and magical thinking that characterizes religion has all been debunked by a systematic gathering of evidence, such that we should know better than to follow the words and ideas of previous eras.

A more direct reference to the absurdity of following ancient texts comes from Atheist Alliance International’s “Six Awkward Questions on Biblical Morality”:

I now understand I am free to own slaves. Naturally, I must abide by God’s perfect laws on how to beat them, how to sell them and how to pass them to my children when I die. The Bible says I can buy slaves from strangers but I live in a city where almost everyone...
is a stranger. Does this mean I can buy from anyone, or does it mean I can only buy from foreigners, like the French or Germans? (With the Euro where it is now, French slaves could be a bargain).

This question does not rely on the specificity of what is denoted by “strangers” to make its point – instead, highlighting the fact that the Bible condones and offers rules for systems of slavery is enough to suggest its obsolescence and absurdity. The post continues:

My neighbor is a hospital doctor. I often see him sneaking out of the house on the Sabbath to go to work. I know I should stone him to death for this evil but there are so few stones in my locality. Would it be acceptable to beat him to death with a baseball bat?

There are four other such questions which similarly illustrate the ridiculousness of some of the laws prescribed by the Bible and the strain this absurdity puts on attempts to interpret them for modern audiences. The post concludes with:

All these questions make me inclined to give up on Biblical morality. I think I’ll just go back to being honest and considerate, and helping others whenever I can. That works.

The author invites the reader to move beyond the ancient moral system of sacred texts to return to simple prosocial values.

It should be becoming increasingly clear how interconnected these various ways atheist organizations are working to save the world from evil (which is synonymous with religion) are.

Each example discussed so far in this chapter could be used in to illustrate most of the other concepts identified in my analysis. To demonstrate how this works, I have opted to analyze the next quote in terms of challenging magical and superstitious thinking and the implications for being free and being fully human as well.

The first quote concerns the impact of Narendra Nayak’s godmen debunking campaign (as described earlier) in replacing magical thinking with rational approaches:

The unison in which the kids repeated the slogan in their local dialect of Hindi, which roughly translated to “Before I believe in anything, it must be presented on the pedestal
of through questioning and investigation” and “great miracles require great replicable proofs”, provided me hope that we have inspired change in at least some of the attendees. (AAI – The Program)

The obvious meaning of this passage is that when people (even kids!) are taught rational explanations for seemingly miraculous events, they can abandon magical thinking; or more simply, education overcomes ignorant and irrational outlooks. The rest of the post describes how tricksters defraud the rural poor by demonstrating their “magical” powers, so educating that population frees them from the psychological chains of religion and the material burden of religious scams. Further, such tricksters are participating in the corruption of natural human prosociality – religion makes possible such predatory behavior. Eradicating superstitious and magical thinking, in this view, makes us more fully human and freer.

Another way atheist organizations attempt to combat traditional and outdated thinking is by pointing to the process of indoctrination. They draw a distinction between education and indoctrination which is probably not accepted by religious people: “how do atheists indoctrinate their children? They don’t. They don’t have to” (AAI – How Atheists Indoctrinate their Kids). However, some descriptions of indoctrination should give some people pause, bringing up features common in the process for all religious traditions.

As already discussed in a previous chapter, atheist organizations naturalize atheism by insisting that children are natural atheists and must therefore be indoctrinated to think religiously. This training process takes on features of abuse or coercion, as this quote from Atheist Alliance International illustrates:

If children question or, doubt, any of these stories, they will be warned not to think such things—questioning incurs parental disapproval. Young children may even be threatened with torture if they don’t believe...The problem is, if you want people to believe things that are fully ridiculous and with no evidence, you have to teach them young, and teach them repeatedly and emphatically. That is why all religions share this same dirty secret… (AAI – Christianity’s Dirty Secret)
The post continues, discussing the tendency for children to grow up to follow the religion of their parents:

We know this process works because we see children raised as Christians becoming lifelong Christians, children raised as Hindus becoming lifelong Hindus, children raised as Muslims becoming lifelong Muslims, and so on. These religions cannot all be true, so it is a mathematical certainty that the majority of parents (and, possibly all religious parents) teach their children ridiculous lies which affect them for their entire lives. (AAI – Christianity’s Dirty Secret)

This idea, that “it is a mathematical certainty” that most parents indoctrinate their children into “ridiculous lies” identifies the way that archaic superstitious beliefs survive. The author suggests that people will only accept ridiculous ideas if you systematically brainwash them before their rational capacities develop too far. Combining this with the variety of religious traditions which each indoctrinate their children, the suggestion becomes that we “grow up”, recognize the absurdity of religion, and abandon those obsolete beliefs. Atheist organizations bring up religious indoctrination processes to help religious people to recognize that every other religion follows the same process of perpetuating unsubstantiated and harmful belief systems. In this way, atheist organizations can see themselves as saving people from the evils of religion.

It is not clear to what extent atheist organizations see themselves in almost-religious terms in their mission to combat the evil that is religion. I earlier named this idea “savior narratives”. There are no explicit references to atheists or atheist organizations being “saviors” in any way, but it might not be too far a stretch to imagine that the oversimplified moral universe they construct demands their intervention to “save the world”. I do not want to lean to heavily on this idea, since it might be adding layers of meaning not intended or implied by the texts analyzed. We will set aside the religion-like framing of saviors and salvation for now. Instead, the next section discusses the ways that atheist organizations depict atheists as the foremost
promoters of secularism and the progress which secularization promises, whether or not these discourses map well onto religious concepts.

6.3. The Vanguards of Human Progress

Across American Atheists’ and Atheist Alliance International’s websites, atheists are depicted as the foremost defenders of the human rights guaranteed by secularization and which are threatened by religion. Painting your group as heroic champions can bolster affective commitment and make membership and its attendant subject position desirable. An obvious example of this type of message appears in American Atheists’ statement opposing Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court:

“The nontheistic community has always been—and will always be—at the forefront of the fight to protect the secular character of our government,” said Larry T. Decker, executive director of the Secular Coalition for America. “The nomination of Judge Kavanaugh represents a clear and deliberate effort transform the Court into a tool that can be used to advance their ideological agenda.” (AA – Atheist Groups Issue Letter Opposing Kavanaugh Nomination)

This contention, that the nontheistic community are the primary defenders of secular principles in matters of government, is a delimited instance of messages suggesting that atheists are the vanguards of human progress more generally. One of the most important ways atheists drive social progress is through a robust defense of secular government.

A significant number of webpages highlight rights violations which could be avoided by having secular governments. We have already covered some of these in the previous chapter, but I wanted to bring in a selection of descriptions from Atheist Alliance International’s campaign to monitor and report on the status of atheists and religious overreach globally, called “Atheist World”. The brief description of the government in Saudi Arabia they provide at the beginning
of their report on that country shows the relation between religious influence on the state and rights violations:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is an Islamic state that has never had a written constitution. It is governed by an absolute monarchy, effectively an hereditary dictatorship enforcing strict Sunni Islamic principles. Saudi law requires all citizens to be Muslim. Neither Saudi citizens, nor guest workers, have a right to freedom of religion.

It is one of the few countries that use “religious police” (officially the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) to enforce dress codes, strict separation of men and women, attendance at daily prayers, bans on alcohol and other aspects of sharia (Islamic law). It reports directly to the king and is not subject to judicial review. (AAI – Saudi Arabia)

The restrictions outlined here go beyond freedom of religion or expression to include strict enforcement of religious rules covering daily life. The argument contained in this description suggests that if Saudi Arabia’s government were entirely secular, these restrictions would not be in place, and would also seem incomprehensible.

Consider this more specific, event-based quote from the coverage of Sudan, which demonstrates the lack of freedom of religion there:

In 2017, Mohamed Al-Dosogy, a young Sudanese man living and working in Khartoum was arrested two days after he wrote to the Sudanese court explaining he wanted to change his religious status because he had become an atheist. He was charged with apostasy which meant a death sentence. (AAI – Sudan)

Apostasy laws are inherently about religion, so this kind of situation would simply not occur in a secular state.

Finally, a selection from the webpage reporting on Malaysia, which illustrates that even in cases where some secular protections formally exist, religious influence can cause the state to violate constitutionally promised rights:

Freedom of religion, despite being guaranteed in the constitution, faces many restrictions in Malaysia as the country continues its shift towards a more conservative style of Islam, the majority religion. A bill to increase the punishments that can be imposed by state
courts remains pending in parliament. In 2017 one state passed legislation to permit Sharia courts to order public canings. (AAI – Malaysia)

Secular policies generally increase the number of recognized human rights in a country, but they might not be adequate to ensure fair execution of laws. This indicates the importance of a cultural secularism to exist alongside secular state policies. Atheist organizations situate themselves as leaders in both legal protections of human rights and in the advancement of secularism more generally.

Atheist organizations depict atheists as the vanguards of human progress in other ways as well. For example, by describing the relationship between secularity (and more specifically atheism) and social wellbeing outcomes:

Atheists are humans and you will find good and bad, but if you compare atheistic countries with very religious ones, you are likely to see atheistic countries have lower crimes rates and less dysfunctional behavior. (AAI – What is Atheism?)

If societies with a sizeable atheist population have fewer social problems, then this kind of progress situates atheists as the primary agents of positive change.

Atheist organizations claim a special relationship with science – that religious and spiritual traditions oppose and provide obstacles to the advancement of scientific knowledge, and atheists tirelessly advocate such advancement. As described in the previous chapter, science is an important value which provides both positive knowledge of reality and evidence which discredits religion. There is a theme I would like to flesh out further at this point of the analysis, the idea that science can and will save us from religion and evil. Some instances of this are relatively modest in scope, making a historical claim about technological advancements:

All these [technological] advances, from the industrial revolution onwards, have relied on science. Not a single advance has been given to us by gods, magic, stars or superstitions that our ancestors relied on for hundreds of millennia. (AAI – How 200000 Years of History has Left its Mark)
Or this more specific celebration of a particular advancement made possible by science:

For the first time, scientists have 3D-printed human corneas in a lab, paving the way to potentially manufacturing this crucial part of our anatomy and saving millions from blindness caused by corneal damage… researchers expect it to be several years before this is perfected and readily available but progress continues to be made. This is a remarkable first step towards a solution that may eventually become a routine procedure. (AAI – Scientists 3D-Print a Human Cornea)

The page this comes from makes no reference to religion whatsoever and is somewhat atypical as a result. Why would general science news show up on the website of an atheist organization? Promotion of science for its own sake combines with the view that science will defeat religion to make reports of remarkable medical advancements an unremarkable part of atheist discourse.

Other instances of the science will save us theme are closer to what I would call science triumphalist, which situates science as capable of solving all problems. A good example of this science triumphalism comes from Atheist Alliance International’s “Comparison of the Value to Mankind of Theology and Science”, which states that,

in less than 500 years science has transformed our understanding of thousands of deep questions that held our ancestors in ignorance since the emergence of our species.

But theology has revealed nothing. Theology has allowed ignorance to masquerade as knowledge. Theology is worthless.

Science is the key that is unlocking the universe.

There is no sense here that science is seen as having limits. That is not to say that this author is a science triumphalist, just that this text contributes to a discourse which admits no limitations to the abilities of science.

The previous chapter contained several examples of this theme as well, including the idea that science will supersede religion. Additionally, all prior discussion (in this and the last two chapters) of the godmen debunking campaign contains threads of this line of thinking.
There is evidence that most secular people understand that empiricism and naturalistic investigation cannot answer every question. Joseph Blankholm reports that,

When pressed, nonbelievers who identify primarily as humanists, secular humanists, atheists, or freethinkers frequently told me they are also agnostics because they believe… that ontological certainty is beyond the limits of empirical science. (Blankholm 2022:52)

This might suggest that science triumphalist discourses are over-enthusiastic and might not represent the actual epistemic beliefs of secular people.

It appears that in atheist discourses, science and secularism are knotted together – references to one usually implies the other. The advances of secularism and the advances of science are treated as functionally the same in many cases. This line of thinking implies that as people learn more science, they will increasingly reject religious worldviews in favor of naturalistic and materialistic approaches. Science education is thus seen as an important driver of secularism’s growth. Also, places where secularism is emerging tend to increase scientific activities and education. Although this connection is not necessary, it appears that atheist discourses treat secularism and science as inseparable.

The rest of this chapter discusses practical aspects of how atheist organizations envision meeting their goal of saving the world from evil (religion).

Firstly, concerning the importance of labels. There are some pages which encourage those who have left religion to self-identify as “atheist” rather than the other various nonreligious labels. Perhaps this urging suggests that being nonreligious might not be enough to make the needed progress into secularism – those who adopt the label “atheist” make a stronger statement and will bolster the visibility and legitimacy of atheism. American Atheists strongly advocate using the word that people understand: Atheist. Don’t use those other terms to disguise your atheism or to shy away from a word that some think has a negative connotation. We should be using the terminology that is most accurate and that answers
the question that is actually being asked. We should use the term that binds all of us together. (AA – What is Atheism?)

Similarly, Atheist Alliance International bemoans the large number of labels atheists have invented to avoid stigma:

some atheists self-identify as freethinkers, skeptics, secularists, agnostics, non-believers and more. That is a pity. Atheism has a long history and it describes an intellectually honorable viewpoint simply and precisely. We vote to use it with pride. (AAI – What is Atheism?)

This concern with labels mirrors the findings of other recent research into secular individuals and organizations:

Discrepancies in how terms are used show that organized nonbelief in the United States is a distinct discursive field, with its own vocabulary and norms, that reshapes those who engage it. (Blankholm 2022:54)

Creating a compelling political force as “atheists” seems to be a goal – of course they would prefer if people shared their beliefs, but more important than this is coalition building, so the organizations’ broad and inclusive definitions of atheist (which are more expansive than the commonly understood definition) could be a strategy for getting other secular people to feel comfortable joining them.

Secondly, the social movement organizations which promote secularity have not only the general cultural obstacles of high religiosity and the assumption that morality hinges on religion, but also an internal culture problem perhaps inherent to the rejection identity aspects of secularists. Unifying the fiercely independent is difficult (Brewster et al. 2020); and I think most fiercely independent thinkers are born out of a hard-fought rejection of what they were taught. Rejection identities are infused with meaning for two reasons: First, refusing to participate in dominant (ubiquitous?) social systems means a rejection of the norms which constitute a significant source of solidarity for participants, and second, as a reaction to the trauma or
distasteful experiences endured as a result of religious belonging. Atheists who were never religious are rejecting a cultural object (which can cause friction interpersonally), whereas it is possible that atheists who deconverted from faith are rejecting a previously-held source of meaning which subsequently caused them sufficient personal pain to leave that behind. The deconverted may experience all the interpersonal challenges of simply being nonreligious while also carrying the religious trauma which produced their rejection-based identity.

My study found that atheist organizations, like atheist individuals, borrow the “coming out” concept from the LGBTQ+ community (Anspach, Coe, and Thurlow 2007; Cloud 2017). Improving the visibility of atheists through public self-disclosure strengthens the legitimacy and can reduce the stigma of the atheist community. Appropriating the closet metaphor symbolically attaches the plight of atheists to that of the entire LGBTQ+ community and gives a recognizable shorthand for impressing upon others the importance of being visible and proud to increase social acceptance and political influence.

Finally, the social movement literature suggests that an important part of movement activity is moral framing. Atheist organizations provide simplified frames to depict the world in black-and-white terms which are amenable to mobilizing of resources and moving toward cultural change. This idea has shown up throughout the various parts of my analysis up to this point. I bring it up again because spreading the oversimplified moral universe which atheist organizations offer is important to the success of these organizations. The possible subject positions become restricted in such moral framings. Consider the types of persons one can be according to this passage:

“This concerted effort to use religion as a weapon against atheists, religious minorities, LGBTQ people, and women is dangerous and un-American,” said Alison Gill, legal and policy director of American Atheists. “This legislation being pushed by Christian Nationalists undermines religious freedom by instilling into the law only one religious
viewpoint, theirs, while attacking the separation of religion and government which is the bedrock of our tradition of religious liberty. They admit to starting with ‘low hanging fruit’ like these national motto displays and building momentum to use religion as an excuse to allow discrimination in public accommodations, adoption services, and medical care. We must protect religious liberty from these extremists.” (AA – Atheists Donate National Motto Displays to Arkansas Schools)

Atheists, religious minorities, LGBTQ people, women, Christian Nationalists, and extremists.

The first four categories label the victims and the other two identify the offenders. This invokes the sense of shared fate discussed earlier by lumping various populations together as those endangered by religious actors. Further, “Christian Nationalist” and “extremist” are pejoratives; more neutral terms could have been used, but the moral weight of the opposition described in this quote would be reduced. If atheist organizations can get enough people to relabel powerful religious actors who influence political decision-making in strongly negative terms, the impact these religious actors can exert will be reduced. Using morally loaded labels to describe relevant others (as good guys or bad guys) can drive affective dispositions and attitudes toward these groups.

This chapter has covered aspects of atheist organizations’ websites which are relevant to my research interests in the construction of an “atheist morality”, centering on the definition and knowability of and solution to the problem of evil or “atheodicy”. My analysis found that atheist organizations at least implicitly conceive of their action as rescuing people from religious harm. This is accomplished by (1) promoting an awareness of how atheism frees people from the restrictions of mind and culture imposed by religion, and helping people attain this freedom, (2) helping people reconnect with their true selves by combatting the ways religion corrupts them and alienates them from human nature, and (3) educating people to replace the obsolete superstitions and magical thinking of religion with rational, scientific approaches. In a moral universe where religion is the root of all evil, it is atheists who are best positioned to save the
world. Even if this atheodicy creates an obviously oversimplified picture of morality, it appears to be a remarkably consistent feature of the discourses distributed by atheist organizations.
7. CONCLUSION

This dissertation is an exploration of how atheist organizations discursively construct morality. Previous studies have examined how moral concepts show up in the narratives of individuals associated with atheist groups (Guenther et al. 2013) as well as those unaffiliated with such groups (Sumerau and Cragun 2016). My analysis builds on this previous work to provide a better understanding of how “morality” as a concept shows up in atheist discourses. I focus on discursive processes and strategies which construct (1) symbolic boundaries through moral contrasts, (2) desirable subject positions and associated collective identities, (3) a cohesive set of common values which can bind the atheist community together, and (4) diagnostic and prognostic frames which reinforce symbolic boundaries by invoking a problem orientation which situates religion as the source of evil.

I argue that social scientists should conceptualize the discourses distributed by atheist organizations as offering discursive resources for rescuing atheist identities from stigma and for flipping the script that puts religion in sole possession of moral goodness. Further, I demonstrate the importance of moral contrasts in both the creation of an atheist moral universe and the legitimation of atheist identities.

I also offer a description of the moral foundations and values of atheists, which has been lacking in prior studies. My hope is that these descriptions can round out our understanding of how atheists employ moral concepts and provide a starting point for new comparative work across different nonreligious populations. It seems likely that the framing of morality and associated values will differ between those who self-identify as atheist and those using other labels, like secular humanist or agnostic. Examining the contours of how nonreligious people make sense of these distinct labels by mapping their perhaps subtle differences in values and moral concepts could provide greater insight into why individuals choose one identity over
another. Research of this kind will require descriptions of the conceptual content of these values and moral concepts, and I hope this dissertation provides a first step in that direction.

The extent to which atheist values and moral foundations differ from those of the general population is an empirical question not yet fully answered. This question seems more salient for social scientists hoping to get a better understanding of social phenomena concerning religion and its alternatives than for people and organizations with stakes in the “culture wars”. It is clear from the growing research on atheists that religious people perceive atheists as being wholly “other”, regardless of evidence of dis/similarities. “Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether” (Edgell et al. 2006:230). This image of atheists as being outsiders does not appear to be grounded in interactions with atheists:

We believe that in answering our questions about atheists, our survey respondents were not, on the whole, referring to actual atheists they had encountered, but were responding to “the atheist” as a boundary-marking cultural category. (Edgell et al. 2006:230)

It seems likely that a similar phenomenon is occurring in other contexts across the globe as well. It is important to remember that religious groups are doing boundary work as well, attempting to sediment a particular vision of who should be considered “one of us” and who should be excluded.

Secular and nonreligious groups not identifying explicitly with atheism likely use wider definitions of morality and different strategies than what I outline in this work. American Atheists and Atheist Alliance International seem to represent the extreme end of the accommodation/militancy spectrum and do not represent the diversity found across secular organizations. Additionally, these organizations may have few members, even though their web presence is significant – American Atheists indicated having “over 3,500 members” on their
The meaning of “atheist” is a site of struggle for the religious and nonreligious alike. Since symbolic boundaries are not oriented toward accurate description, but toward logics of inclusion and exclusion in a moral community, actors involved in this struggle oversimplify and attempt to score points through rhetoric and demonization. This means that the descriptions we find on atheist organizations’ websites of “religious people” can be rooted in an imagined other just as much as the religious conceptions of “the atheist”.

Because boundary work is about concretizing the criteria for membership and exclusion, there are several paths for better understanding the negotiation of the social meaning of atheism. Future research could explore how different religious actors constitute this imagined “atheist”. Studies examining the distinctions made by individuals and organizations opting for other nonreligious labels between their position and that of atheism could enhance our understanding of not only the negotiated meaning of atheism, but also provide insights into what differs between self-labeled atheists versus those who lack belief in deities but choose alternative labels. As I argued in the second chapter, treating “atheist” as an empty signifier allows researchers to move past using purely technical definitions and opens new opportunities for seeing how the social meaning of atheism is being negotiated by actors with different stakes in the symbolic struggles for dominance. Researchers have already identified several conflicting meanings; why should we ignore the strategic boundary work which attempts to sediment and institutionalize such opposing definitions?

An interesting question that arose during this research is: to what extent do social scientists have an influence on nonreligious self-concepts? Are there nonreligious people who
adopt labels that they have encountered through the categorizations used in surveys, interviews, or reports? It would be hard to measure, but it would be interesting to see how often people switch labels to match or oppose social scientific classification. I began wondering about this during the writing of my literature review when I found arguments for which terminology is to be preferred to refer to different nonreligious types. It seems possible that social scientists are unwittingly entering into discourses of nonreligion and providing subject positions and other discursive resources which are impactful on the nonreligious community.

There is evidence that atheist organizations pay attention to social scientific findings – American Atheists reference research conducted by Will Gervais and Maxine Najle (2018) concerning the prevalence of atheists in the US, even prior to its publication:

A recent survey from University of Kentucky psychologists Will Gervais and Maxine Najle found that as many as 26% of Americans may be atheists. This study was designed to overcome the stigma associated with atheism and the potential for closeted atheists to abstain from “outing” themselves even when speaking anonymously to pollsters. The full study is awaiting publication in Social Psychological and Personality Science journal but a pre-print version is available here. (AA – What is Atheism?)

This quote celebrates the highest social scientific estimate for the number of atheists in the US to bolster legitimacy. If American Atheists discuss such research before it is even published, what level of monitoring is in place? It is possible that the authors reached out to them, but if not, this suggests that atheists are aware of the importance of how social scientists represent issues of religion and nonreligion. It would be surprising if the membership of such large atheist organizations did not include any social scientists. This means that researchers might have reflexive influence on nonreligious discourses in both their roles as social scientists and as activists.
7.1. Cultural Tool Kits & Discursive Resources

I would like to highlight the connections a discursive resources approach has to a more familiar sociological approach: Ann Swidler’s (1986) concept of a cultural “tool kit” for meaning-making and action. Throughout my analysis, I invoked this concept of discursive resources, like identity offerings, subject positions, and moral contrasts as the elements which construct atheist morality and identities. This is simply a discourse-centric way of analyzing the phenomena Swidler describes:

Culture provides the materials from which individuals and groups construct strategies of action. Such cultural resources are diverse, however, and normally groups and individuals call upon these resources selectively, bringing to bear different styles and habits of action in different situations. (Swidler 1986:280)

There already exist numerous cultural products which offer strategies of action, identity offerings, and meaning-making tools which constitute “religious” practice. If one would like to participate in religion and adopt the corresponding meanings and actions, they would find a nearly-unlimited pool of readymade patterns of belief, practice, and identity and organizational infrastructures from which to choose. There are fewer resources for those looking to fashion their lives on a “spiritual but not religious” path (many drawing from Western Esotericism and New Age resources, Von Stuckrad 2013b), but these are available widely enough that we have seen substantial growth for this population (as many as 27% of Americans, according to Pew Research Center 2017).

The cultural tools which one might employ in living an “atheist” identity were scant until fairly recently – organizations and communities existed but drew little positive attention which would make these resources accessible. The growth of atheism in the past decades has relied on the creation of cultural products adequate to make “atheist” a desirable identity. This has involved appropriating cultural resources originating outside of atheism, like the “coming out”
phenomenon (Anspach et al. 2007) or Sunday Assembly’s rebranding of church-like events (Smith 2017a), as well as the creation of new tools. Cultural innovation can follow novel uses of existing strategies of action and meaning-making, as Swidler suggests: “Culture provides resources for constructing organized strategies of action. Particular cultural resources can be integrated, however, into quite different strategies of action” (1986:283). This means that shared cultural values are invoked for different purposes.

This idea is illustrated in previous chapters, wherein I describe how atheist organizations (1) endorse common values to reduce symbolic distance from regular people, (2) use discourses established around civil and human rights to garner sympathy and highlight their minority status, and (3) suggest that evolutionary science validates their moral superiority. In each of these cases, atheist organizations use themes and ideas people are already aware of for purposes for which they were never intended. The construction of atheist identities integrates established cultural resources with those newly created by atheist authors, internet communities, and organizations. In the language of discourse theory, atheist identities are constituted by the creation and adaptation of discursive resources, most of which were not created to validate atheism but are nevertheless adjustable to that end.

This way of conceptualizing atheist meaning-making as a particular use of existing cultural resources has also been noted in past research. For example, Jesse Smith highlights the way atheists appeal to scientific discourses:

Science, like religion, enjoys an institutional and respected status in American society. These atheists found an effective, institutionally-grounded meaning structure which provided a framework for self-understanding; a secular worldview within which they could situate themselves and find a sense of direction, purpose, and legitimation of their viewpoint by appealing to science, reason, and a secular value system. (Smith 2013a:180)
Since atheists have lacked a readymade set of scripts, styles, and habits of action, they rely upon established patterns, like scientific discourses and the institutions which sustain them, to make “atheist” a livable and meaningful identity. That is to say, the simple fact that one does not believe in God does not in itself generate a worldview and lifestyle. Instead, atheists bring together cultural resources from compatible discourses to construct a coherent worldview and attendant plan of action.

Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2007) have suggested that atheists in the US have engaged in “defensive competition” with evangelicals by adapting their strategy of emphasizing the “culture wars” and the “tensions and unease that evangelicals experience as they interact in the greater American society” which has, for both evangelicals and atheists, “enhance[d] the vitality of their [non/]religious identities” (2007:418). The authors frame this as a response to a perception that progressive secularism has failed; since secularism has yet to become the dominant influence in the US, they have had to adjust their strategies and abandon the idea that they were ushering in an imminent secular transformation (Cimino and Smith 2007).

In contrast to their findings, Jesse Smith’s (2013a) research on processes of atheist identity formation found that individual atheists still assume a coming victory for secularism, and that their activism situates them as a “secular vanguard”. Smith suggests that “organized atheism continues to perceive the progression of secularism in America” (Smith 2013a:186). My research has found support for this notion that atheists envision themselves as the secular vanguard. This is not to say that Cimino and Smith were wrong – the strategies they identified were certainly in use by the atheist community – just that atheists have not across-the-board given up on a future where secularism is the norm.
It is not yet clear whether the growth of religion’s political influence through deprivatization, called the “desecularization” of the world (Berger 1999, 2008), represents a stabilizing force for religious cultural systems (thereby refuting the secularization thesis), or a last ditch attempt to rescue religion from irrelevance. Either way, atheist organizations operate on the assumption that secularism will defeat religion in the end, and their work is instrumental in leading the way to this post-religious world.

Stephen LeDrew (2013b) argued that the New Atheism, as represented by such thought leaders as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, is a form of secular fundamentalism which envisions “a society administered according to scientific authority” (2013b:207) which will be ushered in by natural laws of evolution, in ways similar to Herbert Spencer’s evolutionistic vision of how society progresses. Atheist organizations share much of this conception of scientific triumphalism which shall vindicate secularism, though it shows up less stridently than in the works of the New Atheists. LeDrew (2013b) already observed the move by secular groups away from the severe scientific atheism of the New Atheists toward more humanist and political secularist features. We see that the discourses of atheist organizations contain elements of scientific atheism as well as these humanist and political secularist stances. Unfortunately, my data does not allow for a historical analysis which could determine whether the atheist organizations in question have always espoused this more diverse and moderate style or whether they shifted away from the strident scientific atheism in response to the increasing challenge to the New Atheists from other segments of the secular community. It could be that atheist organizations believe that to create an integrated coalition of secular people requires more moderate frames.
Secular organizations make decisions about which principles and beliefs are requirements for membership, or at the very least communicate the importance of these in the group in ways that will either resonate or alienate those who feel affinity for their cause. The websites of both Atheist Alliance International and American Atheists seem to offer mostly inclusive frames which should be found agreeable by as many secular individuals as possible, while containing fewer instances of militancy which would hold strong appeal for some while coming off as too aggressive to others. Joseph Blankholm makes an important observation related to this point:

How much to focus on beliefs is a persistent, strategic consideration for anyone trying to engage in the paradoxical work of organizing nonbelievers. Disagreements over where to draw the line between secular and religious can lead easily to factionalism and to new groups bearing new names. (Blankholm 2022:59)

How much emphasis groups put on beliefs or styles of approach (accommodating or militant) is an important factor in determining the size and growth potential for secular organizations. In addition to the importance of finding the right framing of a group’s unifying beliefs, secular organizations must also present an amenable way for members to belong.

What can we see if we imagine that one of the goals of these atheist organizations is to attempt to expand the power of nonreligious people by reducing the ambivalence felt by secular individuals about belonging? “All nonbelievers are ambivalent about belief, but organized nonbelievers are also ambivalent about belonging” (Blankholm 2022:57). If Blankholm is correct in this regard, the political potential of secularism and atheism is reduced because of an unwillingness to create communities which look even a little bit religious. There also appears to be a perceived connection between belonging and conformity. Significant criticism of religion we find in atheist discourse revolves around this association, namely that people give up their individuality of thought and behavior to belong to a religious community (Sumerau and Cragun 2016). Secular people often envision themselves as independent thinkers and can be disinclined
to join groups for this reason. Leaving core principles and goals of secular organizations relatively modest may allow for members to maintain the type of independent thought prized by the secular community. Alternatively, watered down frames might reduce the transformative capacity of the secular social movement. Future research could examine how secular organizations’ discourses attempt to reduce this resistance to belonging.

7.2. Final Remarks

This project contributes to a growing body of social scientific knowledge about nonreligion through a description and analysis of atheist discourses, moral constructions, and identities. My analysis demonstrates the utility of an approach centers on symbolic boundaries for sociological inquiry into religious and nonreligious identities. Further, it would be fruitful for research into deviant statuses generally to incorporate the concepts of symbolic boundaries, boundary work, and discourses which constitute identities. Solidarity and identity are not constructed through a mere noticing of similarities between oneself and a group or type of person and then simply adopting the label that best fits; the normative and moral dimensions of social classification and related feelings of affinity and estrangement have been recognized as far back as the early twentieth century, with the work of Durkheim and Mauss (1969). The concept of “moral contrasts” is thus a useful analytic tool for examining the constitution of the boundaries circumscribing identities, whether for identities inherently attached to morality (like religion) or not (like those associated with “school spirit”).

Friedrich Nietzsche identified the importance of moral contrasts over one hundred years ago, in *Human, All Too Human*: “We lay no special value on the possession of a virtue until we perceive its complete absence in our opponent” (Nietzsche 1915:302).
I would like to conclude by offering some thoughts about how discourses constitute the entire objects of study for the sociology of religion and nonreligion. Nancy Ammerman (2014) suggests that “religious realities” are created in the conversations people have due to perceived religious/spiritual homogamy. This appears at least minimally contentious – that religion is a conversational reality. It is nonetheless useful to conceptualize religion in terms of the ways people talk about it, or as a discursive reality. I think we would have less objection if we substituted “atheist” for “religious”. “Atheist realities” are generated by the conversations that people have about the possibilities and consequences of such a thing.

Unlike the Eliadean arguments about the existence of “the sacred” which constitutes religion, no such metaphysical reality is imputed to explain atheism - we do not find cross-cultural expressions of “the atheistic” and study them as merely different ways that “the spirit of atheism” manifests itself in different contexts – that somehow there is a shared mythology and anima which is universal and persistent. To suggest that the existence of atheism requires conversations about it does not seem particularly contentious. Of course, with a purely logical definition of atheism, lack of belief in the existence of deity, atheism exists whether or not we talk about it – babies are atheists whether or not they tell us that they are. But if we consider the more properly social definition of what “atheist” means, babies are not atheists, and such a reality cannot exist outside of the articulations of that possibility. Classifying beliefs and practices as “atheist” or “religious” prescribes our assumptions about them:

Like every form of symbolizing, sign usage in discourses classifies the worldly given into particular entities (for the classifier) which provide the basis for its conceptual experience, interpretation, and way of being dealt with… Classifications have significant impacts on action. The interest in classificatory devices and classifications is due to their constitutive role for symbolic ordering in discourse and practical action as an effect. (Keller 2018:33)
Social classification thus exerts a powerful influence on the way we understand the phenomena we investigate. The assumptions which categories such as “atheist” or “religious” carry are more likely a barrier than an aid to accurate social scientific descriptions.

Religious people paint atheism as a threat, secularists paint it as heroic and necessary, but it simply does not exist until we talk about it and infuse it with social import. It cannot be a part of one’s identity without the discursive resources for making it a coherent subject position which seems legitimately inhabitable. In other words, “atheism” does not exist apart from the discourses which point to a domain of objects/ideas which can count as atheism, and treating religion as the same warns us against essentializing the object of our field and looking for universal or invariable traits that all experiences, institutions, practices, beliefs, and identities which have been “properly” categorized as religious must share.


Zuhlke, Derek M. 2016. “Experiences of Coming out as an Atheist.” Michigan School of Professional Psychology.