

A Sociological Study of Atheism and Naturalism
as Minority Identities in Appalachia

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study aims to provide a sociological understanding of people who hold minority beliefs about spirituality and religion and to improve our sociological and social-psychological understanding of a-religious and alternatively religious people. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 10 atheist and 11 naturalist respondents. The study examines the religious histories of the respondents, how they left mainstream religion, how they adopted a minority identity with regard to religion/spirituality, and their personal experiences living in a predominately Christian area. I hypothesized that atheists and naturalists would hold minority identities and feel subordinated or oppressed by the dominant group: Christians. Analyses of interviews provided strong support for the idea that the respondents experienced a minority identity in the sociological sense.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Almost all people in the United States are socialized into some type of religious or spiritual belief system as children; however, some choose to deviate from these belief systems as they grow older (Banerjee 2008). Sociologists have studied the religiosity of members of mainstream religious groups and religious cults (Durkheim 2008; Glock and Stark 1965; Thielbar and Feldman 1972). They have studied people with little to no formal religiosity far less often. This project aims to improve our sociological and social-psychological understanding of a-religious and alternatively religious people. My thesis is based on interviews with atheists and people whom I collectively refer to as “naturalists” in order to explore the experiences of both believers and nonbelievers. The category of “naturalist” was chosen as a label of convenience and encompasses those who have a reverence for nature, and may believe in a God, Goddess, or multiple deities. A naturalist may believe in a deity or a divine creator, but may not necessarily believe that it intervenes in everyday life. An atheist, by contrast, does not believe in any god(s), does not infuse nature with any spiritual meaning, and does not believe in the existence of an afterlife.

People do not typically start out as full-fledged atheists or naturalists. To learn more about the process that their beliefs and non-beliefs took, I looked at how these individuals went about questioning and then moving away from their early religious teachings. I examined whether the change in their spiritual belief system was something that slowly evolved over time or whether it was something that happened rapidly. I questioned how atheists and naturalists

came to hold their beliefs, how they maintained their beliefs in a predominately Christian cultural context, and how others treated them when they were open about their beliefs.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, a nationwide survey based on telephone interviews with 35,000 adults in 2007 (religions.pewforum.org), revealed that religious adherents are tolerant of those with other faiths. The study found that 70 percent of Americans affiliated with a religion or denomination agreed that "many religions can lead to eternal life" (Banerjee 2008).

Significance of the Study

Because the South is frequently referred to as the "Bible Belt," the everyday lives of alternative spiritual and atheist individuals are distinct from their counterparts in more religiously and culturally diverse regions. The homogeneity of the Bible Belt region presents a more extreme situation for religious nonconformists. Because Christianity is the majority religion in this region, Christian individuals have a tendency to feel both comfortable and righteous about holding their religious views, displaying religious icons, and proselytizing to nonbelievers. Their strength in numbers and the fact that they are predominately members of organized groups results in their having both regional and national political influence and extensive support networks in the community and the workplace. Their beliefs put them in sharp opposition to religious nonconformists, whom they tend to perceive as a threat to their salvation and their way of life.

Because few people hold atheist or naturalist beliefs, they may frequently find themselves in positions where they must defend both their personal character and their philosophical

position (Smith 1979). This is an issue of concern because it creates the possibility of negative personal and social consequences for them. Depending on the people in the social environment, atheists and naturalists may be vulnerable to isolation, verbal hostility, job discrimination, or worse. I sought to learn how frequent those experiences were, how individuals were psychologically and socially affected, and how their experiences impact their lives.

Significance of the Problem

According to the website adherents.com (2005), the website cited by the U.S. Census Bureau for information on religious affiliation in the United States, 79.5 percent of the population is Christian, 1.3 percent is Jewish, 0.5 percent is Buddhist, 0.5 percent is Islamic, 0.4 percent is Hindu, 0.3 percent is Unitarian, and the remaining 16.5 percent are people describing themselves as Pagan, agnostic, or atheist. Although religious and a-religious nonconformists are numerical minorities, this study aims to understand how they identify themselves and how they individually claim a minority identity. A related sociological concern is to learn whether or not atheists and naturalists have developed a collective identity as religious nonconformists. The presence or absence of a collective identity makes a significant difference in how religious nonconformists in southern Appalachia deal with the dominant religious group in the region, Christians. Although there are many different denominations of Christianity, atheist and naturalist respondents combined all Christians into the same category, ignoring the heterogeneity of Christian belief and practice. As a result, throughout this study I will use the term “Christian” to encompass all individuals who espouse Christian beliefs.

Religion and Individualism

Individualism is a customary mindset in American culture, and as a result it impacts the way people think about and practice their spiritual beliefs. Many people claim to feel that conceptions they come to on their own are more credible and reputable than ideologies that have been taught to them formally through social institutions such as schools or churches. Despite the strong divisions between religious nonconformists and mainstream believers that I analyze in this thesis, participants in this study appear to share an ideology of individualism.

Religious individualism is not a new concept in the United States. Even in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, a personal experience of salvation was a requirement to be accepted as a member of the church (Bellah et al. 1996). The emphasis that the church put on personal experience during that time, however, resulted in members starting to rely more on themselves than the church for answers concerning spirituality. By the nineteenth century, churches began to compete for members and catered to individual religious tastes to ensure church growth. As early as the eighteenth century individuals were finding their own spiritual path. Thomas Jefferson said, "I am a sect myself," and Thomas Paine, "My mind is my church." These historical icons, like many naturalists and atheists today, could not find an existing religion or church that felt right for them, but the various religious teachings of many traditions were appealing to them (Bellah et al. 1996:232-233).

Definitions

Agnostic - Someone who claims he or she does not know whether or not God exists.

Atheist - One who does not believe in a God or Gods. One who does not believe in the

supernatural or life after death.

Bible Belt - A primarily Protestant area in the United States: the areas of the South and Midwest in the United States that are characterized by fervent Protestant beliefs and strict interpretation of the Bible (Microsoft Works Dictionary 2007).

Christian - Someone who believes Jesus Christ is their savior. Someone whose religion is Christianity. This term includes all denominations of Christianity.

Mainstream religious adherents - Those who follow one of the major world religions, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Judaism.

Naturalist - One who holds minority beliefs about spirituality. One who has a reverence for nature. A naturalist may believe in a God, Goddess, or in multiple deities. He or she may believe in a deity or a divine creator but not believe that it intervenes in everyday life.

New Age Beliefs - Modern beliefs emphasizing spirituality; relating to a cultural movement dating from the 1980s that emphasizes spiritual consciousness and often involves belief in reincarnation and astrology and the practice of meditation, vegetarianism, and holistic medicine (Microsoft Works Dictionary 2007).

Oppositional Identity Work - A type of identity work performed by individuals in subordinate groups that involves the resistance of stigma imposed by a dominant group. Individuals engage in oppositional identity work to transform discrediting identities into crediting ones (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996).

Oppressive Identity Work - Casting members of other groups as unworthy and incapable human beings (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996)

Spiritual - "1. Relating to the soul or spirit, usually in contrast to material objects. 2. of religion,

relating to religious or sacred things rather than worldly things. 3. temperamentally or intellectually akin: connected by an affinity of the mind, spirit or temperament. 4. refined: showing great refinement and concern with the higher things in life” (Microsoft Works Dictionary 2007).

Spirituality - A quality or condition of holding spiritual feelings or beliefs.

Research Questions

- How do individuals go about adopting minority identities with regard to spirituality?
- Why do individuals leave the religion that they grew up in to pursue a minority spiritual belief system?
- How long does it take individuals to change their spiritual belief system?
- How do those who hold minority beliefs about spirituality maintain those beliefs in a predominately Christian cultural context?
- How are those who hold minority beliefs about religion/spirituality treated by others when they are open about their beliefs?

Working Hypotheses

- Individuals adopt their minority beliefs about religion over a long period (10 years or more) of time.
- There is a specific catalyst that leads to individuals leaving their childhood religion.
- Those who have minority beliefs about religion hold onto their religious beliefs by forming small close-knit groups of individuals who hold similar beliefs about religion.

- Those who hold minority beliefs about religion are discriminated against by mainstream religious adherents when they are open about their beliefs about spirituality/religion.

Overview of the Study

Following this introduction, I describe my research methods in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I examine the religious backgrounds of the respondents, how they went about leaving the religion they grew up in, and how they adopted a minority identity. In Chapter 4, I then explore how atheists and naturalists face daily challenges of living in an area that is predominately Christian, and how these challenges impact their feelings, relationships, and opportunities in life. Chapter 5 examines respondents' reports of discrimination and moral judgments made by Christians about them as non-Christians. I identify the strategies that atheists and naturalists used to manage their minority identities in a predominately Christian cultural context, and I analyze the limited means of support available to and used by atheists and naturalists. In the Conclusion, I discuss the sociological implications of my research findings.

CHAPTER 2

METHODS

Because there has been little study on this research topic, I chose to conduct qualitative research using ethnographic field research techniques. This method of research was advantageous because it allowed me to obtain detailed answers to my research questions. In-depth interviews were best suited for this study because I sought to discover the respondents' subjective experiences and recollections (Kleinman, Stenross, and McMahon 1994).

Objectives

The objectives of this study were to investigate the following:

- A. How, why, and when people deviate from the belief systems that they were socialized into as children.
- B. What and/or who influences atheists/naturalists to believe the way they do.
- C. The social consequences of atheism/naturalism for respondents.
- D. The social-psychological consequences of atheism and naturalism for respondents.

Data Collection

The individuals I interviewed were chosen using convenience sampling based on existing social networks. I recruited interviewees through personal contacts I had already developed. I also asked respondents to recommend friends, family members, or acquaintances who held minority beliefs about religion and who might be willing to complete a personal interview. I then contacted those individuals to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. In order to gain

the answers to my research questions I conducted approximately one-hour-long interviews with 10 atheists and 11 naturalists in the Southern Appalachia. Participants were asked to share how they came to be atheists/naturalists and how they cope with and maintain their beliefs in a predominately Christian cultural context. With the permission of the interviewees, I tape-recorded each interview. The interview format was informal and conversational in order to encourage participants to elaborate as much as possible. Consequently, although all participants were asked the same questions, they were not necessarily asked in the same order. After tape recording, I transcribed all interviews in their entirety. Due to the small sample size of my study, it is not representative of the population of atheists and naturalists in Appalachia.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews and reading them several times I identified and coded the transcripts for emergent themes. The codes identified can be found in Appendix 1. Some examples of codes for atheists' and naturalists' feelings were: anger, resentment, isolation, fear, etc. I then compared interviewees' responses on each of the different codes in order to find out whether they seemed to fall into any particular patterns. I then analyzed and wrote about these patterns in a sociologically mindful way (Schwalbe 2005).

CHAPTER 3

PARTICIPANTS' RELIGIOUS HISTORIES

Naturalists' Backgrounds

All of the naturalists that I interviewed came from Christian families. Some were more involved in church than others. Six of the 11 interviewed grew up attending church regularly (at least once a week) in the following denominations: Baptist, Catholic, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Methodist, and Presbyterian. Christianity played a fundamental role in the lives of those who grew up regularly attending church. Family members required them to attend church services and participate in church activities such as Bible school, church camp, holiday church programs, etc. Gender roles, dress codes, academic endeavors, familial roles, morals, discipline strategies, and political affiliations were dictated by their family's Christian belief system.

Respondents claimed that they were not allowed to question the word of God or study other religious belief systems or philosophies without serious repercussions from family, friends, and clergy. When asked if she voiced her concerns about the Christian belief system her family adhered to when she was young, one respondent stated, "No, I learned better than to get real vocal about God with him" (her father, a Church of Christ minister). I asked what she thought would have happened to her if she had openly questioned the Bible or God's word, and she claimed, "I wouldn't have been alive very long! I'd have got the daylight beat out of me." I asked her if she had ever been beaten for asking questions, and she said, "just when I told him I wasn't going [to church] anymore." Another respondent, when asked if she voiced her concerns about the Christian belief system her family adhered to when she was young, said:

I was afraid to openly question Christianity. I didn't want to disappoint or worry my mom. She wouldn't understand. Anything that came up that could even remotely be construed as questioning God's word was forbidden. When I was a teenager my boyfriend wrote some poems that I kept in a folder. They were very special to me. One of them made reference to a "spawn from Hell." The poem she was so disturbed by went as follows,

SPAWN

*Atop a roof he sits. Wondering.
Looking down at life.
Something he cannot be apart of.
Surrounded by crosses.
Symbols of God.
Holy. Something he cannot be apart of.
He died. The Evil came, offering power.
Evil made a promise. He agreed.
He turned his back on God.
He shook hands with Evil,
And now he must pay.
Every time he does good.
His soul is closer to Hell.*

*Atop a roof he sits. Thinking.
Looking around at the beauty.
Something he can't love.
Surrounded by crosses.
Symbols of what is good.
Holy. Something he cannot be apart of.
His heart died. He feels no love.
God?
How can God love a spawn from Hell?
He turned his back on God.
He shook hands with Evil,
And now he must pay.
Pay the ultimate price.*

*Atop a roof he sits. Crying,
His soul is signed off.
He is Evil's soldier.
All he wanted was love.
He shook hands with Evil,
And now he must pay.*

Demented, distorted, and insane.

Atop a roof he sits. Dying.

Surrounded by crosses.

Symbols of his enemy.

-J.H. 1992

When she found this poem in a folder, along with some others, she made me go have a counseling session with the preacher at the Baptist church we attended, and also made me visit a psychiatrist. She tried to force me to break up with my boyfriend and even made me go to a school in a different state because she thought that my boyfriend worshipped the devil. The preacher at the church we attended told my parents that the poems that my boyfriend wrote had Satanic undertones. The poem, "SPAWN," was actually written about a comic book character. I tried to explain this to her, but she and my pastor wouldn't listen to me. They just tried to tell me what to think. Critical thinking is not a virtue in the Baptist religion.

The remaining five naturalists who I interviewed came from loosely Christian families. These respondents attended church services sporadically and their families did not subscribe to a specific denomination of Christianity. Christianity was referenced around holidays that Christians celebrate such as Easter and Christmas. Also, basic Christian principles and morals were discussed and practiced in their homes. Respondents claimed that religion was discussed when their family's Christianity stood to be challenged by other spiritual minorities or government policies. One respondent claimed that as a teenager he wanted to hang a picture of Buddha up in his room, but his mother refused to let him put the picture above the one of Jesus that she had placed in his room. Although their family did not attend church regularly or study the Bible, the children in the household were still expected to value Christian principles and believe in and respect Jesus. Respondents who grew up in loosely Christian families reported that their families were more tolerant of their exploring belief systems other than Christianity than those who grew up attending Church within a specific Christian denomination.

Atheists' Backgrounds

Six out of 10 of the atheists I interviewed came from Christian families who regularly attended church. They grew up attending church in the following denominations: Baptist (3), Church of God (1), Catholic (1), Methodist (1). These respondents claimed that they were not allowed to question the word of God or explore other religions or philosophies without family members and clergy instilling guilt and shame. Echoing the naturalists, the atheists reported that gender roles, dress codes, academic endeavors, familial roles, morals, disciplinary strategies, and political affiliations were dictated by their family's Christian belief system growing up.

Two of the atheist respondents grew up in Jewish households. One of the respondents reported that Judaism was discussed and studied in the home, his family attended the Synagogue, and they celebrated Jewish holidays and rites of passage. The other Jewish respondent claimed that Judaism did not play a very big role in her life as she was growing up because her family rarely discussed their religious beliefs. Her mother was a Holocaust survivor, and, as a result of having to keep her religious views silent in her youth, even today she does not feel comfortable voicing her religious views, even to family. Thus, Judaism as a belief system was muted in the second Jewish respondent's socialization process. Her family's Jewish faith was, for the most part, referenced only on Hanukkah (www.jewishresearch.org/projects_demography.htm).

The remaining two atheists I interviewed came from loosely Christian families. One grew up in a family whose mother and father were agnostic but whose extended family was deeply Christian. His family, including his mother and father, took part in celebrating Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter. The extended family were influential in his socialization process in that Christian principles were discussed and practiced and were referenced in terms of

instilling moral codes of conduct. The other atheist respondent had a father who had a deep hatred of Catholicism and a mother who was loosely Protestant. The respondent claimed that her mother attended church and discussed Protestant beliefs, principles, and morals. She also claimed that her mother had never read the Bible. This respondent attended Catholic school, and so Christianity played a significant role in her socialization. Her early understandings of gender roles, academics, familial roles, and morals were deeply influenced by Christianity.

The Process of Adopting a Minority Identity

Interviewees came to adopt their identities as naturalists and atheists in a number of ways. The majority of naturalists came from a Christian background. Most went through a series of stages based on patterns that emerged in the interviews. The stages have been identified as follows:

1. negative experience with mainstream religion or religious doctrine and/or clergy person's inability to answer questions
2. questioning mainstream belief systems
3. research on mainstream belief systems
4. research on minority belief systems
5. rebellion against mainstream beliefs or antagonism towards those holding mainstream beliefs
6. redefined concept of god/spirituality and acceptance of newly found beliefs/pride

Steps 1-5 fit the process for naturalists and atheists, while Step 6 applies only to naturalists.

Although not everyone passed through each stage, most roughly followed this pattern.

Most respondents claimed that the mainstream belief system that they were affiliated with just did not feel right for them and went on to explain precisely what it was that did not feel right to them (See Table I in Appendix IV). For many, mainstream religion is viewed as an institution riddled with hypocrisy. Rather than teaching and living by a code of love, forgiveness, and acceptance, naturalists and atheists claimed that mainstream religious adherents such as Christians promote hatred, bigotry, war, sexism, and classism. Respondents offered various personal experiences to document the sense of hypocrisy. For almost every respondent it was either a negative personal experience, a negative experience of a loved one, or inconsistencies they found in religious doctrine and practice. (After I explain how the process of adopting a minority identity operated, I will return to the content of respondents' comments about religious hypocrisy.)

All respondents reported that they went through a period of questioning mainstream beliefs before settling in to their personal beliefs. There were many different things that led people to begin questioning their beliefs. With some it was how various minorities were treated by religious adherents. For others it was a lack of logic in mainstream religions. Some reported that there was too much hypocrisy found in mainstream belief systems because mainstream religious adherents will preach one set of values but follow another.

In questioning a particular mainstream religious belief system, most reported to first question in silence. In their minds they would contemplate the problems they had with mainstream religion but would keep these issues to themselves. For many, this was an agonizing stage. Some felt that there was something personally wrong with them because they had doubts about the validity of mainstream religious doctrine. According to mainstream religious doctrine,

to doubt is to sin and to voice doubt to friends, family, or clergy is risky. Many reported going through a phase of looking for answers in Christianity or Judaism by talking with clergy members and reading the Bible. Some clergy expressed hostility towards those who had uncertainties. They were reminded that to question is to sin, and to question the word of God is to blaspheme. The feelings of guilt and shame respondents felt resulted in many of them holding on to their faith longer than they might have if they had felt comfortable in questioning and seeking answers to their questions. Of the respondents who expressed their uncertainties to clergy, none were satisfied with the responses that they got and, after varying periods of time, chose to move on and do personal research to find answers outside their current faith.

In expressing their doubts about mainstream religion to family members, the respondents received various responses. Some family members dismissed it as a stage that would pass, others expressed denial and/or anger. Overall, the responses were negative. One respondent, cited earlier, claimed to have been physically assaulted by her father for expressing her desire to quit attending church. Family members who were deeply religious tended to react more harshly than those who more loosely followed Christianity or Judaism. Those who were more deeply religious tried to use religious texts to answer respondents' questions while also seeking to use guilt and shame to keep them in the faith. Nearly all respondents claimed that their family members expressed worry for the soul of the respondent.

After moving on from the questioning phase, many respondents reported conducting personal research on their religion. While some briefly researched their faith on their own, others carried out a long and in-depth study. They looked up the origin and history and tried to find ways the scripture might be applicable to their lives. In doing research they identified specific

aspects of religious history and doctrine that did not coincide with their personal beliefs.

After finding no solace or answers in their mainstream faith, some respondents began looking into other mainstream faiths or organized religions. Some with Christian fundamentalist backgrounds turned to Catholicism or the Episcopal church to see if perhaps those religious denominations could quench their thirst for spirituality. Some attended other churches, read books about different faiths, and/or spoke to members of other faiths. This phase lasted for different lengths of time for different people, while two naturalists and one atheist never went through this phase.

The next phase was of inquiry centered around minority spirituality, such as Buddhism, Native American types of Spirituality, New Age Spirituality, the Rainbow Family of Living Light (a group of young and middle-age “Hippies” who have co-opted many of the Native American spiritual beliefs), and Wicca (Niman 1997). Most respondents reported reading books about minority spirituality and/or New Age beliefs. Some used the internet to examine minority spiritual beliefs by writing in forums, searching sites, and participating in chat sessions. Later, some found a loose network of individuals who shared similar beliefs. These beliefs, however, were not the center of close relationships or friendships.

Once individuals researched minority spiritual beliefs and began subscribing to them, many developed hostile feelings towards mainstream religions and their adherents, especially towards the religion they came from. Some respondents reported using mainstream religious doctrine to outline what they found as inconsistencies and hypocrisy within a given faith. Many vehemently pointed out these inconsistencies to family members, friends, clergy, co-workers, or any other person who brought up the subject of mainstream religion.

After engaging in research on minority spirituality, naturalist respondents (but not atheists) began to redefine their personal concepts of God/Goddess and/or spirituality. Many acquired their sense of spirituality by taking elements from other mainstream and minority belief systems and recombining them into a view of spirituality that fit their needs and conceptions. The redefining process occurred more through study and selecting the particular concepts of religion/spirituality that worked for respondents, than through actual ritual, training, worship, or practice. Once respondents redefined their concepts of God and spirituality they dismissed all or some of their previous ideals concerning God and spirituality and embraced their newly crafted personal form of spirituality. In embracing their newly crafted form of spirituality, respondents let go of much of the uncertainty and guilt that plagued their lives prior to this occurrence. They claimed to have developed a sense of justification for what they believed and how they felt. Respondents also professed taking pride in their beliefs because they developed them in a deliberate, purposeful way. For example, one naturalist respondent stated that,

It took me years to figure out exactly what I believed and what worked for me in terms of spirituality. I studied different types of Christianity, Buddhism, Native American spirituality...you name it and I studied it (laughs). I kinda found that there were little pieces of truth in all of them. For awhile, I really agonized about not adhering to one particular faith. I mean when I was growing up I was always told that there was only one true God and one truth religion and that was Baptist. The Baptist faith just didn't work for me, not in its entirety anyway. I mean there were pieces of it that seemed right to me, but there was a lot of it that didn't make sense to me. Once I accepted that there were little pieces of truth in all the religions that I studied I kinda just pieced together the parts that worked for me, the parts that comforted me, and the parts that I felt gave structure and meaning to my life. I just felt like a huge weight had been lifted off me once I made this discovery. I didn't feel ashamed of my beliefs, or confused. I finally felt happy and confident that I had found something that felt true to me.

Naturalists studied different types of philosophy and religion and carefully constructed a unique

form of spirituality that worked for them personally. The personal nature of their crafted spirituality seemed to make it more meaningful to them than any type of traditional mainstream form of spirituality. They further reported that their newfound spiritual beliefs made them feel happy and gave them the courage, strength, and drive to persevere through life struggles. The passion they developed in regards to their new spiritual beliefs was reported to positively affect all aspects of their lives.

Like naturalists, atheists also went through a series of steps in coming to their beliefs about spirituality. When asked how he came to be an atheist one respondent claimed, “It was never one of those hallelujah moments like religious people seem to have when they have an epiphany. It was just a gradual process, and I realized ‘Hey, I am an atheist.’” All atheists claimed to experience steps one through five--not necessarily in that order--in developing their minority belief about spirituality. The key difference is that they did not experience Step 6 the same way as naturalists. Once they reached step six they began to accept the fact that they no longer believed in a God.

Both the naturalists’ and atheists’ accounts of their process of adopting a nonconformist religious identity significantly differ from born-again Christians, who frequently describe a powerful “calling.” Individuals who convert to Christianity claim to experience a call from the divine to accept Jesus Christ as their savior. This abrupt call from God is a life-changing event and a turning point in the lives of Christians (Grudem 1994:692). None of the naturalists interviewed reported feeling “called” to adopt new beliefs and none of the atheists reported a sudden powerful reversal from belief to non-belief. Their more deliberate process instead was presented as a rational counterpoint to mainstream believers.

The Logic of Leaving Mainstream Religion

These six steps outlined above provide explanatory detail of the process that individuals went through in adopting minority identities concerning spirituality and a-religiosity. The first step in the process of adopting a minority spiritual identity reveals the depth of the faults that respondents found with established religion as they were exposed to it. This step was perhaps the most critical part of the process because it was crucial to the development of respondents' identities. None might have become naturalists or atheists without this step, and thus a closer examination of their comments concerning this step is warranted.

Many respondents claimed that they left mainstream religion because they felt that mainstream religion perpetuates hate, separatism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression. They claimed that women, homosexuals, racial/ethnic minorities, and non-believers all suffer negative social and psychological consequences as a result of the Christian belief system.

Six out of 11 naturalists cited that they chose to leave the mainstream religion that they grew up in because they were unhappy with the ways minorities were treated or discussed. One of the naturalists claimed that he came to a point in his study of Christianity that he began believing that he was better than the God he was worshiping. He came to believe this after having a discussion with a woman who had stopped attending his church. The woman grew up in a Christian family where she was molested by her father as a child. The woman claimed that she went to bed praying every night that her father would stop molesting her. When the woman grew up she became an atheist because she believed if there were a God he would have answered her prayers. The church that he attended claimed that this woman was going to spend an eternity in hell because she no longer believed in God. The respondent claimed that he disagreed with his

church on that matter, and that if that were the type of God his church was worshipping, then he was morally superior to that God.

Furthermore, the respondent claimed that after hearing this story from the woman and seeing how Christians he knew treated women, homosexuals, and racial/ethnic minorities, he began to come up with his own personal spiritual belief system. He claimed that Christians treat women as inferior to men. They claim that women are the weaker sex, and that it is their fault that humans are here on earth rather than in the Garden of Eden. They also require that women be submissive to men and to God, whereas men are to be submissive only to God. He claimed that many of the inequalities present in American culture stem from Christian influence. All six of the naturalists who disapproved of how minorities are treated by Christians claimed that Christians treat women as inferior to men. Another respondent claimed that she diverged from Christianity when she was fourteen after listening to a church sermon from her step-father. In his sermon he said that people should love one another, yet after the sermon he was watching a gay pride parade on the news ranting to his family that the homosexuals should be bombed.

Five out of 10 atheist respondents claimed that one of their primary reasons for not following mainstream religion stemmed from disapproval of how minorities are treated or talked about by religious adherents. One of the respondents recalled sermons where the pastor would preach about the Tower of Babel and how it was the mixing of the races that led to the demise of Babylon. This respondent also noted how the pastor was misrepresenting the scripture, however. The respondent claims that according to the scripture, God destroyed the Tower of Babel, scattered people to different areas of the earth, and confused their languages as punishment for worshipping false Gods. The respondent further claimed that although this sermon preached by

the pastor of her church was inaccurate, it is still a common argument used by fundamentalist churches to justify the so-called immorality of interracial marriage.

The other atheist respondents did not cite a specific example of how a particular incident concerning minorities led to an end to their believing in God. They did make reference, however, to how many Christians use their faith as a means of keeping minority groups down. Two of the atheist respondents claimed that the Baptist church they grew up in seemed to quietly practice racial segregation in the church. There were no racial minorities that attended their churches regularly. Occasionally an African American or Hispanic family would visit the churches but would then find another church where they felt welcome. The respondents speculated based on their experience in the church that people from racial minority groups did not feel comfortable becoming members of their church, which was predominantly white. Both respondents claimed that in the city that they grew up in, the Baptist churches were split between African American churches and Caucasian churches. Once or twice a year they reported that the African American Baptist churches were invited to visit the Caucasian churches. The two respondents both claimed that the African American Baptist churches were located in low income areas and were not as large, wealthy, or aesthetically pleasing as the Caucasian churches.

Beyond their observations of racial segregation, three female atheists claimed that part of their break from religion and belief in God came from observations of how women are written about in the Christian Bible and treated in church. All three of the women complained that women were not treated as equals in the churches they attended and they were not allowed to hold positions of leadership. They also expressed disdain with their respective church's expectation of female submissiveness. One of the respondents claimed that in the church she

grew up in, when the sermons addressed females in the Bible, they were always depicted as either virgins or whores.

For atheists, the main reason they stopped attending church and believing in God is that they no longer found believing in God to be logical. One respondent likened believing in God to believing in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. This respondent claimed that part of growing up is not accepting things on faith, but rather using logic and reason to back up one's beliefs. The respondent claimed that truly believing in God and an afterlife would likely be quite comforting, but when there are no facts to back up such phenomena, people must let go of the fairy tale.

Both atheists and naturalists cited Christian hypocrisy as a reason for leaving the faith they grew up in. They maintained that Christians claim to spread messages of love and acceptance, yet they are often heard preaching sermons of hate, hellfire, and brimstone. They claimed that Christians pick and choose the Christian laws they wish to emphasize and enforce. For example, in discussing his views on hypocrisy and evilness in the Bible one respondent stated that,

You reach a point where your common sense has to override anything else. There are so many contradictions, and so many actual evil things that are supported. Again, we go back to the gay issues. People talk about homosexuality, and a lot of times they say it says it is wrong in the Bible. It is in Leviticus, and they protest gay marriage, but the same people don't protest the Super Bowl. It also says in Leviticus anyone who touches the flesh of a dead pig is sinning.

Atheists and naturalists adopted their minority religious identities because of the multiple grievances that they had with mainstream religion. Leaving the religion that they grew up in was a painful and gradual process because it was something they were socialized into from a young age, and as a result it had become part of their identity. In order to adopt a new identity they had to make new discoveries and figure out exactly where their beliefs lie. The process of adopting a

new identity was a necessary process to achieve happiness and confidence in their new belief.

CHAPTER 4

LIVING AND CONTENDING WITH MINORITY IDENTITIES

Naturalists and atheists are ideological and numeric minorities in the Bible Belt. Because there is a great degree of variance in naturalists' beliefs, they have a difficult time gaining rights and political influence compared to members of organized religious groups. Few naturalists have established networks powerful enough to influence political policies or to gain notoriety among fellow citizens. Due to their minority status, naturalists report that they have less political power, less safety, fewer resources, and fewer connections to friends, mentors, and acquaintances.

Atheists, in contrast to naturalists, do not share a belief system, they only share a single belief about the nonexistence of God. They do not tend to have support systems or networks, and, if open about their beliefs, face severe social repercussions. Some atheists have attempted to exert influence through the court system, but their efforts have occurred as individuals not as organizations.

Perceptions of Differential Treatment

Both atheists and naturalists claimed that mainstream religious adherents treated them differently as a result of their minority status concerning religion. They claimed that their beliefs or lack thereof were not respected as legitimate. Their beliefs were deemed by the religious majority as a phase that will pass rather than a permanent and reasonable way of believing.

All naturalist and atheist respondents claimed that they experienced Christians proselytizing to them once it was discovered that they did not follow a Christian belief system. All were invited to church numerous times by many different people. They were given short

lessons on Christianity and Jesus at different times and in different situations without having asked for these lectures. They were also warned of what some Christians believed would be the consequences for not believing in Jesus' divinity or attending church, spending an eternity in hell. Some of the naturalists and atheists reported that they politely listened to these lectures, while others were more vocal about their personal conceptions of spirituality. Those who were quiet expressed more resentment about the Christian confrontations than those who were open and vocal about their spiritual beliefs. Those who chose to discuss their spiritual beliefs with Christian proselytizers often took these instances as opportunities to challenge Christians' beliefs about God, Jesus, and morality. One respondent claimed that when his beliefs about spirituality were challenged by Christians he would challenge their beliefs by asking questions concerning contradictory passages in the Bible that he knew they would be unable to answer logically. For example, he would ask,

Do you believe that the Bible is 100% accurate, and I have never heard anyone ever say "no." They always say the Bible is 100% accurate. So, that means you believe every verse in the Bible is straight from the mouth of God, and again it's 100% accurate, and again they say "yes," and I say so you believe the verse that says, "Through God all things are possible." And they say, "absolutely." And I say if all things are possible then there are many ways to God and not just through Jesus Christ, and they say, "no" and I say then you don't believe that through God all things are possible, and you don't believe that the Bible is 100% accurate, and so ultimately I have not found anyone who can explain that to me in a way that makes sense, that they can continue to hold on to that belief. Ultimately, when that happens I think they are ready to get away from me because um... ultimately either they are going to have to redefine their beliefs or they're going to provide an explanation, and neither one of those are going to be an easy task. So, the path of least resistance is just to end the conversation.

Another respondent claimed that he looks for areas of agreement when Christians confront him concerning the subject of spirituality and religion. He pulls out passages from the Bible that support and justify his personal beliefs about spirituality. He claims that this usually appeases

Christians' concerns because they are taught that it is blasphemous to argue with the Bible. He claims that in these situations Christians usually stop discussing religion because they cannot argue with him without contradicting their own belief system.

Atheists' and Naturalists' Feelings Resulting from Minority Status

When people join a religious majority they gain a sense of community; however, when people develop personal and unique conceptions regarding spirituality, they do not necessarily gain a network or community. Instead, they gain a feeling of being in opposition to a dominant group, which, in this region, means people who follow mainstream Christianity. Although naturalists and atheists may share common grievances concerning the religious majority, these grievances do not equal solidarity. In contrast to the positive emotions experienced by religious conformists, such as feelings of camaraderie and joy, religious nonconformists reported having experienced a wide range of negative emotions such as anger, resentment, isolation, fear, and pressure. For example, when asked how he feels about being an atheist one respondent claimed that,

I feel fine with it, but I am constantly irritated by the people who aren't and to me that should be their issue, but they are turning it into my issue. I kind of believe in live and let live. If you believe in the cow from Uranus is the big creator of everything, that is no skin off my nose, but don't try to push me to believe in it. Likewise a lot of people who push their beliefs, they themselves would never ever allow someone else proselytize to them. Listen to how the average Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian talks about Mormons, or Jehovah's Witness who come to their doors to proselytize to them. They run them down, and rope and crucify them, no pun intended. Love thy neighbor tends to only extend to the neighbors who believe in what they believe in.

They also claimed to feel stifled and misunderstood by others. When asked how she feels about being an atheist, another respondent proclaimed that,

I feel like the Christians in this area wrongly assume that everybody thinks just like they do. For instance, at my children's school they have a moment of silence for people to pray, and they have the Ten Commandments up at their school. I feel like Christians are constantly trying to push their views on me. I can't even count the number of times that people ask me what church I go to, or the number of times people invite me to their church. It just gets very annoying.

Naturalists claimed to experience anger at the fact that other people misunderstand their spirituality. Six out of 11 of the respondents claimed that the people from the Christian majority have accused or identified them as witches or Satan worshippers, even though none of the respondents believed in Satan, heaven, or hell. Many Christians are taught that Satan tempts people to question the Bible or the word of God, and that anyone who does not strictly follow the path set out by mainstream Christianity is following the path of Satan. When asked how people react when she identifies herself as a naturalist one respondent recalled what happened when she told a member of her family:

Well, my uncle told me I was going to hell, and I said that's okay 'cause I don't believe in hell. He asked if he could pray for my soul. I told him he could pray, you know, for my soul anytime he wanted. I'll take all the prayers I can get.

By claiming that religious non-conformists are by default following a Satanic path, Christians leave little room for naturalists to deny the accusation. This situation becomes difficult, if not impossible, for naturalists. Denying Satan worship might be interpreted by Christians as proof of Satanic leanings. Aside from the fact that they do not believe in Satan, another reason that naturalists find the Satan-worshipping accusations offensive is because Satan worshipping is associated with evil, immorality, and maliciousness. The naturalists interviewed did not condone these types of attitudes and behaviors but rather claimed to seek peace and unity with nature and their fellow human beings. They also claimed to promote love and kindness. For example, in

discussing his spiritual beliefs one naturalist respondent stated, "I believe in love and tolerance, and I believe that is something that should be used to create a bridge."

Ten naturalists claimed to feel resentment as a result of their minority status. Many claimed that Christians' misunderstanding of their spiritual beliefs resulted in discriminatory treatment. They resented the fact that they were treated as though their beliefs were evil and harmful when they viewed their beliefs as benign and positive.

Perceptions of Christian Dominance in the Public Realm

Many respondents claimed to resent the power that the Christian majority has over other social institutions such as the family, schools, politics, the government, the economy, education, and even medicine. When asked how people first reacted when she first began to identify herself as a naturalist, one respondent expressed her resentment at not feeling comfortable stating her true beliefs because of the prominence of Christianity in the region. She stated that,

The people I grew up with, for example all the way through high school, and my first couple of years of college, you know in Knoxville, the...we never talked about religion, but religion was there (emphasis). I mean it was just so...they had these things...these meetings, that...these school things where you went to hear Christian leaders give you...and it was just like a club or something like that. It was pushed down our throats. It was everywhere we went. Religion was always there. I felt very resentful. I didn't like it. I didn't like...I was... I mean just didn't like to have to go to these places where they sent me off to camps, you know, and things that they were all ran by, you know. It was very interesting because there was this one camp that I went to when I was maybe 10, and went two years, but the second year I only stayed two weeks because the first year had been, I mean the first summer had been so traumatic I just hated. I don't know what it was, you know I was so young then, and I couldn't understand why I cried all the time and wanted go home, and then I got on the internet maybe a year ago, and looked up Skyline Ranch, this place, this camp, and it's a religious run camp, you know. It is a Christian, we're going to...blasted all over the place, you know, we're going to influence your children towards the goodness, and all that crap, and then I knew why I hated it so much, even if it was just a subliminal thing, something in my subconscious, and I just

resented being told a bunch of lies, you know, and the hypocrisy of it all, and the fact that organized religion is nothing but business, and why don't they pay taxes, and I have believed that for a long time.

In terms of the family, the Christian majority sets the standard for what is deemed to be acceptable family types and structures. For example, many Christians promote the nuclear family and openly disapprove of single-parent families. Structurally speaking, Christians advocate patriarchy. They teach that males are to be the head of the household, and, as such, it is men who are responsible for decision-making, money, discipline, etc. Additionally, many Christians vehemently oppose homosexual unions, abortion, and divorce. These religious and political positions were used by naturalists and atheists as points of opposition to mainstream religion.

Although in the United States separation of church and state is usually interpreted to mean that religion is not to be promoted in state-run institutions, in the Bible Belt this is not the case. Respondents reported that in the Tri-Cities region many schools seemed to promote Christianity. When asked if she ever experienced discrimination as a result of her spiritual belief system one respondent replied that,

You walk into the courthouse, and see the Ten Commandments up, that's a form. I think, you know it's funny 'cause I had an interesting discussion with somebody that has no problem with my beliefs, but yet we had a very different belief on school prayer. She seems to think that school prayer should be okay, and you know I'm fine with that also if they are going to accept everyone, and everyone's beliefs because I think what you see is the mainstream. What bothers me is the mainstream Christianity. You know, if you had a Wiccan child out there dancing barefoot in the circle, and that was their prayer. What would happen really? I think we do see discrimination.

Several schools have the Ten Commandments displayed in the school halls, hold moments of silence and prayer at school, celebrate Christian holidays, and sing Christian Christmas carols. They refuse to keep Christianity out of state-run schools and make no effort to teach about other

religions and philosophies.

The Christian right has a great deal of power over politics. They lobby against abortion, gay marriage, civil unions, and the teaching of evolution. They lobby for prayer in school, the teaching of creationism in school, censorship, and for the Ten Commandments to be posted in government institutions. They have allied themselves with the Republican party and endorse Republican candidates. Ministers and priests warn their church members that it is un-Christian to vote for candidates who hold views that go against church doctrine.

In this context, two respondents, one atheist and one naturalist, asserted that Christian religious and philosophical doctrine has been used by individuals to pass laws concerning moral issues such as divorce, abortion, censorship, and sexuality. This religious doctrine is a key contributor to the production of sexually biased laws and court decisions. In the U.S. Supreme Court Case *Roe v. Wade* (1973) the judges ruled that an unmarried woman has the right to make the decision as to whether to obtain an abortion. Few court cases have led to such controversy for so many years. Although *Roe v. Wade* has not yet been overturned, it is in imminent danger as a result of lobbying by the Christian right. Christians pushing their moral agenda have put forth a lot of time and energy in trying to make abortion illegal. They claim that abortion is murder, and as such is a violation of one of the Ten Commandments. Two respondents who grew up in Elizabethton, Tennessee claimed that a doctor who performed abortions in the city was harassed and ended up closing down his office as a result of Christian churches' organized protests. One of the atheist respondents stated, "The church I went to banded together with other churches and organized anti-abortion protests outside Dr. Patterson's office. My minister called him a murderer. I remember my mom and grandmother talking about how disgraceful it was to live in a

town where a doctor murdered babies.” When the respondents were asked if the police did anything to curb the harassment of the doctor, they said they did not recall the police even showing up at the protests outside his office. One of the respondents claimed that what was interesting about the protests against Dr. Patterson was that his office was not an abortion clinic, it was a gynecologist’s office that performed abortions when necessary. Even though abortion was not illegal in Elizabethton, the police still did not protect the doctor from harassment, and as a result he left the town to practice medicine elsewhere.

Another example of people’s religious notions of what is deemed moral playing a role in the rulings of court cases can be noted in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986). This case came about when Hardwick was charged with violating the law by engaging in homosexual acts in his home. Hardwick claimed that there was no rational basis for the law against sodomy. His defense claimed that the only reason the law was in place and enforced was because the majority of the electorate in Georgia believe that homosexual sodomy is immoral and therefore unacceptable. According to William N. Eskridge Jr. (2002) author of *Gay Law: Challenging the Apartheid of the Closet*,

The primary historical justification for penalizing sodomy was the Judeo-Christian valorization of sex within the context of procreative marriage. Under Roman Catholic natural law and Protestant (Puritan) fundamentalism, fornication, adultery, and same-sex sodomy are sins because they by definition occur outside the context of marriage; contraception, abortion, masturbation, and all kinds of sodomy are sins because they are by definition nonprocreative. From this religious perspective, sodomy is doubly sinful, both undermining marriage and denying the procreative imperative. When American states codified their criminal laws in the middle third of the nineteenth century, most of them followed this Judeo-Christian tradition and included sodomy prohibitions in close proximity with abortion, fornication, adultery, and incest--all termed “crimes against public morals and decency.” (p. 161)

Chief Justice Warren Burger joined the court’s opinion that no one has a right to commit

homosexual sodomy, and further went on to state that throughout history governments had intervened when it came to homosexual conduct (Eskridge 2002:150). Although homosexuality is not considered illegal in Tennessee, some respondents claim that local governments still set up sting operations to target this minority population. Three atheist respondents and two naturalists noted that police in the Johnson City area target homosexuals who meet with other homosexuals in two local parks, Buffalo Mountain State Park and Winged Deer Park. Although the act of setting up sting operations to catch individuals engaging in illegal acts is potentially legitimate given the deviant nature of public sexual activity, these respondents claimed that these "sting operations" are religiously motivated. Respondents further noted that media coverage of the sting operation focused on the homosexual orientation of those being targeted by authorities. One respondent claimed that one summer in 2005 police wrote down names and tag numbers of all individuals going into the park. On October 1, 2007, 40 men were charged with engaging in indecent exposure, disorderly conduct, and some were charged with sexual battery. City manager Charles Stahl stated that, "Our parks are for families. They're not for this anti-social behavior. That is unacceptable and will not be tolerated" (Johnson City Press October 2, 2007).

Social psychologically, participants' perception of Christian domination in the public realm makes sense. People in all societies make up sexual hierarchies that set up limits between what is deemed good and bad or reasonable and forbidden in terms of sexualities. People in societies construct and categorize certain sexualities with certain wants, acts, and identities as normal, reputable, good, healthy, and moral; other types of sexualities are categorized as unhealthy, abnormal, wicked, and immoral. In contemporary societies, people tend to privilege and offer support to those who subscribe to their ideologies of what normal and good types of

sexuality mean and seek to penalize those identified as abnormal and bad through law, violence, derision, or shame (Seidman 2003). In developing their ideals concerning what is moral and immoral, most people look to religion for the answer. If their religion deems certain types of media and sexual acts as sinful then they are likely to act on those religious ideals. With the high number of people subscribing to some type of religious belief system it is easy to see just how influential religion stands to be in influencing people's views concerning morality and thus what laws should be put into action. Because the majority of people in the United States are Christian, it stands to reason that it is the most influential religion in terms of law and legislation in the United States. In the Bible Belt, the ratio of Christians to non-Christians is substantially higher than in other parts of the United States, and as a result, Christians have even more power and influence in this region.

Christians make up the majority of voters, and as a result vote Christian leaders into office. These leaders vote according to their Christian conscience and in effect legislate their sense of morality. In addition to voting Christian leaders into office, many Christians draft bills, raise funds, and raise awareness to fight for their sense of morality to be written into the law of the United States.

Naturalists claimed that Christians even have power over the economy. American money has "In God We Trust" printed on it. They claimed that the days of the week that stores are open is a direct result of Christian power. Many stores close on Sundays for the Christian Sabbath or open after church services end. Banks and government institutions close on the Sabbath and on religious holidays as well.

Although this complaint was more prominent among atheists, three naturalists also noted

their resentment towards how Christianity affects the educational system in the Bible Belt. They claimed that Christianity has an effect on core subjects such as science, history, and English and also on students' value systems in terms of patriotism.

Eight atheists and two naturalists claimed that young people in the Bible Belt receive an inadequate education in the discipline of science. Four atheists and one naturalist recalled controversy in their hometown schools over the teaching of evolution and the history of the earth in science classes. Up until 1967 it was illegal to teach evolution in public schools. In the 1925 Scopes Trial, teacher Tom McLaughlin was found guilty and fined for teaching evolution in public school classes. One atheist respondent claimed that in her 2003 freshman biology for science majors class, her professor apologized for having to teach the section on evolution. She said that the professor claimed to be a Christian, and that evolution was "only a theory," not a fact. Another atheist respondent claimed that he experienced resistance at the university where he works, as well as from people in the community concerning his work, research, and teaching on evolutionary theory. He claims that many of the Christians he has encountered vehemently claim that the earth is only 6,000 years old.

Three atheists and two naturalists claimed that in their experience as high school students in the Bible Belt, many Christian parents sought to have classic books banned due to sexual content that went against Christian values. They claimed that the Christians seeking to ban the books on the high school reading list believed that high school students should not be exposed to literature that has sexual content because they believe that it will entice teenagers to engage in premarital sex. This debate continues to go on in the Sullivan County school district in the Tri-Cities today. Lee Smith's book *Fair and Tender Ladies* was up for review by a panel of parents,

teachers, and a Christian minister. The minister was invited by the school board to discuss his take on the moral aspects of the book. There were no representatives invited for those holding minority views about spirituality and religion.

Four atheists and three naturalists also cited their disapproval concerning subtle Christian indoctrination in schools, especially in elementary school. These respondents noted that this indoctrination often begins with the teaching of the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag, which states,

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, **one nation, under God**, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

They claimed that this mandatory pledge for school children goes against the United States Constitution, which states that there must be separation of church and state and freedom of religion. They claimed that many individuals do not believe in the Christian notion of God, are polytheistic, or do not believe in God at all, and thus should not be required to learn and recite a pledge that states that we are “one nation under God.” One atheist respondent claimed that her first grade daughter came home from school around Christmas time one year with an assignment to make a gift for the Christ child. In questioning her daughter about the assignment, she found that the students were given a choice to either make a gift for the Christ child or to make a nonreligious item such as a candy cane or Santa decoration. The child claimed that all the students chose to make gifts for the Christ child. The parent claimed that she felt that the children were coerced by their teacher to make gifts for the Christ child.

Part of religious nonconformity is expressed on cars, but is in response to widespread Christian displays on cars such the “Jesus fish,” the Jesus fish eating the Darwin creature, and

bumper stickers declaring “What we need is a moment of silence in our school (referring to prayer in schools),” and “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve,” to name a few. An example of how those holding minority views may respond to Christian “car speech” can be illustrated in two bumper stickers I observed when driving home from school in Elizabethton, Tennessee one afternoon while conducting this thesis research. I observed a car with a bumper sticker that read, “Please God, save me from your followers.” On the same car, another bumper sticker read, “What we need is a moment of *science* in our school.” These bumper stickers exemplify the frustration that those holding minority views about religion experience living in this area.

Feelings of isolation coupled with pressure and sometimes fear were reported by both atheist and naturalist respondents. Nine atheists and four naturalists reported that they felt socially isolated as a result of their beliefs about religion and spirituality. For example, when asked about how she felt growing up as a naturalist teenager in Knoxville one respondent stated,

Isolated. I was popular, and had friends, and stuff, went to parties, but I always felt like I was an outsider looking in. I just wanted somebody to talk to me about stuff like that, and I just never had... I just wanted some revolutionary friends that I could talk to, but I never had any (said with regret).

Some respondents however, chose to isolate themselves from others. This elective isolation resulted after multiple experiences of harassment by individuals from the religious majority and feeling out of place in the Bible Belt. All respondents claimed that they had been repeatedly invited to church by Christians, to the point that the invitations became uncomfortable. In describing a neighbor who repeatedly invited her to church one respondent stated that,

I had a next-door neighbor who came over, or would call, and she’s an older lady, and she’s kind of scary, and would come over and invite us to church. She could see that our car was here on Sunday mornings when she was leaving for church, and would invite us, and we would the first and second time politely say thank you, and kind of try to leave it at that, but she was really persistent, and knocked on the door one day, and asked us to

come, and I thanked her again, and she said (in a witchy voice tone), “Do you know that Jesus Christ is your savior” really kind of scary, and so... that was really uncomfortable, but she doesn’t know that I’m an atheist.

After repeated episodes of pressure by the religious majority and other incidents, atheists and naturalists begin to avoid those who do not share their beliefs. It is not enough to keep their beliefs about religion to themselves because many individuals from the religious majority make a point of trying to find out what others believe, and where or if they attend church. Many claimed that they feel the need to avoid people who are religious because if they are open about their feelings concerning mainstream religion, they either experience increased pressure to start attending church, receive warnings of eternal damnation, or they just get shunned. An atheist respondent claimed that she chose to isolate herself when asked how people react once they realize she is an atheist. She stated that,

My husband and I do not do a lot of social things. We live so far away. We live in a very isolated area near the top of a mountain, and the friends that we do have come to the house are also people who believe in evolution. We have never broached the religion subject, so I don’t really know exactly where they lie. It hasn’t really been an issue. We are reclusive.

Atheists and naturalists do not have the same social networks as Christians. They do not have organized groups that support their beliefs about religion, but some do, however, turn to the internet to network with others concerning their beliefs and politics. This occurs more among atheists than naturalists, however. The anonymity that is possible with the use of the internet offers atheists a safe haven to voice their beliefs and concerns on blogs and in chat rooms. Atheists and naturalists tend to have small groups of friends who loosely have the same views as they do. Most atheists had small social networks that consisted of other atheists and agnostics, while naturalists had small social networks that consisted mostly of other naturalists. Naturalists,

being a catch-all term for those holding minority beliefs about religion and a reverence for nature, do not usually hold precisely the same spiritual views. These social networks do not center around their beliefs about religion.

Naturalists do not share the same degree of isolation as atheists, however. Unlike atheists, they often choose to *pass* as Christian when it is convenient for them, or when it is not worth it to them to argue with adherents of mainstream religion about their differing views. For example, several naturalists claimed that when questioned about their spiritual beliefs by Christians, they profess to believe in God and imply that they hold similar beliefs as Christians, when in reality their beliefs are quite different. When asked if she had friendships with followers of mainstream religion one respondent stated that, “I don’t know. I guess that sometimes, in order to talk to somebody, to get on their [good side],...I’m like a chameleon. I can do or be whatever, and it’s alright.” Four naturalists even seemed to almost ally themselves with mainstream religious adherents when discussing their feeling concerning atheists. These respondents claimed it was unnatural to not hold a belief in a higher being, and that there was something psychologically wrong with atheists. One respondent stated,

I just don’t know how people don’t believe in the spirit. I mean, you look at mother earth and you see all her power and beauty. Those people who don’t believe, they are just running from something, something has happened in their life, and they are just closed off, or have just closed themselves off from the spirit. I mean it’s just obvious that there is something else out there.

These naturalists, just as adherents of mainstream religion, seem to feel confused and threatened by atheists.

Unlike naturalists, atheists have a tendency to avoid conflict and discussions concerning religion, and do not have the luxury of passing as a follower of Christ, Allah, or Buddha. They

avoid, as much as possible, people and groups where their atheism might be an issue. When asked whether she belongs to any groups where her atheism is an issue, one respondent claimed that, “No, I avoid those groups usually.” When asked how her atheism impacted her work and social relationships with people, another respondent stated that,

Um, it really doesn't impact it in any direct way...it just keeps me from being able to develop very close relationships with them. Although I don't know that if I wasn't an atheist or if religion was never in question I don't know that I would have close relationships with them anyway, but I think that probably my religious beliefs, political beliefs um, and education sort of...it's almost a boundary between me and them.

These boundaries brought on by issues concerning religion and spirituality can have an impact on atheist's opportunities in life. They feel they are likely targets for job discrimination and have the possibility of developing social anxiety and psychological issues as a result of their social alienation.

CHAPTER 5

MORAL IDENTITY AND IDENTITY WORK

Thus far, the evidence for understanding atheists and naturalists as experiencing a minority status appears to be plentiful. As nonconformists, both atheists and naturalists perceive themselves as different from and struggling under the dominant institutional power of a Christian majority. Based on their accounts, Christians, as dominant group members, engage in “oppressive identity work” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Atheists and naturalists further reinforce their minority status identity through their negative contact with Christians and through their “oppositional identity work” (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). For reasons already covered, support for thinking of these nonconformists as minorities appears strong.

Oppressive Identity Work

Many Christians claim that their primary objection to non-Christians is that they lack the fundamental morals and values that are taught in the Bible. This belief is often used to support prejudiced views and discriminatory action towards non-Christians. For example, on the syndicated Glen Beck show, which is played on a local radio station, 92.7 FM, Beck claims that people should not vote for any presidential candidate who does not get down on his knees and pray to Jesus every night, and that any man who fails to do this cannot be a good leader (exclusively defined as male). He argues that a leader must have Christian values and be submissive to a higher power to avoid being corrupted by the most powerful political office in the land.

Based on participants’ reports, many Christians engage in what Schwalbe and Mason-

Schrock (1996) call “oppressive identity work” by claiming that atheists and naturalists lead immoral lives. The claims about religious non-conformists’ supposed immorality allow Christians to rank themselves as morally superior to atheists and naturalists. They posit that atheists and naturalists cannot be moral unless they recognize and follow the divine Christian law. This identity work performed by Christians relegates atheists and naturalists into a group of exploitable others. They can interpret atheists’ and naturalists’ expressive behaviors as signifiers that define the meaning of all parts of their character. Consequently, they end up being labeled as profane before they act in any particular way.

All of the atheists and naturalists interviewed indicated that the Christian majority labels them as moral degenerates. Atheists and naturalists exhibited anger at these false assumptions. They all claimed to have a set of moral values and guidelines they followed. They did, however, claim to have developed their moral values and guidelines in ways that differed from the mainstream.

Two naturalists claimed that morality is subjective, meaning that they believe everyone has his or her own personal moral code based on individual opinions and feelings. Four naturalists and five atheists claimed that they gained their sense of morality through a compilation of the socialization process. They claimed that their morals were developed through peer and parental influences, school, religious training, and the mass media. Five naturalists and five atheists claimed that morality is intuitive and that everyone is born with a sense of good and evil. Knowledge and experience were also cited by those who claimed that their morals and values grow out of the socialization process. In describing how he came about his moral values one respondent claimed,

Through life experience. I'd like to think that I don't need religion to tell me that lying, cheating, and killing are wrong. I believe people's morals change over time. There are things that I used to think were okay. The more knowledge I've gained, I've come to realize that okay, maybe those are actually bad.

One atheist pointed out that although some of his morals were derived through his Christian upbringing, he quickly pointed out the similarities in morals from other religions and philosophies. He stated that,

I think there is an overlap, some of the things I believe are also taught in church, but I don't think they are mutually exclusive. You know treat people the way you want be treated, and a lot of religious people go back to you know the golden rule, but again Confucius said the same thing. I think there is just a common way society looks at what is acceptable, and what's not acceptable, that evolves over time. One hundred years from now I don't think anyone will bat an eyelash at two people of the same gender being married, but now whoa. Of course one hundred years ago it wouldn't even be discussed. Certain things are flexible when it comes to morality, but I think there are certain things that are always there... don't take other people's stuff, and don't kill people.

This respondent was upset that the Christians he had spoken with in this area act as though they have a monopoly on the moral standards set in the Ten Commandments, when in actuality those moral guidelines are present in many other religions and philosophies.

Ten atheists and seven naturalists claimed to experience some degree of harassment or discrimination as a result of their views concerning spirituality. Only one atheist reported blatant discrimination. The rest of the respondents claimed that they experienced harassment, and prejudice, and that they feared discrimination. All respondents claimed to be fearful of severe discrimination if they were completely open about their beliefs. When asked if she had experienced discrimination or harassment as a result of her spiritual beliefs one naturalist respondent stated,

I think we do see discrimination. I think people are harassed all the time. I got a tip one day waiting tables from a preacher, and his tip was a little Bible. No cash because you see

we weren't supposed to be working on Sunday. I needed that little Bible because I was working on Sunday (sarcastically). I wasn't religious enough, and I told him if he would eat dinner at home with his family like he should on Sundays, then I wouldn't be working. So, yeah some people are petty and harass me about, and some people are kinda like me they don't care what you do as long as you treat them right.

When asked if he ever experienced harassment or discrimination an atheist respondent stated that,

Nobody says I am not going to give you the raise because you're an atheist. I don't always advertise, but it makes you paranoid. Is that the real reason I didn't get the raise, or is because of my beliefs?

Just like Christians, atheists and naturalists have moral values and guidelines. In fact, they share many of the same morals and values as Christians. The harassment and discrimination they reported receiving from Christians who assume they are immoral becomes yet another strike against mainstream Christianity, which, to them, appears to promote bigotry. As a consequence, many naturalists and atheists saw themselves as morally superior to the mainstream religious adherents who judged them.

In response to the oppressive identity work of Christians, atheists and naturalists engage in oppositional identity work. They struggle to transform their blighted identities into creditable ones by defending their moral character. This oppositional identity work undermines the identity codes of Christians. Atheists and naturalists resist being devalued by Christians and create themselves as people, individually and collectively (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996).

Oppositional Identity Work

People in minority statuses develop strategies to manage the stigma they endure in their social interactions (See Table II in Appendix IV). This is the case whether individuals are a

racial minority, religious minority, ideological minority, or other type of minority. For example, Amir Marvasti (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with Middle Eastern Americans in order to examine how they manage the stigma they endure living in the post-September 11th United States. He found that in negative encounters in which Middle Eastern Americans were asked to explain their identities, they used five strategies for stigma management—or oppositional identity work—in accounting for their identities: humor, education, defiance, cowering, and passing.

Marvasti (2006) found that respondents reacted to situations of having to account for their identities in different ways. Some were irate about their treatment from others while others refused to see themselves as stigmatized at all. Marvasti states that, “Self or audience perception are not fixed; they change in the course of practice. Similarly, the meaning of ‘stigma’ varies situationally” (2006:527). Audience or self perceptions about stigma become meaningful and accessible when communicated in a certain settings for particular purposes. There is variation in terms of how individuals define, enact, and manage with stigma in routine encounters (Marvasti 2006).

Researchers Anne R. Rochelle and Peter Kaufman (2004) also examined strategies for coping with minority status in their article, “Fitting In and Fighting Back: Stigma Management Strategies among Homeless Kids.” They looked at strategies of inclusion and exclusion that homeless children use in managing their identities in a hostile social environment. They explain that although stigma arises from macro-level influences, micro-level processes play a critical role in how individuals manage stigma. Those who are stigmatized do not have the power to safeguard their sense of self, which may lead to the stigmatized individual acting in such a way

that worsens their stigmatization. This cycle perpetuates the structural relationships that produce their stigmatized identities. It is possible for stigma management strategies to blemish the identity of stigmatized individuals. Strategies of inclusion involve trying to act normatively in order to fit in with others. Rochelle and Kaufman (2004) found evidence of making friends, passing oneself off as fitting in with the majority, and/or covering up their minority status. Strategies of exclusion involve the antagonistic behaviors that minorities engage in an effort to gain social acceptance. Strategies of exclusion include declaring oneself as better, more mature, or tougher than others and making aggressive attempts to fit in with mainstream culture.

These same strategies of inclusion and exclusion are used by atheists and naturalists in managing their minority identities. In negotiating their minority identity in a sometimes hostile environment, atheists and naturalists employ many different strategies to cope with social situations. They reported using the following oppositional strategies: exhibiting superiority, passing themselves off as fitting in with the majority, finding humor, avoiding labels, invalidating mainstream beliefs, asking questions that mainstream believers cannot answer, using social support structures, and using books to validate their beliefs.

Exhibiting Superiority

Many naturalists and atheists exhibited an air of superiority in the interviews. The pattern of arrogance suggests that it is a strategy to resist dominant Christian majority's power. For example, nine out of 11 naturalist and nine out of 10 atheist respondents made comments indicating that, unlike mainstream religious "followers," they came to their spiritual beliefs through extensive research and logic. They claimed that mainstream adherents accepted religious

teachings without considering whether or not the religious teachings were logical. They also made comments indicating that they had stronger morals than their mainstream counterparts because they did not judge, condemn, or ask for tithes from others. These naturalists were not shy in offering examples of how they believed they were superior to adherents of mainstream religion.

Avoiding Labels

Although none of the naturalist respondents gave me a name for their spiritual beliefs, they made it clear that this was a deliberate ideological decision. They disliked having a term assigned to their spirituality. I discovered this directly in interviews when I attempted to put a temporary label of “naturalist” on their beliefs for my ease in asking questions. When I did so, five out of 11 respondents expressed their discomfort with labels. Three out of 11 respondents said it was alright for me to temporarily use the term naturalist in speaking with them during the interview but exhibited some discomfort with the label through body language. These respondents winced and fidgeted when the term naturalist was used.

Avoiding labels thus was a strategy for managing their minority status. One respondent stated that, “any time that a label is put on my beliefs there is something that cringes within me.” Naturalists claimed to feel that attempts to label their beliefs made their beliefs appear stagnant and rigid. Naturalists also disliked labels because they called attention to the fact that their beliefs were different from the mainstream, which left them vulnerable to prejudiced views and discriminatory action from mainstream adherents. Many naturalists liked the freedom of being able to pass as Christians when it was convenient for them, and putting a label on their beliefs

limited this possibility.

Invalidating Mainstream Beliefs

Invalidating mainstream beliefs functioned as another strategy for both naturalists and atheists. Eight out of 11 naturalists and three out of 10 atheist respondents claimed to use personal knowledge about the Bible to disparage other's mainstream religious beliefs.

Invalidating mainstream adherents' beliefs enabled them to legitimate their own beliefs about spirituality. One naturalist respondent recalled using this strategy when mainstream adherents would try to "enlighten" him about mainstream religion. He stated,

I think people felt the need to talk me out of it, or to enlighten me in some way, which at that point I would use the knowledge I have to obliterate their belief system because of the...I guess the anger, the uh resentment.

Nearly all respondents claimed to know more about the Bible than followers of Christianity. Nine naturalists and 10 atheists claimed to know more about Christianity than Christians. By appearing knowledgeable about Christianity some naturalists and atheists reasoned that they come off to others as having made a sound and logical decision concerning their personal beliefs. Although not true of the atheist respondents, naturalist respondents claimed that they often gained a degree of respect from some mainstream adherents indicating that this strategy of coping with minority status worked to overcome many obstacles they faced as marginalized individuals.

In dealing with an often confrontational climate in the Bible Belt, atheists and naturalists often feel the need to justify their beliefs about spirituality to mainstream adherents. They use Biblical knowledge and knowledge about the history of Christianity to justify their beliefs and

make their beliefs seem more logical than the beliefs of Christians. When asked if his beliefs about spirituality have been challenged in his interactions with others, one atheist respondent stated that in talking to Christians,

They won't even recognize that you can't have intelligent conversations about the Bible with them, and when they proselytize either they get frustrated and walk away, or I just throw my hands up in the air and say there's just no way we can have an intelligent conversation. I have generally found that the less educated, the less intelligence, the more judgmental they are, and the more persistent they are in getting their Christian message across. I don't know if it is intellectual education, if you have a broader sense of the world, or if it is just my personal experience.

Asking Impossible Questions

Another strategy naturalists and atheists used to cope with their minority status was that of asking questions that mainstream believers cannot answer. In incorporating this strategy, the atheists and naturalists aimed to demonstrate superior knowledge about the Bible and make mainstream believers appear foolish or misguided. Ultimately, this strategy reinforces their reason for holding their particular beliefs, and also illustrates precisely why they do not hold mainstream beliefs.

Based on data from the interviews, mainstream adherents act as the catalyst for atheists' and naturalists' need to justify their beliefs. While mainstream adherents offer faith to back up their beliefs, naturalists offer nature and "the circle of life" for their counter-reasoning, and atheists offer logic and reason as their justification. This strategy of justification again reinforces for atheists and naturalists the validity and/or logic of their personal beliefs, which has the result of making them feel confident and content with their beliefs and, perhaps, think of themselves as smarter than mainstream believers.

Staying Silent/Closeted as a Means for Passing

Atheists and naturalists also use silence as a tactic for dealing with their minority status. If mainstream adherents are unaware of atheists' and naturalists' beliefs about spirituality, then these individuals do not have to suffer the consequences of marginalization and subordination. All atheists and naturalists indicated that they are, to some degree, "in the closet" when it comes to their personal beliefs about spirituality. One atheist respondent explained how her closeted beliefs about religion affect her relationships at work. She stated that, "I think that probably my beliefs about religion, political beliefs, and education sort of...it's almost a boundary between me and them."

Just as some naturalists "passed" as Christian believers (See Chapter 4 for examples), atheists sometimes claimed to be agnostic as opposed to atheist because it is more accepted by the majority, given that it leaves the possibility open to the acceptance of a deity. This occasional claim of agnosticism occurred for three of the 10 atheists. At times, some naturalists tended to conceal the degree to which their beliefs differed from mainstream adherents. Eight out of 11 naturalists claimed to periodically remain silent about the differences between their beliefs and the beliefs of mainstream adherents. They chose to be silent about their beliefs around family members, friends, and co-workers who they thought would not understand their beliefs and those who they thought might worry or be hurt by the awareness of their beliefs.

Finding Humor

There were both atheist and naturalist respondents who cited incidents where they used humor in discussing religion or specifically in coping with their minority status. These respondents used humor in their dealings with Christians and peers, family members, co-

workers, and acquaintances who shared their beliefs about religion/spirituality. Ten naturalists and nine atheists cited incidents where humor was used in talking to or about Christians when discussing religion. Only one naturalist and two atheists actually discussed humor as an actual strategy. The others simply described incidents where humor was used, but an observer could clearly discern how it was used as a strategy in dealing with minority status. Much of this humor was articulated in the form of sarcasm, while the rest was articulated in the form of sardonic humor, jokes, and even slapstick. One atheist respondent cited a favorite quote she laughs about with friends and the sole family member who shares her beliefs. The quote, which makes reference to how Christians supposedly use their faith to discriminate against others, states to Christians, “Stop using your faith as an excuse to be a narrow-minded, bigoted, asshole.” In terms of slapstick, a naturalist respondent described an incident where she was physically mocking her step-father, a minister. She described standing up at a mock pulpit, beating the Bible with her hand, and yelling (like a fervent southern pastor) that all her friends were sinners who were going straight to hell to burn for all eternity. She stated that

After my little pastor skit we were all rolling on the floor laughing, I mean the whole Christian thing is just so hilarious. They take everything so seriously, and everything is wrong and worldly. How are we supposed to live without being worldly? I mean, we do live in the world. I sometimes just have to laugh at them; they are just silly and uptight.

A naturalist and an atheist respondent both made reference to a joke about the “What would Jesus do” slogan. They both described a situation where someone was doing something that Christians might find immoral or offensive, like drinking or cursing, and someone in their circle of friends would say while laughing, “What would Jesus do?” and the respondents claimed that they said, “Declare myself king, the son of God, and nail myself to a cross.”

Seeking Social Support and Resources for Identity Work

Atheists and naturalists often have a more difficult time than mainstream adherents in gaining affirmation, acceptance, and tolerance from peers, co-workers, and family in part because they lack the “safety in numbers” that would come from a large network of people sharing and reinforcing their beliefs. When available, however, they do use social support structures as a strategy for dealing with their minority experience. Eight out of 11 naturalists and five out of 10 atheists reported having social support structures based loosely on spiritual beliefs/non-beliefs. These atheists’ and naturalists’ social support groups were generally informal and unorganized and usually came together by happenstance rather than by intention. For example, all of the above-mentioned respondents reported that at least one of their social support networks came together by being introduced to like-minded individuals via other friends. Although these individuals had somewhat different views concerning spirituality, they shared a type of camaraderie based on their minority status. They reported frequent discussions that center on their negative experiences with Christians and living in a right-wing conservative culture. These discussions work at times as a type of therapeutic support group to aid in reinforcing their beliefs and their claim that there is nothing wrong with them psychologically for holding unconventional religious beliefs/non-beliefs.

Two naturalists claimed to be members of a formal group, the Unitarian Universalist Church, to reinforce their spiritual beliefs. Two other respondents reported attending the same church but were not members. They reported that this organization did not support a specific religious ideology but instead offered different presentations on spirituality by church members, mediation, prayer, and music. One of the two respondents moved on from the Unitarian

Universalist church after attending for about a year because he felt that he needed to examine his personal spirituality without the influence of a formal group. The other respondent claimed that she benefits emotionally and spiritually from having the formal social network of a church to discuss and examine her beliefs.

Three naturalists indicated that they were part of semi-formal groups that offered them support. One individual was part of a chiropractic/new-age healing network that incorporated strategies for dealing with minority status in terms of members' spirituality. Led by a chiropractor, members of this group worked on plans to resist vaccinations for their children, vote liberal candidates into office, and approach and talk to family members about their spiritual beliefs. Two other naturalist individuals reported belonging to the "Rainbow Family," a group of old and new-age hippies who have a variety of spiritual beliefs. Members of the "Rainbow Family" revere nature and many engage in Goddess worship, while others have alternative beliefs about spirituality. The two individuals who are part of the "Rainbow Family" claimed to gain support through counseling sessions with elders, participating in drum circles, sweat lodge ceremonies, ceremonial marijuana smoking, and the use of mind-altering drugs such as LSD, peyote, and psychedelic mushrooms.

All atheists and 10 out of 11 naturalists discussed using books as a resource in dealing with their minority status, while eight out of 10 atheists and seven out of 11 naturalists claimed to use the internet as a resource for dealing with their minority status. These individuals reported gaining knowledge from these resources about how to construct sound arguments to support their beliefs about spirituality. Respondents also reported using the internet to contact like-minded individuals and to support legislation relevant to their religious beliefs and freedoms.

The atheist respondents had little social support in comparison to naturalist respondents. None of the atheist respondents were members of a formal or informal group that could support their lack of spiritual beliefs. In fact, only one atheist claimed to even have the support of the majority of his family. Although all the atheists who were married or in relationships were open and received some support from their partners, nine out of the 10 interviewed were not open about their beliefs about spirituality to more than one or two of their family members for fear of persecution and abandonment.

Other than a few close friends and/or family members the only other social support system named by atheists were those found on the internet. Eight out of 10 atheists claimed that they gained some psychological support from online forums and chat rooms that examine issues concerning beliefs about spirituality. This medium is likely a popular means of social support for atheists because of the high degree of anonymity possible on the internet. The internet allows these individuals to discuss their beliefs without the feared social ramifications that could come from being open to friends, family members, and co-workers.

The differences in the availability of support lead to very different minority experiences for atheists and naturalists. Naturalists do tend to have social support systems, whereas atheists are, for the most part, alone and closed off from people in society. This situation leaves atheists feeling alienated from the social world.

Summary

Although atheists and naturalists have developed strategies to cope with their minority status and deal with the Christian majority, they are still in need of day-to-day support for their

social-psychological and physical well-being. Atheists and naturalists do not have the same means of support as followers of mainstream religion. There is a lot of variation in the amount and means of support reported by naturalist respondents. Naturalists who practice their spirituality similarly to mainstream religious adherents reported more means of social support than the others. Four naturalist respondents claimed to attend a local Unitarian Universalist Church, and two of these said they were members. These individuals appeared to have stronger social support networks and tend to be more open about their beliefs than those who do not attend a formal place of worship. Although naturalists who attend formal places of worship have relatively strong social support networks, they still do not have the high degree of social support enjoyed by adherents of mainstream religion. Naturalists do not receive the same support and approval from the government, workplaces, family, and co-workers that mainstream religious adherents receive. Naturalists receive their social support from a relatively small group of like-minded individuals rather than from a large formal network.

Depending on the specifics of their beliefs, naturalists may receive little to no social support as a result of their spiritual beliefs. Rather than attending formal worship services, some naturalist respondents claimed to occasionally attend meditation groups and drum circles as a means of reinforcing their spiritual beliefs and meeting like-minded individuals. These respondents reported that these meditation groups and drum circles were more social in nature than spiritual, but spirituality did play a key role in the events. Respondents reported that those attending these events often had very different beliefs about spirituality. They reported that part of what united these individuals as a group is their dissent from mainstream religion.

Naturalists who experience the least amount of social support are those who keep their

spiritual beliefs to themselves and look to online groups to discuss their beliefs about spirituality. These individuals do not have a group of people they can look to for physical support in times of need. The only support these individuals receive is verbal support on forums and chat rooms, and this type of verbal support is usually at the leisure of those who sign onto the internet. It is not a fixed or reliable means of support.

Atheists tend to have little to no social support and are rarely open about their beliefs. The only factors uniting atheists are that they do not believe in God and that they share an experience of oppression. Although all atheist respondents claimed to yearn for someone to talk to regarding their experiences in the “Bible Belt,” five out of 10 atheists did not see sharing their beliefs about spiritual matters and experiences of shared oppression as *enough* reason to seek out a network of like-minded individuals.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

I initially hypothesized that the study participants would hold a minority identity and a subordinate status, and indeed, participants' interviews provided strong support for the idea that they are minorities in the sociological sense. As numeric and political minorities, they experience systematic oppression. Their perception that multiple institutions oppose them is significant because that is part of what makes them feel surrounded and not free to believe (or not believe) as they choose. Many organizations proclaim overtly anti-atheist and anti-pagan beliefs, such as the Christian Coalition, and frequently social actors promote anti-atheist and anti-pagan rhetoric in social institutions such as education, the law, the family, etc. The naturalists I interviewed have more degrees of freedom than the atheists. Categorically, they are not as uniformly oppressed. Atheist and naturalist respondents provided support for my hypothesis that they experience discrimination from mainstream religious adherents when they are open about their beliefs. The exact degree of discrimination is unclear, however.

Respondents reported to have adopted their minority beliefs about religion and spirituality over a long period of time. The series of steps that respondents went through indicate that the process took place over a period of several years. None of the respondents, however, noted a specific amount of time that it took them to develop their beliefs about religion and spirituality.

All atheist and naturalist respondents who grew up attending mainstream religious services offered reasons for leaving that belief system. The majority of naturalists and atheists explained that they left as a result of negative experiences with a mainstream religion. Only two

naturalists and one atheist, however, offered a specific example of a catalyst for their exit. Although all who grew up attending mainstream religious services provided reasons for leaving, there is only limited support for my initial hypothesis that a specific catalyst results in individuals departing from their childhood religion.

The steps that naturalists and atheists went through to “unconvert” themselves from mainstream religions continued to serve a purpose as strategies to counteract religious hegemony. Although naturalist and atheist respondents experienced themselves as minorities who are disadvantaged in a Christian context, they compensated by feeling morally and intellectually superior to mainstream adherents. Their non-sexist, non-racist, non-homophobic values became a source of support for their moral identity as religious nonconformists.

A problem that atheists and naturalists share is that their ideologies reproduce their sense of powerlessness. The individualistic nature of their beliefs discourages them from banding together as a group. This prevents them from supporting each other socially, attaining political representation, or doing anything else to gain respect and relief from the power of mainstream believers. It is difficult for those with unconventional or a-religious beliefs to even gain recognition as a minority group due to their highly stigmatized beliefs and the fact that naturalists do not share a set system of beliefs.

Having a minority identity can result in some serious social-psychological consequences. Due to their minority identity and their individualistic beliefs, many religious nonconformists lack fundamental resources for social support. Religious nonconformists often struggle for social support even more than other minority populations because they do not have an organized social movement encouraging them to stand together as a formal group—unlike women, gays and

lesbians, or racial minorities. Instead, religious nonconformists are split into several smaller groups with differing views on religion and spirituality but that nonetheless deal with the same overall issues of prejudice, discrimination, and social isolation.

Religious institutions are places where many minority group members go for social support (Fiala, Bjorek, and Gorsuch 2002). For example, the traditional locus of support for political organizing during the Civil Rights movement was church-based. A similar base of support would be difficult for most naturalists because of their individualistic beliefs but virtually impossible for atheists, as nonbelievers. The second-wave feminist movement was based on consciousness-raising groups, literary organizations, and other forms of grass-roots organizing (Brownmiller 2000). If naturalists and atheists reached out to others, these organizational forms could potentially be available to them. Both the Civil Rights movement and the women's movement had something that naturalists and atheists lack so far: a sense of collective identity and collective responsibility to challenge the majority power structure. As long as atheists and naturalists hold an individualistic, non-conformist "outlaw" identity with regard to their spiritual beliefs/non-beliefs, the chance that they would organize with like-minded others seems highly unlikely.

Minority populations struggle for social support more than majority populations. Members of the majority experience social support almost by default. Their membership in a dominant category gives them an unquestioned sense of fitting in with others who share a particular membership category. Sometimes, membership in certain minority groups can give members a sense of belonging. For example, the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans, and second wave feminism for women allowed these minorities to feel accepted in a group and

to feel that they are making progress towards their goal of equality. Their struggle produced solidarity even though internally they sometimes had strong ideological disagreements. Religious nonconformists, however, may lack this sense of belonging and feeling of solidarity with others who share unconventional beliefs about spirituality. Solidarity with others is difficult because their beliefs are not codified, they are highly individualistic, and, in the case of atheists, their beliefs are highly stigmatizing. These aspects of religious nonconformity make the chance of their gaining recognition as minorities unlikely and the possibility of forming a social movement based on their concerns even unlikelier. Thus, atheists and naturalists unwittingly play a role in reinforcing their minority identity and their marginality even as they resent it.

Study Limitations

This study is limited in several respects. The sample size is too small to be representative of the overall population of atheists and naturalists in Appalachia. Likewise, because convenience sampling was used in choosing respondents, the data gathered do not offer generalizable results for the population of interest. In addition, because the data gathered are based on participants' personal accounts of discriminatory treatment from mainstream adherents, they lack objective details about discrimination, harassment, or oppression of atheists and naturalists.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should address sample size. Using a larger, representative sample would provide data that would allow the researcher to draw conclusions that could be generalized to the

larger population. Also, future research might look beyond individuals' personal accounts of discriminatory treatment and focus on objective measures of discrimination.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Data Coding

CODES FOR NATURALISTS:

- Rebellion
- Questioning
- Problems with the way minorities are treated
 - women
 - race
 - homosexuals
- Christianity used to justify mistreatment of others
 - past
 - present
- feelings of superiority (naturalists)
- redefining concepts of God
- coming to feelings of spirituality/God over a period of time
- dislike of labels (in terms of spirituality)
- feeling that individual concept of God is unique *(individuality)
- use of personal knowledge about the Bible to disparage other's mainstream beliefs
- claim that others (those following mainstream belief systems) feel the need to enlighten those who have minority beliefs about spirituality {a form of resistance to mainstream power}
- feelings
 - anger
 - resentment
 - isolation
 - fear
 - pressure (different forms)
 - silenced
- belief that others have a right to whatever beliefs they have concerning spirituality *(belief in religious freedom)
- Strategies in dealing with others
 - asking questions that mainstream believers can't answer to dispute their beliefs (challenging mainstream believer's knowledge)
 - strategies to get mainstream believers to stop pressuring those with minority beliefs about spirituality to believe the way they(mainstreamers) do. (see above category as possible strategy) (strategies to end mainstreamer's proselytizing)
- those with minority beliefs claiming to have extensive knowledge of mainstream beliefs and belief systems
- the coming to individual spirituality through:

- research
- reading
- influential persons
- disdain for mainstream religion
 - hypocrisy
- justification or feeling need to justify belief system
- ways of coming to moral values and guidelines
 - subjective morality
 - family
 - inner knowledge
- open mindedness
- seeing of similarities in all religious/spiritual belief systems
- religious backgrounds
 - Baptist
 - Presbyterian
 - Catholic
 - None
- Disdain for what is not logical
- belief that spirituality is personal
- debates spiritual position with:
 - family
 - friends
 - coworkers
- groups that support spirituality
 - Unitarian Church
 - Online Groups
 - meditation groups
- nonconformist
- dislike of conservative politicians
- open minded concerning others beliefs
- happiness with personal spirituality
- explained that they went on a search or quest in finding personal spiritual beliefs
- others believe that their beliefs are as a phase rather than permanent
- feels misunderstood by others
- has satisfying relationships with Christians
 - debates religious positions
 - does not debate religious position
- does not discuss spiritual beliefs with others (in the closet)
- experiences pressure from Christians to attend church
- activities that reinforces spirituality
 - outdoors activities
 - taking care of the environment
 - offering thanks
- belief that all life is valuable

-met those with similar spiritual beliefs through mutual friends

ATHEIST CODES

- years spent in making decision to identify as atheist
- atheists claim that they are identified by others as Satanist
- religious background
 - fundamentalist Christian
 - Baptist
 - Jewish
- difficulty meeting other atheists
- does not have close relationships with Christians
- feeling that they have to watch what they say around Christians *(self censorship)
- Social Isolation
 - avoidance of groups where atheism might be challenged
 - feeling that others can't relate to them because of their atheism
 - treated differently by others because of beliefs
 - some reside in scarcely populated areas
 - reclusive
- beliefs about spirituality are challenged
 - people react meanly
 - are accusatory
 - are condescending
- social repercussions of beliefs
 - strained relationships
 - feelings of isolation
 - experiences difficulty developing close relationships
- in the closet (doesn't share beliefs others)
- Issues concerning children of atheists
 - children of atheist being proselytized to by other family members
 - feeling that their children need to explore spirituality
- Activities that reinforce atheism
 - reading
 - internet groups/searches
- annoyance that people blindly follow mainstream religion rather than questioning
- annoyance with Christian's ignorance towards their(Christians) beliefs
- personal feelings about their atheism
 - proud
- individuality (in terms of coming to atheist beliefs)
- feeling that they have to offer explanation for why they don't attend church (excuses for not attending church)

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions for “Naturalists”

Demographics:

Sex:

Age:

Level of education:

Place of birth:

City of Residence:

Marital status:

Do you have children? If so, how many?

1. Do you have a term for your spiritual beliefs? (note: If interviewee has a term it will be used throughout the interview. If not, the umbrella term of “naturalist” will be used.)

2. How did you come to identify yourself as a naturalist?

3. When did you become a naturalist?

4. How did people react when you first began to identify yourself as a naturalist?

5. People who follow mainstream religions say their religion gives them a set of moral values and guidelines. Do you have a set of morals you follow? If so, how did those come about?

6. Please describe your religious background.

7. Many people struggle to find the meaning of life and turn to religion for the answer. Has the question of “what does life mean” ever come up for you? (Interviewee will be asked to elaborate.)

8. Does your belief in naturalism help you in understanding how your life is meaningful? If so, how?

9. Do you have friends who are also naturalists? How did you meet them?

10. Do you have friends who hold what you think of as mainstream religious beliefs? If so, do

you ever debate your different spiritual positions?

11. Do you belong to any groups that support your naturalism? Do you belong to any groups where your naturalism is challenged?

12. Has your naturalism been challenged in your interactions with others? Can you give me some examples?

13. Does it matter for you that the majority of people around you are Christian?

14. Do members of your family know that you are a naturalist? (Interviewee will be probed by asking are they are open to their parents, children and siblings.)

15. What activities do you participate in that reinforce your naturalism?

16. Do people treat you differently once they discover that you are a naturalist? If so how? Explain.

17. Do you ever experience discrimination or harassment as a result of your naturalist beliefs? Explain.

18. Are you open to coworkers, bosses, teachers, etc. about your naturalist beliefs?

19. How do you feel about being a naturalist?

20. Was there a particular person/persons who were influential in the process of you becoming a naturalist? Explain.

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions for Atheists

Demographics:

Sex:

Age:

Level of education:

Place of birth:

City of Residence:

Marital status:

Do you have children? If so, how many?

Questionnaire One for Self Identified Atheists:

1. How did you come to identify yourself as an atheist?
2. When did you become an atheist?
3. How did people react when you first began to identify yourself as an atheist?
4. Please describe your religious background.
5. People who follow mainstream religions say their religion gives them a set of moral values and guidelines. Do you have a set of morals you follow? If so, how did those come about?
6. Many people struggle to find the meaning of life and turn to religion for the answer. Has the question of “what does life mean” ever come up for you? (Interviewee will be asked to elaborate.)
7. Do you have friends who are also atheists? How did you meet them?
8. Do you have friends who believe in God? How do these friendships compare with those you have with other atheists?
9. Do you belong to any groups that support your atheism, or where your atheism is not a problem? Do you belong to any groups where your atheism is challenged? (Interviewee will be

asked to elaborate.)

10. Has your atheism been challenged in your interactions with others? Can you give me some examples?

11. Do members of your family know you are an atheist?

12. What activities do you participate in that help to reinforce your atheism?

13. Does it matter for you that the majority of people around you are Christian?

14. Do you ever experience discrimination or harassment as a result of your atheism? Explain.

15. How do you feel about being an atheist?

16. Was there a particular person/persons who were influential in the process of you becoming an atheist? Explain.

17. Are you open with coworkers, bosses, teachers, etc. about your atheism? (Interviewee will be asked to elaborate as to why or why not, as well as on how people react to them if they are open about their position.)

19. Do people treat you differently once they discover that you are an atheist? If so how? Explain.

APPENDIX D

Patterns in Participants' Minority Experiences

Table 1. Respondents' Reasons for Leaving Mainstream Religion

Atheists	Number	Naturalists	Number
Prejudice or discrimination against minorities	8	Prejudice or discrimination against minorities	6
Specific negative experience	1	Specific negative experience	2
Belief that Christianity is illogical	10	Christian doctrine is fundamentally incompatible with their spiritual or philosophical beliefs	11

Table 2. Strategies for Maintaining Nonconformist Religious Identities

Atheists	Number
Invalidating religious/spiritual beliefs	3
Being silent	10
Reading	10
Using humor as means of coping	9
Using social support structures based loosely on atheism	5
Using internet forums/chat rooms	8
Naturalists	
Use of social support structures based loosely on spiritual beliefs	8
Being silent	10
Invalidating mainstream beliefs	8
Reading	10
Using humor as a means of coping	10
Using internet forums/chat rooms	7
Membership in formal spiritual group	2
Exhibiting an air of superiority	9
Membership in semi-formal group that offers social support	3

VITA

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Education

B.S. Sociology (December 2004) Magna Cum Laude
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

Master of Arts (December 2008)
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

Program of Study: Sociology/Current GPA 3.79

Professional Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant for Social Problems (2005)
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

- Facilitated Class Discussions
- Assisted Students in Learning Key Concepts
- Graded Student Essays

Graduate Teaching Assistant for Gender and Society (2006)
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

- Facilitated Class Discussions
- Assisted Students in Learning Key Concepts
- Graded Student Essays

Graduate Teaching Fellow for Introduction to Sociology (2007)
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

- Taught course
- Facilitated class discussion
- Created lesson plans
- Developed Power Point presentations
- Graded student essays and tests

Adjunct Teacher for Introduction to Sociology (2008)
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

- Taught course
- Facilitated class discussions
- Created lesson plans
- Developed Power Point Presentations
- Graded student essays and tests

Teacher/Intern for Introduction to Women's Studies (2008)
East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN

- Currently teaching course
- Educating students on key concept and figures in women's studies, and how to analyze social hierarchies related to gender, race, class.
- Grading student essays

Special Skills Grant Development, Windows XP, Windows Vista, Microsoft Office, Power Point, Internet Research, Web Page Building, Internet Forum Building, SPSS, Three Semesters of Japanese

Presentations WomeNet Conference, Tennessee Tech January 2008
Paper Presentation, *Virtual Reality Real Sexism*

WomeNet Conference, Tennessee Tech, January 2007
Workshop, *Creating an E-portfolio*

Activities ETSU Concert Band, ETSU Show Band, ETSU Marksmanship Club

Groups Golden Key Honor Society, Graduate and Professional Student Association

Awards received Outstanding Student in Sociology, 2005