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What Discrimination? Christian Microaggression Rhetoric Against Nontheists

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology & Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

by

Nicole Dolfi Hall

December 2023

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Keywords: religion, nontheism, microaggressions, discrimination, stigma

ABSTRACT

What Discrimination? Christian Microaggression Rhetoric Against Nontheists

by

Nicole Hall

Theories of microaggressions have been used in the last decade as a framework for studying subtle forms of discrimination against racial minorities and other marginalized groups. However, there is a dearth of research on the scope and types of microaggressions nontheists face. This qualitative study examines microaggressions against nontheists by interviewing 16 religious Christians on their experiences and opinions of the discrimination Christians and nontheists face. The narratives were analyzed for thematic patterns between the rhetoric used and the type of microaggressions employed. The study revealed nine categories of microaggressions. The findings also showed how experiences of discrimination, political viewpoint, and understanding power structures affected religious Christians' perceptions of the discrimination nontheists may or may not experience. Knowing how anti-nontheist microaggressions are rhetorically framed contributes to the study of larger patterns of prejudice and discrimination against nontheists.

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DEDICATION

Pursuing a postgraduate degree would not have been emotionally or physically possible without the understanding and support of my immediate family, especially Matt. The importance of my education came ahead of many other competing family needs, and I am thankful that I was only ever encouraged to maintain education as a priority—as such, this thesis is dedicated to you.

I would also like to dedicate this thesis to my friend, Carmen Altarriba, for helping me to see myself as capable of such scholarship when I was convinced otherwise. Without your characteristic enthusiasm for what you thought was the obvious, it may have remained hidden.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Pew Research Center’s report “When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean,” 10 percent of the U.S. population “do not believe in any higher power/spiritual force,” a number that doubled from 5 percent in 2007 (2018). Nontheists, defined as those who do not believe in God, are a heterogenous group that can encompass many identities or none; however, the most prevalent nontheistic identities are Atheist¹ and Agnostic. This population of nontheists is larger than the U.S. populations of Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons, and Orthodox Christians combined, which constitutes just 8 percent of the population (Measuring Religion, 2021). While research on this demographic is limited, there is an expanding body of research exploring the depth and prevalence of prejudice and discrimination nontheists experience. Prejudice entails holding a negative attitude toward people based on their perceived group memberships, when manifested through actions, it becomes discrimination. There are several categories of discrimination and not all have been explored equally in the literature. The following review of relevant studies and the research presented in this thesis contributes to the knowledge of prejudice and discrimination that religious Christians employ against nontheists.

Literature Review

Prejudice and Discrimination of Nontheists

Social statuses, institutions, and familial attitudes inform and act as filters or focal lenses for experiencing and expressing our prejudices and biases (Allport 1954; Amir 1969; Bigler and Liben 2007; Hall and Crisp 2005; Petsko, Rosett, and Bodenhausen 2022). There is an expanding

¹ I capitalize the term Atheist or Agnostic when referring to an identity but use lowercase when referring to the generalized concept.

body of research exploring the depth and prevalence of prejudice nontheists face. Prejudicial beliefs about Atheists and other nontheists undergirds discriminatory behavior because they are predicated on the idea that nontheists are immoral and a threat to a respectable community and the common good (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). In 2020, Pew Research found that almost half of respondents in America, 44 percent, believe that God is necessary to be moral and have good values (Tamir, Connaughton, and Salazar 2020). About 75 percent of Atheist respondents in a study on prejudices reported being told their atheism was immoral (Hammer et al. 2012). In other studies, regardless of respondents' valuation of secularism or even religious or political group affiliation, atheists more so than any other religious, ethnic, or cultural group were seen as the likely perpetrators of immorality (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011) such as serial murder and animal torture (Gervais 2014). This anti-atheist prejudice is not just an American phenomenon. Research indicates that immoral acts such as serial murder are seen as more representative of atheists globally (Gervais et al. 2017). Such stereotypes often lead to rationalizations for prejudice and are especially prevalent among religious theists and are widespread. Some of the most common found among theists are that Atheists are rebellious (70%), anti-Christian (67%), and argumentative (63%), as well as both pleasure-seeking and self-seeking (62%) (Harper 2007).

The discriminatory behavior that Atheists and other nontheists face is experienced in a multitude of ways. The most prevalent and perhaps the most visible form is through social and cultural exclusion, both publicly and privately (Cragun et al. 2012; Doane and Elliott 2015; Edgell and Tranby 2010; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Miles 2014). Exclusion from participating in American democracy socially and even in an official capacity is common (Miles 2014). For example, a study using national data collected in 2003 found that when compared to

other groups such as homosexuals, Muslims, or recent immigrants, atheists were seen as the least likely to share in the American vision (Edgell et al. 2006). More recently, Edgell and colleagues report that Muslims are now seen as the least-accepted group, but they did not find evidence that anti-atheist sentiment has lessened (2016). A majority of respondents to a Gallup poll selected atheists as the least likely presidential candidate they would vote for in an election (Jones 2012). Currently, only one sitting member of congress, Rep. Pete Stark, has admitted to not believing in God; however, the admission came 30 years after he was elected (Schreck 2007). Furthermore, several states prohibit nontheists from holding city and state public offices: North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, Arkansas, Texas, Mississippi, and Tennessee (Bulger 2012). Although constitutionally unenforceable, these legal clauses were most recently used in 2009 in an attempt to depose a North Carolina city councilman due to his atheism (Jones 2009). While many of these legal clauses are the vestiges of a previous era, a bill passed in the House of Representatives in 2013 banning Atheist or Humanist chaplains from serving in the armed forces and is evidence of overt discrimination of nontheists ("U.S. House Votes to Say No Atheist Chaplains in Foxholes" 2013).

Regarding exclusion in more personal realms, Atheists are seen as less desirable as potential spouses for respondents' children (Edgell et al. 2006). In a study conducted in 2012, out of 796 self-identified Atheists in America, 92 percent reported experiencing coercion to participate in prayers or religious services against their will, over 56 percent reported they had been socially ostracized, and 14 percent have experienced hate crimes due to their secular identity (Hammer et al. 2012). Additionally, 41 percent of respondents in another study confirmed they had experienced discrimination in the prior five years, and specifically more so by family or socially than at work or school (Cragun et al. 2012).

Societal Factors

There are many people in America who believe in God or a higher power, but there is also a uniquely high rate of religiosity among Americans, which is defined by how strongly a belief is held and how often people pray or attend religious services, among others. Religiosity in the United States is unmistakable and puts America forward as a stark outlier because levels of religiosity tend to be higher than those in other wealthy countries (Diamant 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2004). America also has increased levels of civil religion as compared to other secular nations, such as France. Judicial administration, public education, and financial institutions are just a few of the governmental administrations that are protected from the establishment of religion but they also exist within the liminal space of civil religion (Gorski 2017).

When it comes to religious affiliation in America, 63 percent of the population continues to identify as Christian (Pew Research Center 2021). The ability of Christians to inject religiosity into the American secular sphere demonstrates that Christians can tap into their perceived higher social status and social networks to reach common goals and uphold similar values (Coleman 1988; Ridgeway and Markus 2022). The trustworthiness of other Christians is based on the valued identity and perceived prestige of Christian membership (Coleman 1988; La Porta et al. 1997; Putnam 1994). This consequently establishes the *untrustworthiness* of others that often results in exclusivity and inequality for those deemed “other” (Fukuyama 2001; Kristiansen 2004; Ridgeway and Markus 2022; Tan and Vogel 2008; du Toit 2016; Uslaner 2004). Additionally, there is evidence that groups with strong moral bonds will often reduce their level of trust and cooperation with those outside the group, thus creating a radius of distrust in addition to one of trust (Fukuyama 2001; Uslaner 2004). Indeed, researchers have found that atheists are viewed as untrustworthy and unfit to uphold or be a part of a conventional society (Brown-

Iannuzzi, McKee, and Gervais 2018; Cheng, Pagano Jr., and Shariff 2018; Edgell et al. 2016; Gervais 2014; Gervais et al. 2011; Hammer et al. 2012). Other research has shown that Christian Americans use vertical networks (Maselko, Hughes, and Cheney 2011) and horizontal networks of religious connections to increase their range of influence by tolerating other sects of theists, while remaining exclusionary toward nontheists (La Porta et al. 1997). In contrast, Atheists and other nontheists do not have similar methods of vertical or horizontal networks because they are a nonhomogeneous group (Fukuyama 2001; Kristiansen 2004; Putnam 1994).

There is ample evidence of the cultural pervasiveness and privilege of Christianity in America when combining societal frameworks of social capital and hegemony with the social status Christians embody (Blumenfeld 2006). One example of this cultural pervasiveness can be found on American coins and bills, which are emblazoned with the phrase “In God We Trust.” Another example is the pledge of allegiance taught and recited in American public schools, which includes the phrase “one nation—under God”. The addition of *under God* resulted from a resurgence of religiosity starting in the 1950’s in response to atheistic communism (Stark and Finke 2000). These examples illustrate how American Christians express religiosity on a societal level but also the cultural and social leverage they can take advantage of. With Christian symbols, norms, and values so prevalent in America, it makes it difficult to argue that America is strictly a secular country.

In religious intergroup contexts, people’s acts of discrimination rely on social interpretations of social power, conflict, and status (Giles and Evans 1986; Ridgeway and Markus 2022). Regarding power and conflict, the perception of the amount of power a competing group has shapes its effect on conflict. Religion is also a catalyst for intergroup intolerance and hostility (Fukuyama 2001; Silberman 2005). Regarding group size, the trend of

religious affiliations in America shows a steady rise in some nontheist identities, specifically Atheists and Agnostics, up from 7 percent in 2015 to 10 percent in 2021 (Pew Research Center 2021). Conversely, Christians comprised 77 percent of the population in 2009 and dropped 14 percent in 2021 (Pew Research Center 2021). The decline in the Christian population may be perceived by those who identify as Christian as a weakening of power by way of lost social status and cultural influence that threatens their Christian hegemony. Furthermore, combining this perceived social threat with a distinct distrust of nontheists can create an environment conducive to prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory behavior.

Microaggressions

While the term discrimination only requires a prejudice to be acted upon, there are two main categories discrimination typically falls under. The first is explicit discrimination—actions that are publicly overt or blatant and enacted with the intent to demean or to harm another due to their perceived marginalized group membership or identity. The second form is covert discrimination, often termed *microaggressions*, which are subtle or concealed forms of discrimination (Sue 2013; Williams, Skinta, and Martin-Willett 2021). However, there is an ongoing debate about whether or not a willful intent is required to classify covert discrimination as microaggressions, and is a point I discuss in the conclusion (Lilienfeld 2020).

Microaggressions cover a variety of discriminations and fall under three general types developed by Sue (2013): microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults consist of derogatory behavior similar to explicit discrimination; what makes this behavior “micro” is that it is done privately or within a small but seemingly safe or sympathetic group context. In this respect what would usually be seen as overt discrimination is expressed in a more hidden manner. Microinsults occur when a person from a marginalized group experiences rude,

insensitive, and demeaning actions that undermine their perceived identity group.

Microinvalidations are similar to microinsults, but they differ in that the focus is on the feelings, thoughts, and experiential reality of a marginalized individual who is told their experiences are doubtful, negligible, or nonexistent. All three forms of microaggressions are not only hurtful to experience, but they can also cause true harm. Research has shown that microaggressions, through increased stress, can lead to elevated rates of hypertension (Williams and Neighbors 2001), as well as an increase in negative mental health outcomes (Cheng et al. 2018; Kim, Kendall, and Cheon 2017; Matheson et al. 2019; Sue et al. 2007).

The microaggression framework has been used in the last decade to study covert discrimination against racial minorities and other marginalized groups such as Muslims (Haque et al. 2019; Poynting and Briskman 2018) and those who identify as LGBTQ (Galupo and Resnick 2016; Nadal 2019). However, there is a dearth of research focusing on the intersection of microaggressions and nontheists. There is only one study focusing on nontheists and the nonreligious, sometimes referred to as *nones*, explicitly using a microaggression framework with respondents reporting experiencing several forms of microaggressions (Cheng et al., 2018). Cheng and colleagues developed and validated the *Microaggressions Against Non-Religious Individuals Scale* (MANRIS), to measure the types of microaggressions nontheists experience and to assess any correlation with negative mental health outcomes. The researchers found that respondents had higher rates of depression among those who experienced microaggressions as compared to those who did not. This is consistent with previous research on racialized or ethnic-based microaggressions correlating with negative mental health outcomes (Haque et al. 2019; Sue 2013).

However, what is lacking in the literature regarding microaggressions that nontheists face is the rhetorical constructs that theists, those who *do* believe in God, use when they employ microaggressions. Given that microaggressions cover a wide range of discriminatory behavior, they have the potential to affect different marginalized groups, and can cause negative health outcomes. Consequently, better research is needed to explore microaggressions, especially regarding marginalized groups. Understanding how these microaggressions are rhetorically framed could inform theories of how microaggressions toward nontheists contribute to their social marginalization.

CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY

Researcher Positionality Statement

It is prudent that I disclose the personal social factors that have contributed to my methodological approach. I self-identify as an Atheist who is a White, bisexual, cisgendered woman. Although I was raised agnostically, I was afforded opportunities to learn about and “try on” the religious traditions I found interesting. Throughout my teenage years I “tried on” different religions and sought discussion with others on the virtues of their beliefs, but I found myself consistently defaulting back to atheism. Thus, my approach to religious beliefs and their systems has been from a nontheist outsider perspective. However, having been born and raised in America I have been enculturated by a Christian hegemonic society of which the effects are largely unavoidable. Therefore, I do share some of the same values my participants profess to have as well as some of their traditions—like celebrating Christmas—but I cannot relate to what are common religious experiences or practices.

As a result of America being a highly religious country, I regularly interact with those who believe in God in my day-to-day life and even more so due to personal involvement in interfaith groups and initiatives; but as such, I have only ever experienced the social world as part of a marginalized “religious” group. These experiences have inspired me to explore the interactive and symbolic ways dominant and marginalized religious groups navigate social encounters and society as a whole. I have a vested interest in understanding the discord that is felt and experienced between these groups. Therefore, my nontheist identity and intersectional experiences are the lenses through which the research question, design, and analyses were conducted. I have written below in detail how I approached the issue of the disclosure of my religious affiliation to participants (p. 24). It would be remiss if I did not also point out that I was

raised and continue to live within privileged middle-class Whiteness that affords me advantages and privileges that some of my participants are continually denied. Structural racism affects those who are ethnically and/or racially minoritized and intersects with other identity markers such as religious affiliation. This adds complexity to interactions when a person is minoritized in one or more ways but whose religious affiliation is either in concordance with the dominant group or marginalized outside of it. Even though I identify with a marginalized “religious” group my Whiteness protects me from racial and ethnic biases and prejudices that would otherwise compound my marginalization.

Qualitative Design Strategy

This study examined rhetorical microaggressions from American religious Christians as they discuss their perceptions of prejudice and discrimination nontheists may or may not face. Given the difficulty in studying firsthand prejudice and discrimination and the covert nature of microaggressions, I used qualitative semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. I used grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and a thematic analysis approach (Adu 2019; Braun and Clarke 2022) to understand the context and varieties of microaggressions within the data.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

I chose participants based on the following criteria: 18 years old or older, physically present in either northern central Illinois or northeast Tennessee, identify as Christian, and be moderately to highly religious. Northern central Illinois and northeast Tennessee represent two contrasting regions both in regional levels of religiosity and political affiliations, with the former being less religious and politically moderate and the latter being highly religious and politically conservative. I chose contrasting regions to ensure a greater likelihood of capturing a more diverse range of microaggressions should they be present. Christians are a hegemonic group in

America's religious landscape which provides them the cultural power to establish social norms, influence policy and laws, and utilize their privilege to acquire and maintain advantages. Therefore, focusing on participants who identify as Christian helped to contextualize the social power differentials between Christians and nontheists. I anticipated that microaggressions against nontheists might be difficult to capture; therefore, participants were chosen based on their level of religiosity using a modified 5-question Centrality of Religiosity Scale (see Appendix C). Participants were required to score a minimum of 3.6 or higher on the modified CRS, because higher religiosity is correlated with distrust in others and a predilection to discriminate (Berggren and Bjørnskov 2009; Chuah et al. 2016).

Recruitment

Capturing covert forms of discrimination in situ is difficult and can be beleaguered by response biases. Therefore, accounting for and preventing this phenomenon required careful attention to the language being used in all communications with participants. This began with the language being intentionally vague, but nonetheless accurate, in both digital and print advertisements. I first listed the inclusion criteria that clearly conveyed that only Christians were eligible to participate in the study. To describe the study's purpose in advertisements, I used the following statement, "What is it about? Experiences and opinions on discrimination for those who believe in God and those that don't." Next, I again used an accurate but generalized description of the study for the consent form, by stating:

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences and opinions that Christians have regarding the types of discrimination faced by those who do believe in God and those who do not believe in God. This study aims to add to previous research by collecting descriptions and opinions directly from Christians.

Taken together, I leveraged participants' assumptions that the focus of the study was about Christian discrimination experiences and not their opinions on the discrimination nontheists face.

I then recruited participants by posting advertisements to the pages of interfaith groups and churches on Facebook, physical flyers posted in classroom buildings on ETSU's campus, and using snowball sampling through prior participants. I also reached out to known contacts to refer friends or family by providing them a link to my online eligibility survey. All eligible participants who volunteered to conduct an interview were offered an incentive of \$15 for participating in the study.

Participants

I conducted one-hour interviews both virtually and face-to-face with 16 adults. Demographically, the average age of my participants was 37 years but varied widely from 20 to 61 years of age. Most participants (12) identified as women and were largely located in Tennessee (11). The participant pool was racially similar, as only two participants identified as Black and one White participant disclosed being ethnically Hispanic. Denominations that participants were affiliated with also varied between traditionally conservative and liberal, but the participants were overwhelmingly evangelical (11), with the remaining participants being of a moderate tradition (2) or a liberal religious viewpoint or tradition (3). Political affiliation and viewpoints are increasingly indicative of stances toward social phenomena such as discrimination, church-state separation, and social justice (Pew Research Center 2017). Of the participants who declared a political viewpoint, five were conservatives, five were moderates, and five were liberals or liberal leaning. Of those who declared a political affiliation, three identified as Republican, six as Independent or nonpartisan, and four identified as a Democrat or leaning Democrat. The demographics of the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants

Pseudonym	Age	State	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Denomination	Political Viewpoint	Political Affiliation
Anastasia	43	IL	Woman	White	Catholic	Conservative	Republican
Andrew	24	TN	Man	White	Protestant	Liberal	Democrat
Ashton	61	TN	Woman	White	Reformed	Conservative	Republican
Christine	61	TN	Woman	White	Southern Baptist	Moderate	Independent
Dolores	44	TN	Woman	Black	Baptist	Liberal	Democrat
Felicia	42	IL	Woman	White	Evangelical Lutheran	Conservative	Nonpartisan
Harry	20	TN	Non-Binary	White	Presbyterian	Liberal	Democrat
Holly	24	TN	Woman	White	Nondenominational	Moderate	Democrat leaning
Jason	36	IL	Man	White	Catholic	Moderate	Independent
Jesus Freak	42	TN	Woman	White	Pentecostal	Conservative	Independent
Joy	35	IL	Woman	Hispanic	Nondenominational	Liberal-moderate	Nonpartisan
Molly	23	TN	Nonconforming	White	Assembly of God	Far-left socialist	Independent
Nusi	30	TN	Woman	Black	Pentecostal	None	None
Purple	34	IL	Woman	White	Nondenominational	Conservative	Republican
Trout	24	TN	Woman	White	Nondenominational	Liberal leaning	Independent
Vanessa	45	TN	Woman	White	Nondenominational	Moderate	Independent

Reporting Anonymity. In the reporting of certain data I have withheld identifying information, such as gender or other demographics, in an effort to protect a participant's anonymity.

Interviews

Administration. Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the study, participants were given the option of conducting the one-hour interviews in person or virtually. Most participants (11) chose to conduct the interview virtually. All participants were audio- and video- recorded regardless of interview modality. The purpose of recording the audio and visual components was to capture intonation, cadence, body language, and facial expression data. These nonverbal cues were included in the analysis and provide additional context and depth to the analysis that would not be present if only analyzing verbal responses. When interviews were conducted in person the recording device was set to the side with a full view of the participant so as not to hinder communication between the interviewer and interviewee. In person video recordings were captured via Zoom where internet connection was stable and where the connection was unstable, they were recorded via the mobile Atlas.ti app. All virtual interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom. Each interview lasted approximately the same amount of time and followed the same semi-structured interview guide.

Question strategy. I continued the effort to reduce response biases by leveraging the assumptions participants may have had and applied them to the design of the semi-structured interview guide. The first two questions of the interview guide were designed to build rapport with participants but also to reinforce the suppositions that the study was about Christian experiences of discrimination and not their opinions on the discrimination nontheists face. The first question asked was what they liked most about their church and I then used probes to

explore the context of their church, such as how long they had attended as well as how often and with whom. Next, I asked “what does belief in God mean to you?” Most participants responded with theological stances rather than statements of personal piety or emotions. In anticipation of these theological-based responses, the probing question asked was what emotions came up for them when thinking about their belief in God.

I then segued into asking the first nontheist based question, “What do you think or feel about people who don’t believe in God?” This introduced the strategy for an alternating question order, in that questions were framed to apply to Christians first and then to nontheists. For example, the following question was asked, “have you ever been discriminated against *because* you are Christian?” After probing further, the next question asked was, “do you think those who don’t believe in God experience discrimination (too)?” Constructing the question order in this manner implied that the researcher’s main interest was in Christian-framed questions when in fact the secondary, nontheist questions were the primary focus.

Questions were less open-ended than typically used in qualitative design because the research focus was based on opinions and biases, not necessarily participants’ experiences. However, through probing questions I encouraged participants to describe how and why they had formed their opinions. Not only did this strategy reduce response biases, but it also allowed me to observe microaggressions in a more naturalistic way. I also constructed two questions to assess if participants would employ the nontheist microaggression of *denial of prejudice*, as proposed in the MANRIS measurement by Cheng et al. (2018). A full list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

Disclosure of researcher background. I did not reveal my religious affiliations at any point before or during the interview process. I chose not to disclose my lack of religious

affiliation to avoid response biases while also allowing participants to assume my motivation for conducting this research. I anticipated the possibility of participants asking what my religious affiliation was and therefore planned the response, “I am more than happy to talk about it after the interview but for now I want the focus to be on your thoughts and feelings.” This answer satisfied participants and the interviews were able to resume unhindered. Once the interviews concluded, I revealed that I identified as an Atheist who was raised without religion. I also disclosed that my personal interests were centered in interfaith dialogue and that I am quite involved in the interfaith community in my hometown.

Analytic Strategy

To analyze themes of the denial of prejudice and other microaggressions against nontheists, I conducted a qualitative thematic analysis with a grounded theory approach. However, I first created microaggression categories derived from the MANRIS measurement and used them for selective coding. I then engaged in open coding looking for emergent themes beyond my initial set of codes. Finally, I used axial coding to determine additional categories, overlaps, variants, or exceptions (Charmaz 2006).

Transcription Process

As noted above, video and audio were captured to collect data not only to produce transcripts of the words spoken but also to gather data on intonations, cadences, body language, and facial expressions of participants. Transcripts were initially produced using Zoom’s auto-transcription feature. I then went through a process of cleaning the transcripts to correct language errors. As I cleaned the transcripts of these errors, I simultaneously watched the video and notated the transcript with vocal cadences, verbal inflections, emotional cues, facial expressions, and body language. I also de-identified the transcripts by omitting proper nouns, replacing

identifiable information with [redacted], or by replacing identifiable words or statements with generic terms.

Coding

I developed the initial set of codes from the five main microaggression categories found in Cheng et al.'s MANRIS measurement (2018). Each MANRIS category has four to nine associated statements that correspond to the microaggression category. For example, one of the statements that is associated with the Denial of Non-Religious Prejudice category is, "others have denied that non-religious people face extra obstacles when compared with others." Another associated statement for the same category is, "others have suggested that my negative experiences as a non-religious individual do not compare with the negative experiences of religious individuals." Therefore, the initial selective codes were as follows: assumption of inferiority, denial of prejudice, assumptions of religiosity, endorsing nontheist stereotypes, and pathology of a nontheist identity.

Analytic coding process. Transcripts were largely produced and corrected after the interviews were conducted and thus most analyses were performed after all interviews had concluded. During my use of open coding, I found emergent themes beyond microaggressions that contextualized beliefs about the discrimination my religious participants perceived nontheists to face. For example, denials of nontheist prejudices were often accompanied by feelings of perceived persecution, such as believing nontheists receive preferential treatment in secular spaces while Christians are shunned or excluded. Including nonverbal language such as verbal intonations and cadences, as well as pauses and other nonverbal communication in the analysis was especially useful when interpreting underlying emotional responses and beliefs.

These nonverbal communications helped to contextualize participants' interview responses and reveal hidden biases and emotions.

During the axial coding phase I reevaluated initial microaggression categories and found specifically there were fewer instances of participants pathologizing nontheist identities. I also renamed MANRIS-derived codes to better align with the emergent themes as well as combined two categories in the MANRIS to better reflect sociological concepts. It was also during this phase that several new categories of microaggressions were identified, such as participants viewing secular systems and people as threatening to different social aspects of their perception of America. A full list of codes can be found in Appendix B.

CHAPTER 3. THE RHETORIC OF MICROAGGRESSIONS

The categories of microaggressions below have been developed in two distinct ways. The first set of classifications that were developed by Cheng et al. (2018) and represent the first four categories listed below, namely: *assumes inferiority and stereotypes*, *belief as default* (I renamed this category, see p. 34 for details), *denial of prejudice and discrimination*, and *pathologizes nontheists*. The second set of classifications are a result of using open coding and represent five novel categories of microaggressions found within the data. I have categorized them as the following: *assumes ignorance*, *desire conversion*, *religiosity as social norm*, *secularity as threat*, and the *superiority of belief*. There are several categories that often overlap and at times are spoken about in similar ways. However, one category does not necessarily always appear with another similar one. I argue that keeping them distinct allows for a more robust rhetorical analysis. It is also strategic, considering the implications for similar research in the future.

It should be noted that all but two of the 16 participants studied used at least one microaggression over the course of their interview. However, the participants varied greatly in their responses to the questions asked, with some participants being polar opposites in their beliefs about discrimination and power differentials between theists and nontheists. Included in each microaggression category below are the frequencies of the microaggressions employed and the number of participants who employed them. This is not meant to be extrapolated to represent the general population, but rather to illuminate which microaggressions may be more likely to be employed than others.

Table 2. Number of Microaggressions Employed

Microaggression Theme	Total Employed	Number of Participants Who Employed Them
Assumes Inferiority & Stereotypes	123	14
Belief as Default	22	9
Denial of Prejudice	34	9
Pathologizes Nontheists	8	4
Assumes Ignorance	30	8
Intent to Convert	46	10
Religiosity as Norm	35	8
Secularity as threat	28	6
Superiority of Belief	61	11

MANRIS Derived Microaggressions

Inferiority and Stereotypes

In the Cheng et al. (2018) MANRIS measurement, the *assumes inferiority* microaggression theme is classified using nine statements that nonreligious participants could report personally experiencing. The statements included concepts such as a nontheists' contribution are not as valuable, that a nontheist is selfish, a cheater, and lacks morals. These statements are asked in a way that are individualized and not applied to nontheists as a group and are based on concepts of trustworthiness and morality alone. One such statement is, "others have assumed that I am untrustworthy because of my lack of religion." Another, "others have assumed I have no morals because of my lack of religion." To adhere to the parameters set in the MANRIS measurement, I initially coded the data in a way that differentiated *assumptions of inferiority* from another similar dimension of MANRIS, *assumes stereotypes*. This stereotype microaggression category is based on assumptions that all nontheists are alike and includes

stereotypes that go beyond morality, such as being self-centered, thinking they are better than everyone, and are not willing to accept other's viewpoints. This presented a small challenge during coding due to question design. I often asked about nontheists as a group, for example, "what do you think or feel about people who don't believe in God?" Many interviewees answered this question by applying their thoughts and feelings to nontheists as a group. A few participants indicated that it depends on the person and made it clear they were not applying their thoughts and feelings to the group. Even so, the wording of my questions provides little option but to think of nontheists as a group. Therefore, functionally, *assumes inferiority* and *assumes stereotypes* are difficult to assess separately because of how I designed the interview guide. Subsequently, in my analysis I joined these two themes found in MANRIS and created the microaggression category *assumptions of inferiority and stereotypes*. Consequently, this single category was the most frequently used by the participants in the study. *Assumptions of inferiority and stereotypes* were employed 123 times by 87 percent of participants.

Nontheists as immoral. For example, Anastasia, a 43-year-old White woman who lives in Illinois believed that theists are disadvantaged in the court systems, largely due to her beliefs about the inferiority of nontheists, nontheist stereotypes, and the superiority of belief. She had a friend whose son is in jail and described him as someone who "had turned back to God and had cleaned his act up," but was dismayed the court would still "throw the book at him." She conveyed that this was because:

A nonbeliever made accusations, untrue accusations against him. [...] And all because they had to... they took the words of two people that had no idea who God was. And just, you know, because they didn't get the attention they wanted. [They] sent a God-fearing man to, to prison for 15 years.

Not only did she imply that the word of nontheists is not worth as much as that of a theist, but that they are attention seekers. She went on to further explain how the testimony of a church pastor should have afforded him a benefit in sentencing. After asking why she thought his Christianity should be important to his sentencing she stated:

Knowing that he was... I mean. [*Sighs*] The church pastor, showed up to talk about him, you know, the good things about him and testify. And said, 'hey, I've seen him in church every week since this, since this happened.' And, but since then, they... but they didn't even take that into account. And they just threw the book at him and threw him in jail. No remorse. The girls won't recant... nothing.

After confirming she believed that nontheists were favored in the court system, I asked what she thought nontheists are able to do in the system that Christians aren't and her answer illuminates the near inseparability of believing religious people are superior, as attested above, and nontheists' inferiority and stereotypes. With narrowing eyes and a suspicious judgmental tone, she attested, "sometimes I wonder if [nontheists are] a little manipulative. Sometimes I almost wonder like, 'oh, you're Christian. Ha, ha, ha,'" intimating they may be intentionally colluding against Christians.

It was not unusual when one of my participants connected the Bible to morality and an absence of "Judeo-Christian" values to immorality. Prior research has shown that atheists, more so than any other religious, ethnic, or cultural group, are seen as the likely culprits of serial murders (Gervais 2014; Gervais et al. 2017). When I asked Vanessa, a 45-year-old White woman in Tennessee, if she thought the court system treats Christians and nontheists the same, she explained:

If you, if you, if you go deeper—so, let’s just say for example, if you don’t have a belief in any type of higher power, if you don’t believe there’s any such thing as right or wrong. [Pauses and leans forward to emphasize] Not that people who don’t believe in God are that way. Like—that’s a whole interesting conversation—but if you literally feel like, ‘well, there’s no reason I should not do what I want.’ Yeah! [Shrugs] You’re going to get treated differently [then chuckles]. Because our judicial system is a Judeo-Christian foundation. It is, right? [...] There’s an idea that when you believe in this higher power and you believe in things like ‘yeah, maybe don’t murder someone’ or take something that’s not yours. You could totally, like, there’s a thousand other things that are personal that you could decide are right or wrong for you, right? [...] A serial killer might *argue* ‘I’m being discriminated against because I believe it’s *okay* for me to murder whoever I want because I don’t believe there *will* be any consequences for it’ ... Right? Or there shouldn’t be [because] ‘why can’t I pursue my ultimate happiness, which is killing people?’ Please don’t take that out of context.

The context was the fairness of the judicial system for those who do and do not believe in God and her response showed she holds explicit biases toward nontheism that she does not acknowledge. Vanessa believed that the court system is based on Christian values that come from the Bible, therefore imagining a scenario where the court was devoid of Christianity led her to believe that morality would be lost. Later in the interview she revealed this bias again when discussing social supports for Christians and nontheists in secular institutions like schools; she stated:

I thought you were going to talk about, like, our whole setup with, like, supporting the homeless and things like that. And I was like *well*, in that case I feel like we’re a *very*

‘unreligious’ country because I think it’s super secular how we deal with people that could be helped and how we handle healthcare. I think we’re very greed driven
[*scrunches nose in disapproval*].

Again, Vanessa equated morality with religious belief. She thought that caring for others is being godly and living according to the Bible, whereas being greedy and not being caring toward others are characteristics of the unreligious—in other words, the immoral.

Nontheists as hedonistic. As shown above, it is common for nontheists to be viewed as immoral. Sometimes that view is rooted in the idea that nontheists are hedonists, or those who put the pursuit of pleasure above all else. While only one participant employed the assumes inferiority microaggression based on hedonism, it is important to note the broad forms this theme may take. In response to asking about the religious and nonreligious demographics of America, Christine a 61-year-old White woman in Tennessee believed that at least 50% of the population were nontheists and some were perhaps those who *could* believe but ignore God because, “Maybe those people don’t want to give God any attention, you know. Maybe He gets in the way of their fun or their decisions or whatever, you know?” This sentiment undergirds the idea that nontheists prefer to engage in indulgences and would ultimately make untempered decisions without God.

Nontheists as angry or aggressive. Another stereotype that is commonly encountered by nontheists is that they are angry or aggressive. Jason, a White 36-year-old man in Illinois, described himself as “not a very emotional person.” He had an analytical approach to the questions asked, his responses were metered, and he declined to answer several lines of questioning due to not knowing enough to state an opinion. When asked what emotions, if any, come up when he thinks about people who don’t believe in God, he responded that it depended

on if he knew them. He went on to say, “you’ve got some people that try to impose their values on you, and then there’s some that are more... umm, a little bit more laid back and not as aggressive or assertive.” This sentiment was echoed in a frank manner by a White 42-year-old woman in Tennessee who coined herself Jesus Freak, stating “I find that a lot of people who don’t believe in God are [*nods head deeply*] ... just *angry*.”

Andrew, a White 24-year-old man in Tennessee, in response to being asked how he would feel about a nontheist center on campus for students expressed his concern:

I would just be concerned about a sort of negativity of it. Because I think a lot of people who have joined the organization would come because they had bad experiences with their religious institutions, and I just would hope that wouldn’t... that they... people in there wouldn’t foster more like negativity. But that’s just a general issue. [*Says flippantly*] But that’s just a general issue.

When asked to expound, he intimated they would need some sort of expert, “like with atheist organizations a lot of it would be based... a lot of people who would come in would come because they had a lot of negative associations with religious institutions and because a lot of these people have unresolved issues with those organizations, they wouldn’t be in contact with a person who is trained to handle that sort of thing.”

I asked my participants how comfortable they would be if they attended an interfaith event and a nontheist gave a speech, and several worried about a nontheist’s motivations and behavior at such an event. For example, a 34-year-old White-Hispanic woman in Illinois, who coined herself Purple, stated, “as a believer, I don’t think I would be uncomfortable in that situation unless it turned into a... *God blaming speech*.” This was after discussing an interfaith

event she had attended in the past at length with no worries or apprehensions of discord between faiths. Anastasia, also from Illinois, was concerned stating, “Depends upon what their speech was about. [...] If they’re coming in spewing hate, I’m—I’m done with them!” Vanessa in Tennessee also felt strongly about it, mentioning her concerns more than once. When asked about nontheists just participating in an event, not leading it or giving a speech, she agrees they should be invited but clarifies, “as long as you’re not there to like, do harm to anyone.” When asked specifically about her comfort level of a nontheist giving a speech at a prayer vigil she reiterated in clear terms, “If they want to give a speech, as long as they’re not attacking anyone else, just like if I was at an interfaith thing.” These quotes indicate that not only is there a common belief that nontheists are angry or aggressive, but that they may act out that anger in inappropriate ways such as during a somber community event that mourns a tragedy.

Belief as Default

In the Cheng et al. (2018) MANRIS measurement, there is an *assumptions of religiosity* microaggression theme. For example, a few of the statements used for this classification are “others have assumed that I am religious,” relatedly, “others have acted surprised that I do not believe in God or Gods,” and “others have told me to express thanks to God or Gods for an event.” These were somewhat impractical to observe in situ, in part because they are more conversational and situational or require knowledge about the religious identity of the person they are speaking to—in this case, myself as the interviewer. While a few participants alluded to assumptions that I shared a Christian faith, to anyone who asked my religious identity I responded that I would be happy to answer that question after the interview, as not to affect my data. Instead of using the only example of the assumption of belief that followed the MANRIS parameters, though I do include it, I used the sentiment behind these statements that belief is

natural or a default. Therefore, I renamed this microaggression category *belief as default*. This particular microaggression category was invoked 22 times by over half of participants who employed it at least once.

One participant directly assumed that I shared not only a Christian faith but that I attended church and furthermore, never asked my religious identity or about my religiosity. When speaking about how her belief in the decline of Christians in the United States affected other Christians, Anastasia from Illinois pointed out it would make them socially “more of an outcast.” She then stated that social support is helpful to Christians “because then you don’t feel alone in the world,” to which she continued, “Like, if you [*meaning me, the interviewer*] go to church right now, you’re going with your husband—I’m not—I’m not going to church with anybody, because I’m not married.” This is a clear assumption that I share a Christian faith as well as attend church, as Anastasia never asked my religious identity nor if I attend a place of worship.

Several participants negated the identity of nontheists either by insisting they were still divine beings or that they would at some point in their life become a theist. This latter sentiment is familiar to theists and nontheists alike and is embodied by the common saying “there are no atheists in foxholes.” It erases nontheist identities and puts forward the idea that belief is not only the default but that it is inevitable. Nusi, a Black 30-year-old woman in Tennessee, stated resolutely that, actually, everyone believes in God because:

When they’re in trouble they say, ‘oh God help me.’ So, really, they want to serve Him. [...] I still believe everybody believes, but just in a different—God can be attributable to anything. But when we are judged and... you still see people calling out for God, especially when there is trouble.

Christine in Tennessee was also direct in treating belief as being a default. When asked what she thinks about people who don't believe in God she imagined that their nontheism was rooted in something, "I think they probably had, a—a past that leads them to that belief. Perhaps they've been raised ultra conservative and had trauma in their backgrounds for them to have a knee jerk reaction not to believe." She further asserted that there is an innateness of belief because, "God places it in the hearts of everyone to have a knowledge of a higher being. And, so yeah, if there are people who steadfastly say I *don't* believe in God, I do feel sorry that they don't." Dolores, a 44-year-old Black woman in Tennessee, erased the nontheist identity by assuring me that eventually they would become believers in God. When asked what she thinks about nontheists she firmly stated, "I usually feel like it's not their time yet and that something's going to happen that makes them believe." This is a form of invalidation that applies to the group in totality.

Denial of Prejudice and Discrimination

According to the MANRIS measurement, the *denial of prejudice* microaggression theme is classified by using seven statements that nonreligious participants could report having experienced. For example, one statement is "others have denied that non-religious people face extra obstacles when compared with others." Another, "others have suggested that my negative experiences as a non-religious individual do not compare with the negative experiences of religious individuals." I have combined the ideas of prejudice and discrimination into the code *denial of prejudice and discrimination* because participants often conflated the two or used them interchangeably. This category was employed 33 times by over half of participants.

Denials of nontheist discrimination with perceptions of Christian discrimination.

Participants who viewed Christians as a marginalized group or who otherwise had very little

social capital or status saw themselves as targets of prejudice and discrimination largely enacted by nontheists. Those who were of this view often denied that nontheists experience discrimination and instead received preferential treatment in secular institutions.

Jesus Freak had a conversation with a friend before her interview in which the friend stated that Christians are not discriminated against because “we just know to keep our mouth shut.” She responded to her friend, “Yeah. But in doing that, isn’t *that* discrimination? Because we know if we say something, then you automatically... So, if I say I’m a Christian, then I automatically get: I’m a racist, I’m a homophobe, I’m a xenophobe.” Upon asking her if she had held back identifying as a Christian to avoid automatically being seen in that way she stated, she would not “volunteer that information because then I know what happens.” When asked if she thought nontheists experienced discrimination too, she deflected and stated, “Well, I think everybody probably just, experiences discrimination.” When I clarified that I meant specifically because of their identity she stated, “not that I have seen.” After I asked why she believed nontheists don’t experience discrimination, she linked a decline in Christian adherents to viewing nontheists as “more the norm now than not.” She even emphatically stated that she *knows* that “especially, college students are less and less presenting as like, Judeo-Christian or any type of religious faith and is mostly agnostic to Atheist or sometimes undecided.” According to Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape study, there is little difference between the religious composition of college graduates and those of the general population (2012).

Later in the interview she suggested she had “a lot of friends who are either atheist or more, more, agnostic, probably,” and I asked if any had talked to her about discrimination experiences. Confused, she asked, “like, discriminating me?” I clarified that I meant if they had

expressed having experienced discrimination or obstacles due to *their* identity, and her reaction was quite revealing:

No. [*Looks confused, looks down and pauses*]. Uh, no. I mean, [*stutters*] I, the only person I [*stutters, eyes widen*] ... [*stutters*] and she hasn't... [*shakes head, says almost sheepishly*] No, she's just angry and she just lashed out about being a Christian. But she [*smiles and chuckles through her words*] doesn't say anything about not being, you know, being discriminated now that she wasn't one!

She found the notion of nontheist discrimination so preposterous that not only did she have a hard time comprehending the notion, but found it a laughable idea. However, her worldview on the absence of discrimination against nontheists is not complete without the context of her perceived experiences of discrimination and persecution due to being Christian.

When discussing her own experiences of discrimination because of her identity, she gave the example of being coined "The Christian Girl" in school and being taunted for it. However, she divulged details of her upbringing that made it clear she was not being taunted for believing in Jesus, but rather belonging to the United Pentecostal Church, which she described as, "it's a, it's a, it's a *cult!* Like it was very strict." They taunted her because she was *that* Christian girl: the one who was not allowed to cut her hair, wear pants, watch movies, wear make-up, or partake in other typical school-aged behavior. When asked what she would do if another Christian came to her and said they had been discriminated against, she stated she wouldn't be surprised and would likely have a similar story in her list but, "I guess... one of those things is, we're *supposed* to be set apart. [...] But in that, we're just supposed to show love back, right?" Her words intimated that Christians are supposed to suffer persecution at the hands of others. The conflation of prejudice, discrimination, and persecution coupled with the opportunity to

prove one's faith in the face of opposition provides a narrative about why it is preposterous that nontheists face prejudice and discrimination.

Other participants shared her “us versus them” rhetoric to complete a narrative commensurate with their worldview. Anastasia in Illinois was adamant that it was Christians who were discriminated against not nontheists. We had just discussed Christian-based discrimination experiences she had when her place of employment wouldn't give her time off to either attend mass or for choir practices, saying “to me it was like that was not—that was not okay that they did that to me.” I then asked if she thought nontheists experienced discrimination she answered in a tone of contempt and annoyance: “Not in the workforce!” Even when presented with the scenario that a nontheist had come to them and said they were discriminated against, Anastasia replied with “um” several times and then paused with a sly smile and said she would tell them, “[to] keep the faith and you know, just kind of have a discussion of, um, about faith in general.”

Another White woman in Illinois, Felicia, who was 42 years old, was similar to Anastasia in this regard, though the discrimination she faced was through friends and acquaintances. When I asked her if she thought nontheists were discriminated against too, she first replied, “Oh, I would say sometimes yes.” However, when I asked her for an example, she backtracked and said she wasn't sure anymore. Later, when I gave her the same scenario I gave Anastasia, she responded in a very similar way with a sly smile and she said mischevously:

Well, I could definitely give him my Bible and let him read it! [*Laughs*]. And then I would sit down and talk to them about it and tell them if they wanted to learn, I could help them. And then, if they ever wanted, they're welcome to join our church. Or just show up one Sunday.

All three participants provide examples of discrimination they perceived facing as Christians but were skeptical nontheists experienced discrimination. Some even saw the scenario of a nontheist experiencing discrimination as an opportunity to convert them to Christianity, a microaggression category that will be explored later in more detail.

A note on the conflation of prejudice and discrimination. To ascertain a participant's understanding of discrimination and prime them for the topic of discrimination, I asked each participant "When you hear the word discrimination what comes to mind?" I then asked two follow-up questions: "Have you ever been discriminated against because you are Christian?" and (after probing) "Do you think people who don't believe in God experience discrimination?" Most participants initially thought about overt forms of discrimination and how that correlates with being treated unfairly because of one's race, identity, or beliefs. However, when it came to answering questions about firsthand experiences of discrimination or their opinions of the discrimination nontheists may face, many pointed to forms of prejudice. For instance, Harry, a 21-year-old White nonbinary individual in Tennessee, stated quite resolutely, "No, not like directly." They paused and then pointed to the possibility of other's prejudices,

I've definitely been in situations where I felt uncomfortable to talk about my beliefs because I knew somebody didn't believe. Like if they were an atheist, I felt uncomfortable, saying, 'Yeah, I'm a Christian,' because I felt like if I did, they'd start to like, feel more hesitant talking to me. Like, they thought maybe I'd start judging them when I'm not like that at all. [...] I definitely have had like, moments where I didn't tell someone that I was [Christian] because I was scared that they were gonna like, not want to talk to me anymore.

They then connected this to the experiences that nontheists may have, “Which is kind of crazy because I’m sure they think the same about being like atheist or any other belief system.” They concluded that maybe they have experienced discrimination, “so yeah, I–I guess so in that way.” But, when it came to their perception of nontheists experiencing discrimination, there was no hesitation: “Oh, yeah, definitely” yet they directly followed this by saying that “it goes both ways.” They conceded that “there’s definitely less if you’re talking solely based on being Christian or not in this area [the Bible Belt]. There’s less of that likely. [...] But it can all like, absolutely happen both ways. You just might not see it.” While Harry may not have been engaging in microaggressions against nontheists, their words point to a conflation of prejudice and discrimination that obfuscates the power imbalance between the Christian majority group and the minority nontheist group.

Another participant defined discrimination quite broadly. A 24-year-old White woman in Tennessee who chose the codename Trout, when asked what came to mind when she heard the word discrimination, stated, “Um, people that like, treat other people differently... usually. You know, so like there’s—people kind of discriminate against everybody, I think.” Also, like Harry, Trout considered the prejudice she faced as a form of discrimination. When I asked her specifically if she had been discriminated against due to her Christian identity she responded with, “Yeah. Um, people just automatically kind of assume that I’m... You know very like, conservative, um, or hateful. [And that] I won’t listen to ‘em, and I’ll like judge them and kinda stuff like that.” While prejudice and discrimination are related, and indeed most discrimination is based on an underlying prejudice, they are not the same. Conflating the two can overemphasize the impact of prejudice while diminishing the effect of discrimination. Furthermore, the impact of discrimination is related to group power dynamics and group majority and minority affiliation.

What many of my Christian participants experienced was the resentments of nontheist oppression and discrimination that results from existing in a Christian-dominated society.

Pathologizes Nontheists

Instances of teasing, mocking, or name-calling are placed under the category of *pathologizes nontheists* per the MANRIS measurement. Statements associated with this category of the scale, for example, are “others have made fun of my non-religious identity” and “others have called me names because of my non-religious identity.” I anticipated that any pathologizing of nontheists would only occur indirectly, as none of my participants knew for certain my nonreligious identity before or during the interviews. *Pathologizes nontheists* was the least employed microaggression category and those instances were largely directed toward nontheists as a group and not toward any one individual. Despite being the least deployed (8 times), 20 percent of interviewees mocked or demeaned nontheists.

One interviewee, Anastasia, used a mocking tone whenever she reenacted or role-played nontheists. When asked if she thought nontheists ever missed opportunities due to their identity, with contempt and anger stated, “not in the workforce!” She explained that they miss opportunities, with her head bobbing indignantly she taunted, “there *is* a God and religion *is* important, but to try to explain that to them, they’re like [*in a nasally mocking tone*] ‘well, your father had brain cancer for eight years. That is terrible. That’s not something to rejoice about.’” Additionally, Anastasia could only imagine that nontheists experienced discrimination in the context of applying for a job at a Christian establishment: “If you’re a nonbeliever and you go apply there, you know you need—[*raising her eyebrows in skeptical contempt*] and you feel discriminated against—you have to make sure that you understand your surroundings.” She continued in an exaggerated, nasally mocking tone, “I am a nonbeliever. I am applying to work

at a Christian place or a Catholic place. [*Mocking tone turning a bit angrier*] *Maybe*, I should understand, you know, their beliefs and not chastise the fact that they have a *chapel* in there, at their work!” She thus intimated that nontheist discrimination is not only the result of willful ignorance but a righteous consequence for nontheists’ overt derision for places of worship and the people who use them.

Vanessa, a 45-year-old White woman in Tennessee, also used a mocking tone but this was in response to being asked what she thought about nontheists. She stated that she felt sad but insisted that nontheists want “to be proven that they’re wrong” and she feels they have an almost frustration with God. She then laughed and mocked nontheists with the joke, “and I’m like well, if He’s not real, how can you be frustrated?” While not spiteful, this is a form of making fun of nontheists in a way that devalues their intelligence and ability to reason.

Dolores in Tennessee, a 44-year-old Black woman, also in response to what she thought about nontheists stated straightaway:

I feel like it’s naïve. Yeah, I feel like it’s, I feel like it’s naïve, but also, it’s ok to be naïve because we all have different levels of maturity according to different aspects of our life, and it just may be an aspect of their life that is not as enriched or as mature as it is in other people.

While she did not call an individual nontheist a name, it is still derogatory to call a specific group naïve or to suggest they are immature and unrefined. Although the category of *pathologizes nontheists* was uncommon, it reflected some of the clearest examples of disdainful rhetoric employed by participants.

Religious Privilege and Christian Supremacy

Expectations for privileged or preferential treatment functionally requires others to be disadvantaged, in this case nontheists. Envisioning an America where Christianity is universal among its populace and institutions, is Christian supremacy. While my participants' rhetoric never directly called for Christian privilege or supremacy, they did show a desire for the features that constitute it. These features comprise the core themes that emerged from data analysis, namely: *assumes ignorance, desires conversion, religiosity as social norm, secularity as threat, and the superiority of belief*. Through narrating their worldviews my interviewees described their wants, fears, and frustrations that undergirded their desire to transform the religious landscape into one of Christian dominance. Most of the participants who supported Christian supremacy in their rhetoric were unaware of the harm it manifests. While these thematic codes are distinct in their meaning, they are employed in ways that overlap and reinforce the core concepts of Christian supremacy.

Assumes Ignorance

Assumptions of ignorance play a significant role in Christian supremacy because it serves as a vehicle for the conversion of nontheists. It was often found in rhetoric that showed a desire to educate nontheists in a way that would spur them into converting to Christianity. This microaggression was also used as an explanation for nontheist behavior and provided context for how nontheists fit within participants' worldviews. This microaggression category was employed by half of the participants.

Vanessa in Tennessee viewed the participation of nontheists at interfaith events as an opportunity for conversion. She stated, "you know, to me that's another way that if someone doesn't believe in God, maybe they learn something through that exposure that awakens their

spiritual side.” This statement combined ideas of *belief as default* and *assumptions of ignorance* in that everyone has a spiritual core that is just waiting to be awakened with the source being nontheists’ lack of exposure to religious knowledge. With the pervasiveness of Christian culture and numerical dominance of those who believe in God in America, nontheists are not underexposed to religious ideas or people. Furthermore, viewing spirituality as innate and applicable to all discounts the experiences of nontheists.

Some participants sought to qualify lack of belief as a lack of deeper understanding. The woman in Illinois, who coined herself Purple, thought nontheists were not giving “God the credit, when credit is due to God. [Because] they don’t understand the magnitude of His *love*, of His grace, of His faithfulness.” She indicated that nontheists should remedy their ignorance and give praise to God. She did struggle with this idea because she said she is “not trying to be, like, negative towards them [nontheists] either.” She went on to indicate that we all experience negative things and believing in God isn’t all “rainbows and butterflies [but if nontheists have] that solid foundation and [they] have that promise that He has for us, then it kind of can change the way that you—your perspective and your outlook on things.” This desire for nontheists to have a deeper understanding of what belief in God entails requires nontheists to be ignorant of the experiences of Christians. Furthermore, this reinforces not only the idea that to have faith is superior but also that to have a solid foundation and happier life nontheists will need to convert to Christianity.

Anastasia in Illinois posited that the only reason nontheists would attend an interfaith event is through lack of understanding religion and religious people by stating, “they’re there because they’re curious and want to see what’s going *on*. Not because they’re like, you shouldn’t be worshipping. No, they’re actually curious in trying to figure out what the heck’s going on.”

When asked how comfortable she would be if a nontheist gave a speech at an interfaith prayer vigil she stated if they talk about hope and love she is “okay with that. Just because they’re still speaking from where they’re at [on their journey toward belief]. And they may not realize that, hey, that’s things we believe as, you know, God fearing people!” This particular participant employed the *assumes ignorance* microaggression 16 times throughout the interview. Her assumptions of nontheist ignorance were linked to other common themes shared by other participants. Ignorance supplied a reason why nontheists exist, either through lack of knowledge or a deeper understanding of God. And, more broadly, these assumptions also provided the key to eliminating nontheists—once “educated” nontheists could be converted to Christianity. Thus, the assumption that nontheists are ignorant serves as a function to how nontheists fit into participants’ Christian worldview: as their subordinates.

Desire Conversion

This category was the third most employed microaggression (62% of participants) and co-occurred strongly with *superiority of belief*. The conviction that belief is superior provides a motivation to proselytize to others. However, it would be remiss to ignore that for many, converting others to Christianity is woven into their theological worldview. Two of my participants attended the same church in which its mission bluntly stated they expected all members to convert at least one other person because it was Jesus’ last mandate to make disciples and is the foundation of their church. One of those church members, Ashton, a 61-year-old White woman in Tennessee, joins others from her church at a bar every week dedicated to “building relationships again.” When I asked if she pointedly seeks out people to directly inform them about her church and God, she said she just tries to make conversation. When asked how she feels about nontheists, her desire to convert others became quite clear. I have included two

longer quotes to highlight not only how she views nontheists but also how she feels about her role in converting others. The first emerged in the interview when asked what she thinks of nontheists:

I want them to [believe in God] because I want them all to feel that. I hope every single one of them will one day. I mean it, really! I mean, it's like, it's this—I know something that you are missing, and you have no idea that you're missing it, and I really want you to have it and you don't think it's a good thing, but I know it's a good thing! And, you know, it's like trying to get somebody to try this new food, and it's like, 'uh it's really, really—trust me it's good.'

Not only did she want to eliminate nontheist identity through religious education, but assumed they are ignorant of the good it provides others. I then went on to ask her what emotions came up for her when she thought about nontheists. She likened it to a parent-child relationship and roleplayed a conversation between the two:

I can't fault anybody, because if—you can't blame somebody for not knowing what they don't know, you know? And so, it's nothing—I don't dislike people that are not saved, or whatever, you know. It's just [*stutters*]. But it's like with your kid, it's like 'I just want what's good for you! You just don't get it!' 'But I'm gonna do this really stupid thing! [*With a whining childish tone*]' 'But I want what's good for you. [*In a parental tone*]'

Not only did she indicate that nontheists do not have the wherewithal to know what is good for them, but also that they should defer to Christians because they *do* know better. Furthermore, she saw them as children thus infantilizing them. This echoes Dolores' sentiment that nontheists are naïve and immature and that their time to believe has not yet come. Ashton envisioned an

America in which one day nontheists will no longer exist because they will have corrected their ignorance and matured through the act of being saved.

At the very end of my interview with the self-coined Jesus Freak, when asked if there was anything else she wanted to add before we concluded, she reiterated that we are all human, “But I don’t have anything negative to say [about nontheists] except that *they need Jesus!* Which, that’s not a negative thing to say!” She, like Ashton, views nontheists as incomplete without Jesus and imagines a world without them, never noting the harm this creates—a point I discuss in the conclusion.

One participant, Anastasia in Illinois, was willing to use underhanded and belligerent means to convert people to her Catholic faith. When we were discussing nontheists she knew, many of whom believed in God but did not attend church, she insisted that she engages with them genuinely and “not just [to] get butts in the seats.” Yet she uses that as a metric of conversion success. She went on to talk about her boyfriend who was resistant to going to church saying, “I always encourage him to join me for church. I have never said you have to go to church with me. Though... *[tapping finger on chin with eyes scrunched in a mischievous way]*... I’m taking him to a wedding with me. He doesn’t know it’s going to be a mass. *[Laughs]*.” She was fully aware that a mass, even as part of a wedding, would make him uncomfortable but decided ‘butts in seats’ mattered more. In this same conversation she spoke about a friend who she readily admitted she badgered weekly by telling her, “well, you should be going to church! [I just kept] giving her that—that weekly nudge to go to church” saying this last line in a droning almost monotonous tone to indicate she had said it repeatedly for a prolonged period of time. She went on to say how proud she was that her dogged insistence had not only paid off with her friend, but that she was able to convince her siblings to go back to church as well.

Other participants viewed the idea of conversion as a natural desire for Christians to have, a desire that Durkheim deems as irrepressible (Durkheim and Fields 1995). Vanessa in Tennessee, stated she wanted to prove nontheists wrong about their views of Christians, “not because it’s like, ‘Oh look at me, I’m right,’ but it’s because one of the tenets of being a person of faith is that you want people to know God, you want them to experience what you have.” She went on to quip that it is not like she is handing out religious pamphlets but rather, “if I believe in God and Jesus, do I not want the people around me, especially those that I love to experience what I have? Do I not want them to have freedom and healing? Of course, I do.” Vanessa intimates that nonbelief in God amounted to a type of imprisonment that deprives one of the opportunity for restoration. Conversion therefore would afford nontheists privileges that she assumed believing in God provided.

Even those who expressed only a handful of microaggressions saw conversion as part and parcel of being a Christian. For example, the woman in Tennessee codenamed Trout stated, “I guess we [Christians] care. You know, any believer just wants everybody to have that relationship.” This not only highlights that Christians see the desire to convert others as natural but, like the examples above, demonstrates their lack of awareness that conversion means elimination of any nontheist identity and is a feature of Christian supremacy. In the themes that follow, the desire for conversion is often implied or is a necessary component to assuage their fears or implement their Christian worldview.

Religiosity as Social Norm

Religiosity is largely measured using similar metrics that explore the depth of belief, commitment to attending services, and participating in private prayer, among others. This is similar to the way I use the term here but note that it is distinct from the microaggression *belief*

as default, in that the facets of religiosity should be a shared public social norm rather than ‘the divine’ being innate or a default. For example, desiring Christian holidays to be celebrated and shared by everyone fits the belief that religiosity should be the norm. Participants particularly spoke of wanting Christian rituals or teachings integrated into public schools. Others wanted its presence in the government or society at large. Over half of participants shared this vision.

When I asked Felicia, a 42-year-old White woman in Illinois, “what comes to mind when you hear the word discrimination,” she laughed and said, “the government.” She then went on to say:

You know, taking God out of the schools and the Pledge of Allegiance. You know, pulling God out of the system when I think we need Him the most right now in the world. If I thought, to me—and this is just my opinion—but if they were to bring God back into the whole system and everybody pray and do a better path in their life, things will get better, but they keep pushing Him out more and more.

Not only did she believe schools should include belief in God, but she assumed American society, including the government, should be imbued with religiosity. Furthermore, she saw the lack of religiosity in public life as discriminatory toward Christians. These sentiments are repeated later in the interview when discussing schools directly. When I asked Felicia if she felt that our public education system treats Christians and those who don’t believe in God the same, she said no. When probed with how it is different, she stated, “because they—I just don’t feel like they want the Christian word in there, I guess you’d say. More like pushed away.” She again invoked school prayer when asked what she felt could equalize it, “maybe even like a daily prayer. Before they [the children]—before school. You know, make sure that they’re safe all day. You know, and have faith in God.” This last line takes it a step beyond compulsory prayer in

school and shows the desire that all children should be Christian and have faith in God. It also insinuates that bringing Christian prayer into schools serves as a vehicle for children to become Christian and believe in God. It is not just about safety but ensuring Christian dominance. This connects to her earlier statement that everyone needs to pray and is a clear example of how desiring religiosity incorporates *desire of conversion* and the *superiority of belief*.

Felicia was not the only one who thought that schools offered unequal support to Christian and nontheist students. I asked my participants how the religiousness, or lack thereof, in America affects them. In Tennessee, the woman who coined herself Jesus Freak was so unsettled with the decline of religiosity in America that she bemoaned, “the fact that I pay a fortune to send my daughter to private school! You know, because I want her to get... [*pauses and smirks*] not just like straight-up evolutionary theory. Like, I want her to get *creationism—and* evolutionary theory. I want *her* to kind of put her puzzle together.” Later in the interview when specifically addressing secular institutions she admitted they scared her: “[...] it’s not the fact that they’re secular *per se*. It’s the fact that they’re anti! Or at least it feels anti.” She then reiterated her desire for creationism to be taught and that, “we can’t prove any of these theories, but it’s a theory, right? We can present it as that, but it’s *that anti* that there’s absolutely none [of Creationism taught].” To teach only evolution and Christian Creationism is to ignore, for example, the teachings of Brahma or the animism creation story of the Ojibwe. Her desire was not based on having multiple viewpoints so that her daughter may have exposure to differing ideas, instead it was based on the desire for her daughter’s life to be seamlessly imbued with Christian religiosity across her social spheres. Her fear of secular institutions also suggests that secularity and the people who support it are a threat, a microaggression explored more in depth below.

Secularity as Threat

Secularity was a subject directly addressed within the interview guide. Previous research has shown that when people were primed with reminders of the efficacy of secular institutions it decreased distrust toward nontheists (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012). I asked participants how they felt about secular institutions in general and then asked if they felt if the public school system, both K through 12 and universities, and the court systems treated nontheists and Christians equally. There were mixed opinions when it came to the court system, but there were pronounced perceptions of unfairness in public schools. However, some participants also saw secularity as a general threat to society, combining sentiments that religiosity should be a social norm and that belief is superior. In total, over 40 percent of participants saw secularity as a threat.

Felicia in Illinois felt particularly threatened by secularity, as this theme was woven throughout her rhetoric. There were also strong cooccurrences, especially the *desire to convert* and the *superiority of belief*. Toward the end of the interview, I wanted to revisit her feelings about the decline of religiosity in America to probe deeper into secular fright and the implications of those feelings. I asked her if she thought there was any problem with America becoming more nonreligious and what those ramifications were. Bluntly she responded, “Worldly destruction. Like, you know, like within nature. Things like that. The storms are getting worse. You know the wars. There’s obviously going to be another war. You know all these terrorist acts, you know. Who knows, we might be without food one day too!” I then asked her if these problems would change if America started becoming more religious and she replied in the affirmative. Since she referenced the world, I probed if she felt if other countries joined in an upward trend of belief would that also avert disaster, and again she replied in the affirmative.

To explore how this might relate to the desire to convert, I probed if it mattered if they believed in the Christian God or just that they are believers in general; she laughed and then with an underhanded, sly tone, said “um, as long as they’re believing in the *right* thing. [Laughs].” As previously explored, Felicia desired the government, society, and schools to be imbued with religiosity, with the goal of converting others. When combined with the sentiments above, it is clear that any secularity is seen as a threat and to achieve greatness all other religious groups must be eliminated. This is Christian supremacy at its most blatant.

It should be noted that some participants have truly been harmed through rhetoric in secular spaces by those who they perceived to be nontheists. Their experiences should not be discounted nor ignored, but they also must be viewed through a wider lens of dominant social groups and values that provide a privileged experience. One participant, Holly, was raised in Appalachia by highly religious parents and attended a private Christian undergraduate college where spirituality was discussed in many of her classes. She spoke of the many interfaith events that included those she perceived to be nontheists, both in attendance and organizing. She spoke fondly of the memories she made while she attended university there and how she enjoyed being immersed in Christian culture.

However, upon moving to Tennessee to her graduate program, she encountered some in her cohort she perceived to be anti-theistic. She recounted anti-religious rhetoric she had experienced and then relayed the fallout by stating, “they didn’t trust me because I was a Christian. And then I had a person coming to me and say like, ‘I usually don’t like Christians. I usually think Christians are pretty mean, but I think you’re the first nice Christian I’ve ever met,’ And I was just like [...] I was just like, ‘Oh! Okay’ [*eyes widen slowly shakes head side to side*].” I asked Holly to clarify if this had been in the last year and with exasperation she

exclaimed, “Oh! Oh yeah! Oh my gosh, none of this happened—none of this is has ever happened to me before.”

This ties into her rhetoric on secularism and the obstacles she faced as a Christian, “I would say an obstacle that’s more imposed upon *me* for my kind of everyday life would be really just uncomfotability with my surroundings. Not really feeling safe.” I then asked her to clarify in what scenarios or places she didn’t feel safe, she paused and in a hushed tone replied, “like, on campus.” I asked if she experienced obstacles outside of campus due to her Christian identity and she reflected after a long pause, “I wouldn’t say that I’ve ever experienced obstacles... especially more in Appalachia. Like I feel like—I feel like around here it’s very acceptable to say you’re a Christian. And I haven’t really faced any obstacles outside of campus.” She clearly felt threatened within secular spheres and preferred being in spaces where her beliefs are dominant, an unacknowledged privilege. This is the first time she had felt othered based on her religious beliefs, a luxury that marginalized religious groups are denied.

Superiority of Belief

While no participant overtly stated that they believed being Christian or having a belief in God was superior, it was often implied, frequently with the first and most prolific microaggression category, *assumptions of inferiority and stereotypes*. This is not surprising given that feeling superior is a functional result of seeing others as less. Predictably then, *superiority of belief* was the second most employed microaggression, employed by 70 percent of participants. However, I exercised caution when coding for feelings of superiority by rejecting instances when participants used stereotypes that did not imply a ‘lesser than’ mentality. This resulted in just over two-thirds of the participants who originally employed *assumptions of inferiority and stereotypes*.

Unsurprisingly, Felicia in Illinois came the closest in her overtness of feeling superior to nontheists. When asked how believing in God and being a Christian made her feel she said, it “gives me a better belief in life too. Like a better perspective to keep me on a good track, to not be a bad person.” Directly after, I asked her what she thought about nontheists and with restraint she replied, “I wouldn’t say they were *bad* people.” Her tone clearly indicated those who don’t believe in God are inferior to those who do. These quotes taken together provide a clear example that believing in God provides superior experiences, perspectives, and morals.

Relatedly, indications of superiority were often in the form of feeling pity or compassion for those who were without faith. When asked about how she felt about nontheists, Ashton in Tennessee replied:

I feel very, very ... sad and worried about people who don’t. Because it’s like, I mean, *I* believe in heaven and hell, you know, all that. [...] But also, it’s like you’re missing so much... [*she pauses and draws out the words*] such good here. And it’s like you’re missing out and you don’t know you’re missing out. Sort of compassion, I guess?

[*Crinkles nose*]

This clearly indicated that she considered Christianity to bestow goodness that was otherwise unavailable to anyone else. She then imagined how nontheists must muddle through life, because God provides her wisdom and gave the example, “I’m a researcher and I get what this surmounts to is like, cheating! [*Laughs*] But just to not even have *that* resource. [...] I think I have a source that gives me wisdom that other people don’t have. Which seems like an unfair advantage.” Her statement clearly illustrates the assumption that belief in God provides exclusive advantages that nontheists cannot obtain.

Vanessa in Tennessee similarly echoed this feeling of compassion when she stated that being Christian has, “always been a gift that I can’t imagine—like if I even entertain the thought because I’ve gone through those [hard] things. But to entertain the thought of not believing seems so incredibly lonely and just desolate and sad. So, I just have a lot of compassion.” This surmised that nontheists were fundamentally bereft making them sad and lonely, and also incapable of dealing with hardships. Thus, belief in God provides a superior bountifulness that nontheists cannot imbibe to help alleviate their feelings of sadness and loneliness.

However, some participants used positive-inflected rhetoric to deflect the negative associations of their belief that nontheists were inferior and that religious belief—and those who believe—were superior. The White woman in Illinois, who coined herself Purple, assumed that nontheists lack the advantages of theists due to the superior effectiveness of having religion in one’s life, especially in the power of prayer. She stated that, “I feel like without having the possibility of group prayer or, you know, other believers on your side trying to get you through an obstacle, that it just makes it a little bit more difficult. A little bit more trying.” She then admitted that she could not really know whether obstacles are really made smaller by belief, but then she recommitted to the idea by saying:

I think as a believer, you can get through obstacles a little bit easier, a little bit smoother, because you have the power of prayer, you have the... outlook of the promise of the Lord. And as a nonbeliever, you don’t, you don’t have that. So, you look to yourself, you look to the world and it’s not so easy to get through something.

Even though she hesitated by saying “I guess I don’t really know. I don’t really know if the obstacles are smaller,” she still saw that looking to oneself or the world was an inferior way of dealing with personal troubles, thereby reinforcing sentiments of the superiority of belief.

The glue that binds all previous microaggression themes together, including those based on the MANRIS measurement, is the conviction that having Christian belief is superior to the lack of belief in God. This conviction of Christian superiority bolsters assumptions of nontheist inferiority and ignorance, enables the pathologizing of nontheists, invalidates nontheism as it is seen as unnatural, reinforces the desire to convert others, spurs actions meant to weaken the separation of church and state, and stokes fears of secularism and those who support it. When these themes are combined, it produces the necessary components of Christian supremacy and, for its most ardent supporters, the desire for the elimination of nontheists altogether.

Other Important Factors in Microaggression Rhetoric

Defining “People Who Don’t Believe in God”

When developing the interview guide, for the first few questions that referred to nontheists I used the wording “those who don’t believe in God.” I then would switch to using “nonbeliever” in its place later in the guide to eliminate the wordiness of the above phrase. After the first couple interviews my participants seemed to be loosely interpreting the term nonbeliever. For example, it could be someone who doesn’t go to church or one who hasn’t repented of their sins. I then reinstated the phrase “those who don’t believe in God” for every question referring to nontheists to keep this reference group explicit and consistent. However, even when using the lengthier phrase some of my participants still defined them as people who do not go to church or those who do not conform to what brings a person salvation in their eyes.

For example, Holly in Tennessee, when asked “Are there any emotions that come up when you think about people who don’t believe in God?” she said she felt sadness because “there is like these consequences... for not repenting of sins and things like that.” She then went on to reference a family member, “like my grandmother is—doesn’t believe in God and she’s like

passing away. And that comes up for me a lot, where it's like she's at the end of her life and seeing that she hasn't chosen to follow God or become a Christian." With further probing, her grandmother does believe in God and the afterlife but believes, "that you [just] have to be a good person... Like [for] the mode of getting [in]to heaven or hell." When probed further, to ascertain precisely whether her grandmother thinks God exists or not she responds, "maybe not that God doesn't exist, but that He doesn't really care. Like believing in Him or believing in whatever you want, it doesn't really matter." She was defining people who don't believe in God according to what will bring them salvation on her terms, namely, belief in Jesus and the repentance of sin.

She was not alone in defining people who don't believe in God as people who don't go to church or make the necessary steps to ensure their salvation. When I asked Anastasia from Illinois if she knew anyone "who doesn't believe in God" she first mentioned her coworker who was never raised in the Church. Then went on to state, "on the other hand, like my boyfriend, he was raised Catholic but doesn't go to church anymore" thus clearly putting him into the category of a nontheist. More directly but unsurprisingly, Nusi in Tennessee whose view is that everyone actually believes in God, wouldn't engage in those terms for the rest of the interview despite my attempts; preferring only to participate in discussions between different belief systems. For example, when I asked if she thought nontheists experience discrimination she said that "everybody is treated the same way. It's really—when it comes to what church you attend, people [are] like, 'oh, [*tuts*] I'm not going to help people because they don't go to my church.'" Later, when I asked her if the court system treats Christians and nontheists the same, she agreed but then stated, "There is no adjustment between Christian or Muslim. Um, nobody asks you whether you're Christian or Muslim." For her, nontheists don't really exist; therefore, she

preferred to answer nontheist-related questions as applying to the two groups she was most familiar with.

Vanessa in Tennessee, when speaking of the nontheists she knows, stated she doesn't know any atheists. Instead, who she considers to be *those who don't believe in God* are those who are church-raised and, "have a lot of anger. And they will say they can't. They don't want to believe in God, or they can't." She divulged conversations she has had with those she considered in this category:

I've heard everything from 'well I've always believed in God, I can't escape it, but I'm mad at the Church' and 'I don't know, I'm more spiritual than anything.' I hear that. Or even all the way to people who are like, [*shrugs one shoulder*] 'I can't go to church, but I really miss Jesus.'

Thus, showing the breadth of what she considered to be 'nonbelief' often fell outside the purview of nontheism. These diverse ways of defining nontheism do affect my data analysis in some ways, but I do not believe it lessens the impact when these microaggressions are employed. Instead, it implies that these microaggressions likely affect a wider subset of people than the original scope of nontheists in this study.

Intersectionality and the Politicization of Religion

Politics was a frequent theme in nearly all of the interviews and issues spanned from defining secularity to the religio-political foundations of the United States as a nation. Discussion of politics was most frequent when I asked about secular institutions and the perceived efficacy of treating nontheists and Christians equally. Opinions varied depending on the political viewpoint of the participant (see Table 1 for a full list). More importantly those who employed

the most microaggressions (40 to 98 instances of microaggressions per interview, including co-occurrences) identified as having a conservative viewpoint. Those with the lowest instances of microaggressions (from zero to seven per interview, including co-occurrences), identified as liberal or liberal leaning. See Figure 1 for a graph on microaggressions and political identity. However, the mitigating factor may include participants' experiences with social marginalization that intersect with politics and religion rather than political viewpoint alone.

For example, one of my participants who identified as Black was forthcoming in sharing her feelings on the intersection of race, politics, and religion. When I asked Dolores, a graduate student, how she felt about student ministry centers being incorporated into campus centers she stated, "I feel like it's scary. [*Smiles and laughs nervously*]" When I asked why, she replied resolutely, "because I'm scared of White Christianity, I feel like it's dangerous. And to have people on campus being—for that to be like, emphasizing them, to validate them." I then asked her about the religiosity on her campus and have included the full quotes below to show how intertwined race, religion, regionality, and politics are for her:

I do think that the university is—performs—Christianity. Primarily Christianity without equal emphasis on what other people might be on campus, it's just the assumption that this is a Christian place. And that's because this is Tennessee and this is part of the Bible Belt. And then also, people here connect their Christianity, their religion to their politics. And this place is a conservative place. It's conservative and it's culturally isolated because of the geography. And so, it's homogeneous, mostly majority White Christians in the mountains who are isolated from everybody else and they grow up with limited culture and exposure to others or—different. And that's what they get from home and church, and then they come to college and it's continued on here. And so, I think that it

is... it doesn't give them any—it doesn't expand their thinking or their knowledge to keep showing them the same things and to hear the same thing they heard at home, at college. And this is not a private religious backed institution [*shaking head*]. This is a public school that serves all people, all backgrounds, from all nations and there isn't enough reiteration of the idea of all.

Interviewer: And you think that's problematic for universities, at least for their students?

Maybe because it just reminds me of where I live and how dangerous it is for me as a Black woman, even as a person to identify [as] Christian because I'm not—[*furrows brows*] I don't identify as White—you know, White Christianity. I feel like when White people say that they're Christians and when Black people say they're Christians it's two different things! It's different things because we don't even go to the same places and we don't sing the same songs and we don't tell the same stories! [*Shaking her head*] So, it's different!

Her discussion brings forth the understanding that Christianity in America is largely White Christianity and that sharing a religious identity, even if believed with the same intensity, does not put Black Christians into the hegemonic in-group and instead leaves them vulnerable.

Dolores also pointed to the politicization of religion in the Bible Belt where conservatism often overlaps with religious beliefs. A few of my participants engaged in the rhetoric of politicizing their religion. One such interviewee was employed in a scientific field in a secular industry. They described how they faced discrimination because of their Christian identity when at work, because they implemented decisions based on the Bible. They had tried to explain themselves to their colleagues in a group email:

[I] was trying to say, this is why I'm making these particular decisions because, I live Bible first [*spoken in staccato for emphasis*] ... and then kind of everything else. And so, I'm gonna align that, like how I live my life. My work is gonna be how I live my life wherever, and it's like [*trails off, frowns and shrugs*] ... And that went over like a nuclear bomb [*laughs*].

They went on to explain that their colleagues were conflating religiosity with conservatism, and stated, "I don't worship conservatives, don't worship the Republican party. I do follow the Bible. But a lot of times those overlap more, and so issues that those entities promote align better Scripturally than some of the others, you know." Then went on to disclose that they were active in a right-wing religio-political organization and their colleagues were concerned this affiliation was affecting working relations. Clearly this participant conflates their *own* religious beliefs with their political beliefs. They imply that anyone whose political and religious beliefs do not overlap are not living Scripturally—they are not Christian enough.

According to prior research, this type of politicization has been driving an increase of religious disaffiliation in America (Djupe, Neiheisel, and Conger 2018). However, as an inclusion criterion, all my participants had to identify as Christian and score as moderately high to highly religious on a modified religiosity scale. Therefore, the effects of the politicization of religion differ in this context. Those who had felt the condemnation of other Christians who engaged in this politicization or who otherwise belonged to a marginalized group, I have termed *affirmers* in my study. This is largely because they affirmed a few important key factors. First, they affirmed that Christians were the hegemonic group in America who were able to imbue the culture with Christianity. They affirmed Christians were not oppressed in America due to their hegemony. They also affirmed that nontheists experienced discrimination, largely at the hands of

Christians. Finally, they affirmed the microaggression categories in that they observed Christians pathologizing nontheists, assuming nontheists were inferior or a threat, and so on. It is these affirmers that I turn to and analyze in the next chapter.

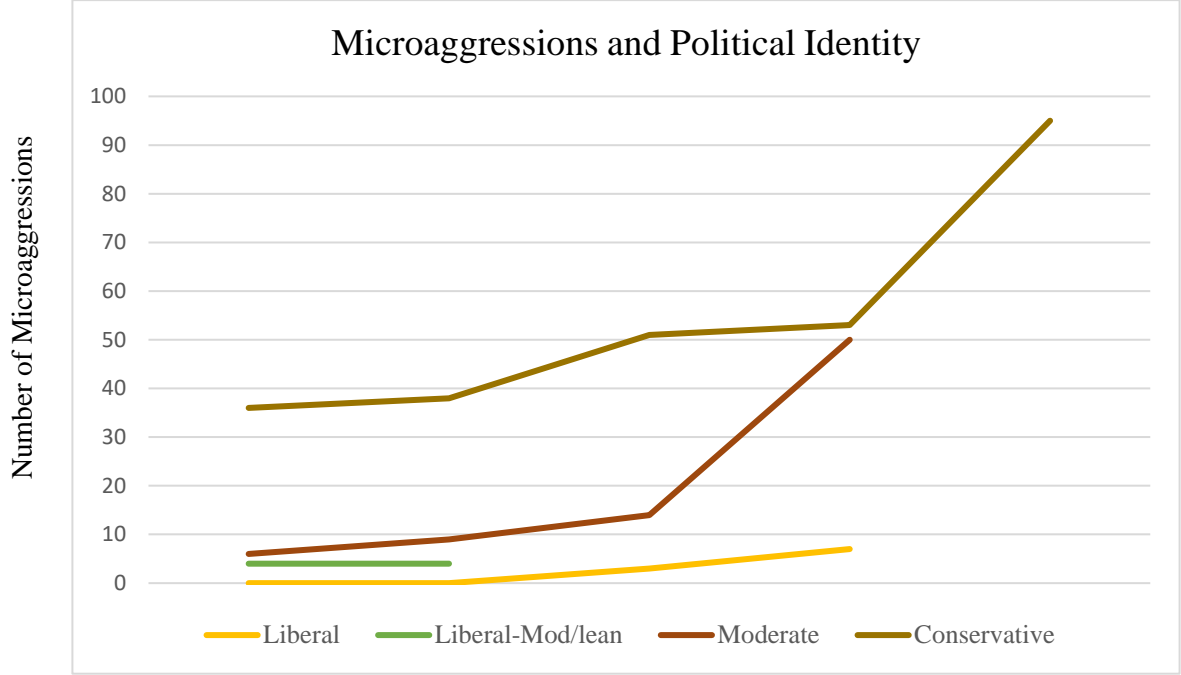


Figure 1. Number of microaggressions employed by participant’s political point of view

CHAPTER 4. THE RHETORIC OF AFFIRMERS

Those who affirmed the microaggressions that Christians employ against nontheists were largely liberal Democrats, with all but one being in their early to mid-20s. Many affirmers understood the implications of Christian hegemony in that it leads to Christian supremacy and bolsters feelings of Christian persecution as well as the conviction that Christian belief is superior. Affirmers, however, were not immune from employing microaggressions. As we saw with Dolores in Tennessee, she employed *belief as default* and insinuated that nontheists are naïve and not as mature, thus she *assumed inferiority*. But Dolores was routinely cognizant of the marginalization of nontheists and was quite critical of White Christians; describing aspects of Christian hegemony throughout her interview, as did other affirmers. While only two of the seven affirmers had zero microaggressions, the remaining six employed a range of two microaggressions to seven per interview. This is a dramatic difference when compared to those who identified as conservative Republicans. Below in Table 3 is the full list of affirming participants.

Table 3. Affirming Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race / Ethnicity	Political Viewpoint	Political Affiliation
Andrew	24	Man	White	Liberal	Democrat
Dolores	44	Woman	Black	Liberal	Democrat
Harry	20	Nonbinary	White	Liberal	Democrat
Holly	24	Woman	White	Moderate	Democrat Leaning
Joy	35	Woman	Hispanic	Liberal-Moderate	Nonpartisan
Molly	23	Nonconforming	White	Far Left Socialist	Independent
Trout	24	Woman	White	Liberal Leaning	Independent

Affirmations of Christian Supremacy and Cultural and Social Privilege.

I asked my participants a range of questions (see Appendix A) that sometimes unintentionally spurred conversations about the amount of social capital, status, and hegemonic power Christians have in America and how that related to Christian supremacy and privilege. Participants were not directly asked their opinions regarding social capital and cultural dominance, however several affirmers nonetheless provided opinions that acknowledged the social frameworks that provides Christians with continued privilege in America.

A number of affirmers saw America as a culturally religious nation but did not think it should be. Joy, a Hispanic 35-year-old participant from Illinois, spoke of her homeschooled-upbringing that taught her that America is, always was, and therefore should always be a Christian nation. She admitted that reflecting upon her upbringing coupled with the process of unpacking and examining her beliefs, known as deconstructing faith, had led her to starkly change her views on Christianity in America. I have included the full quote to highlight how she might have aligned with the sentiments of the participants who desired Christian supremacy had she not deconstructed her faith:

My perception of things when I was younger, was very much that ‘this is a Christian nation, and that’s *great!*’ And now, anytime I see a political representative spouting anything faith related. I’m like, ‘well, who benefits there?’ I very much dislike that my faith and the God that I believe in is being *used* to secure votes. When the lives of those people, and the way that they interact with others, is very much the *antithesis* of what that ‘belief’ structure would have them do. Then in my family, when we talk about politics or we talk about, you know—legislating *morality*, I’m very much against anything that puts limits on the individual’s right to their own autonomy. To me, your rights like my rights

as an individual, end where yours begin. So, I cannot impose upon you my beliefs or my morality. But at the same time, you cannot do that to me. And there has to be this line where, like the goal is for neither of us to be allowed to do harm to the other; and *if harm is done*, then there are consequences. Right? That's how society is able to maintain civility, is that there are consequences to harm done from one individual or one organization to another. And so, my perceptions, *now* of what that actually looks like, and how that's defined is just so different from what my parents believe... and believe is like godly, or—you know because they want their faith to largely influence how they vote, and I *also* want my faith to influence how I vote. But I do *not want* someone to *legalize* or *legislate*, that *my* faith is what everyone has to operate in, right? And I feel like that's becoming a very big shift culturally, which causes me, personally, a lot of anxiety!

Joy viewed the current trend of legislating Christian morality as harmful to society, especially those who are nontheists. She explained that she saw a colonial mindset in Christian culture in which they try to, “conquer and dominate, where [they] have to go in and convert and assimilate people to [their] way of thinking” thus instituting Christian supremacy. She said she no longer subscribed to that harmful viewpoint and has since pivoted to being empathetic and respectful, resolute to avoid dismissing or diminishing the value of another's personal belief system. This is in stark contrast to the assertion of other participants who saw nontheists as deficient and lacking the maturity to know what was good for them.

Andrew, a 24-year-old man in Tennessee who lived abroad for ten years with his missionary parents, had somewhat of an outsider's perspective on American Christianity. When I asked him if he thought nontheists experienced obstacles trying to live their life he stated, “oh yeah, there's social obstacles! Like, you know, just with Christianity—America, they're big on

evangelicalism. So, you know, trying to convert and stuff like that. Not realizing that doesn't really help usually [*smiles*], because everybody in America knows the name Jesus. I don't think *that's* the issue." Andrew was also troubled by the lack of social opportunities for nontheists and other religious minorities in the wider community. Andrew was very involved in student ministries on his campus but was frank about non-Christians, "that's the issue that I think about a lot where there's not a lot of—because a lot of campus ministries are about being social together and doing stuff together, but there's not a lot of that opportunity for people of different religions." Furthering his point of Christian over-abundance, there were two student ministry buildings just behind the campus student residence halls and another two across the street from a campus service building where he attended university. This pervasiveness of Christianity ties to Dolores' earlier sentiment that having an inescapable Christian presence on a college campus protects Christian hegemony, contributes to the ubiquity of Christian culture, and preserves Christian privilege.

Dolores spoke about how Christian hegemony created social privileges for Christians that simultaneously oppressed those who were not. When asked what effect this cultural dominance had on other Christians she stated:

I think that people who believe in God feel like they are a large majority. And that because they believe in—because they feel like that's the majority, they're right. I feel like they often silence other people. And also choose the language that can be used to talk about things. And also choose the voices that should be heard and choose attitudes that represent *their* attitudes.

When asked how this dominance may affect those who don't believe in God she stated, "I think that when people—I think people who don't believe in God don't feel welcome in a place that

overly, that explicitly, openly talks about God, I don't think that that makes them feel welcome.” Dolores' quotes highlight how religious privileges that are invisible to some Christians, especially those who desire Christian supremacy, creates an unreceptive environment for those who are not Christian.

Harry, a 20-year-old nonbinary person in Tennessee, recognized their own religious privilege. When I asked them if living in a country with a lot of religious people affected them, they responded, “I think even without me realizing it probably does affect me. I'm sure I'm influenced by just the sheer amount of religious people there are. I think that, like, I'm probably indirectly affected by a lot of things that I don't even like... I'm taking into consideration. So yeah, I guess I would say yes to that.” Like Joy, Harry was also critical of politicians who used their faith in campaigns by saying, “a lot of politicians that I've seen even like locally, just like run for things, [and for] a lot of them there's always like a stance that they have to have that usually involves some sort of religious belief [put] into it.” Poking fun at political campaigns Harry, pretending to be a Christian politician, mockingly said, “I've been going to church since I was born, and I'll make sure we stay this way America!” They explain that they had met Christians who thought it is important that their politicians be Christian, but for Harry—as a Christian—it was not. They stated that unfortunately, it is inescapable that these elected politicians inject their religious biases into their elected position. This shows the concern that Harry has about the power and privileges that are afforded to dominant groups, something they were keenly made aware of due to their gender nonconforming identity.

Being Queer and Christian Under Politicized Christian Supremacy

For a few affirmers, including Harry, membership in the queer community influenced how they viewed power dynamics between dominant and marginalized groups. While queer

affirmers belonged to the hegemonic Christian group, they lacked the same privilege that was afforded to cisgendered-heteronormative Christians. Thus, the politicization of religion by conservative Christians and their anti-queer rhetoric affected those who considered themselves both highly religious *and* queer (Wolkomir 2006).

A few participants who desired Christian supremacy considered it unchristian to be queer. As a case in point, when speaking about the decline of Christianity in America, Purple in Illinois disclosed that she was worried about the future for her kids because there is a “direct conflict between what is accepted as a believer and what is accepted in the world.” In response to this decline, she desired Christian supremacy and a world that loves the sinner but is not “accepting of the sin.” Furthermore, she found the comingling of Christians and those who are queer as ripe for Christian discrimination when she stated, “as a believer, if you are in a social setting with... people that are... living outside of the Christian norm. I think it’s easy for the believer to be discriminated against because we... [*shrugs*] ... don’t appreciate... that... sort of lifestyle... or thought or belief.” Later in the interview when speaking about schools she clearly linked queerness with nontheism by stating Christians did not have any social supports but nontheists do such as, “LGBTQ groups. I know that there is support in the school system for gender identity issues! There are support systems in the schools for, um, any kind of mental health... [*pauses, changes to a sincere tone*] which obviously is [open to both] believer or nonbeliever” She made a clear distinction that Christians can have mental health issues but they cannot identify as LGBTQ.

Purple was not the only one to sever queerness from being Christian. One participant who was involved in a right-wing organization thinks the K through 12 public school system was beyond repair because, “it’s become so politicized and politically liberal, that [I] don’t know that

you can put the genie back in the bottle anymore.” They then went on to state that schools were “brainwashing” children with matters that conflict with a scripture-based worldview, and they would never be able to send their kids to a public school. This rhetoric is not surprising given that the organization they were involved with wrote pieces on the dangers of the “LGBTQ agenda” being funneled into classrooms and children’s television shows.

The above quotations serve as examples of familiar anti-queer rhetoric that is common amongst Christian supremacists, especially those who politicize their faith. But it also highlights that they are creating a link between being queer and being nontheist. This is especially problematic for those who are queer and identify as Christian because it presents an either-or criterion in the rhetoric: you can either be gay or you can be Christian, but you cannot be both.

Harry exemplified this sentiment when they were asked about what emotions came up when thinking about their belief in God. Harry had mixed and complex emotions and stated that, “It’s starting to be more comfort[able] than it used to be. For a long time, it was a lot of fear just because I am queer. But now it’s still like a little messy like [...] I guess my emotions are kind of like hesitant.” Later they talked about the complications of identifying as both Christian and queer, speaking directly to the implications of the either-or attitudes as quoted above. Harry recalled what it was like to disclose their Christian identity to others, stating, “There’s definitely a lot of like confusion that I get from people, because I am both queer and Christian—from like both sides, from both Christian people and queer people. They’re like, ‘What? Like, you can’t do both!’” Because Harry identified as a queer Christian, they were subjected to scrutiny from both of these communities as anti-queer rhetoric is common within public discourse.

Some of my affirming participants mentioned the struggles they or their friends faced when discussing issues of being queer in a religious country. When I asked Trout in Tennessee if

she knew any nontheists she said that many, if not most of her friends were. I then asked Trout if she and her nontheist friends ever talked about religion:

I have a lot of like gay friends and obviously, [*knowingly smirks and laughs*] like church is not a fun place to be if you're gay... and that—usually [*correcting herself*]. [...] Most people kind of have that trauma from the Church, unfortunately. And people within the Church that have talked to them wrong or just really disrespected them. And then unfortunately *that* becomes associated with the *entire religion* and God and all that stuff. But yeah, it's usually stuff like that. Which—and I can relate to a lot because I'm also gay and grew up in a Southern Baptist church, so [I've] been there too.

Trout intimated that many of her nontheist friends had left the Church due to harmful anti-queer rhetoric. Therefore, when Christian supremacists disconnect being queer from being Christian it can be harmful for those who to stay with the Church. When speaking about the religiousness of America and its secular institutions, Trout saw Christian hegemony and the politicization of faith in America as problematic:

You know people are all upset about God being taken out of schools, but to me it's like, you know, respectfully, why would He be there in the first place? Because not everybody believes in... like *Jesus*. You know? Some people just believe in God, don't believe in Jesus. Some people don't believe in either. Like why would we—and then, you know, being a woman obviously, like abortion rights... can affect us. Being gay, [*annoyed, shaking her head*] ... all the crap that they talk about can affect us. I feel like every other day they're threatnin' to take away our rights! [*Flips hand away, smiles*] ... Respectfully.

She went on to say she didn't think laws should be based on Christianity if those it applies to aren't Christian as well, comparing it to the political reality of "there's a lot of blue dots in Red States and a lot of red dots in Blue States."

Early on in my interview with Molly, a White 23-year-old in Tennessee who is gender nonconforming, I asked if they had ever been discriminated against because they were Christian. With a quizzical look on her face and a slight chuckle she replied, "No, no. I think about where I was raised and the communities that I'm in. No, like that was the standard. If you weren't Christian, you were made fun of, or [they] attempted to convert [you]. And at times I was the 'convertor' and I was like... *oh, God!*" However, she went on to qualify her statement by pivoting to intersectionality:

But no. I think there's been times where I felt discomfort, because I don't know how my privileged identity of being a Christian in a community where it's mostly Christians, plays into my interactions with people in like, my queer community, because I'm also a queer person. So it's like that identity... shift... and issues... It's like, I don't want to...
[exasperated sigh] ... yeah."

Not only did Molly try to recognize the privilege that her Christian identity afforded her, but also struggled with how that intersects with the queer community to which she belonged. Molly also had a direct connection to a nontheist. Her younger sister came out as an Atheist when she was a teenager and Molly experienced the turmoil of her parents' attempts to bring their daughter back into the religious fold by forcing church attendance. Both she and her parents admitted in hindsight it was the wrong thing to do, stating "we've tried to heal that rupture over *years*." Having these personal experiences, coupled with a deep awareness of supremacist social

structures and how oppression is tied to identity resulted in Molly not engaging in microaggressions during the interview.

Affirmations of Nontheist Discrimination.

All affirmers acknowledged that nontheists experience discrimination and mostly by those who identify as Christian. A few of these participants concurred that Christians could experience discrimination too, though some downplayed the impact due to Christians being the dominant group. However, most affirming participants refuted that Christians experience discrimination. Many cited not only the numeric advantage that Christians have in America, but the social and political power they are able to wield, citing these as reasons for refuting that Christians experienced discrimination.

One such affirmer, Joy in Illinois, explained how Christian supremacy affords certain privileges. She pointed out that Christians were able to use social capital to benefit themselves while excluding others. She stated, “when it comes to support networks and stuff, so many like organizations, start out as a ‘Christian’ organization.” She went on to explain that they provided fiscal and social programs for the in-group but “if you’re not part of that community... you don’t have access to those resources [or] you’re actively *excluded* from those resources, *even if you find them* because you’re not part of ‘a church’” She also thought that Christians who claim they have been discriminated against have instead encountered resistance and that they are just “not respecting someone else’s boundaries.” Furthermore, due to her several-year-long deconstruction process, she had become leery of attending church because she did not believe her radical acceptance of others would be respected and instead, she would be labeled a heretic. She went on to state, “when it comes to being part of a community, if they can’t give up some of their rhetoric to really see the individual, then I feel like that’s not a community I can really be a part of.” Joy

saw herself as a bit of an outcast to the mainstream Church in the Midwest and it had prevented her from finding community with those who shared her theological beliefs. Instead, Joy had found community with other outcasts, including her best friend, who was an Atheist.

Holly in Tennessee, the woman who felt threatened in secular spaces, believed Christians do experience discrimination. But she did acknowledge that nontheists can be excluded, especially in Appalachia because “if you're not in that kind of inner circle of like a church or church family, you can definitely be left in the out-group.” She also affirmed that in a largely religious society nontheists may self-censor, stating “I understand that element of it [self-censoring]. Of being like, you don't feel like you can have a say in the things going on in your community because it's a faith-based community.” Even though there was some dissonance within Holly’s rhetoric between her perception of Christian discrimination and what she understands about social structures, she mostly recognized how marginalization contributed to nontheist discrimination.

Molly, on the other hand, had a strong stance on the factors that contribute to ongoing nontheist discrimination. She referenced her experiences within her graduate program of how others feared the inclusion of nontheists stating:

There’s certain labs on campus at times where they'll be hesitant if their focus point is religion. And you know, maybe they're dealing with mostly Christian groups. They'll be hesitant to add people on to their team that are not Christian, so if they’re Buddhist or atheist², because they fear a different perspective of some sort.

² The conceptual group of nontheists, not the Atheist identity.

In an obvious dissent of this attitude, she said she wasn't sure why some Christians had this perspective. When discussing nontheist discrimination she recalled her boyfriend from high school whose family was Hindu but he identified as an Atheist. She said when she ponders discrimination she thinks about him a lot because he faced so many obstacles. She said people back then always pushed the conversation of religion with him, and ultimately he was treated as a "stereotype and not an individual person" echoing Joy's criticism of Christian rhetoric. Molly stated this type of thinking led to a barrage of her fellow Christians trying to convert him. Later, when I asked Molly how living in a largely religious country affects nontheists, she sighed then bluntly stated, "[they are] constantly wondering why everyone's shoving it down their throat [and wondering] why [it is] even in conversation!" While these three participants may not have agreed whether or not Christians can be discriminated against, they all recognized how marginalization directly contributes to nontheist discrimination. Molly and Joy in particular were concerned with the rhetoric that Christians used that sometimes included sentiments of *superiority of belief* and a sense of Christian persecution.

Affirmations of Superiority and Persecution Complexes Among Christians

As seen in the rhetoric of microaggressions, the belief that Christianity is superior to nontheism was often cited by affirmers in their critiques of Christian rhetoric. Nonaffirming participants who at least moderately engaged in microaggressions saw the decline of religiosity as lamentable, with some viewing it as evidence of oppression or persecution. For instance, in the previous chapter Jesus Freak lamented the decline of religiosity and viewed it not as a loss of Christian privilege but a rising threat of an inferior secularity. She also denied Christians are intolerant of nontheists and interpreted Christian discrimination as evidence of persecution that

the Bible prophecies. Ashton, the 61-year-old in Tennessee who saw nontheists as children who did not know what is good for them, also saw Christian discrimination as prophetic, stating:

In Acts where the disciples go away rejoicing because they were accounted worthy to suffer like Jesus did. [...] The Bible is pretty clear that... you're going to face trials [*hits desk with each word*]. Not *if* you do, it's like you're gonna... [And] that's what I want to encourage people with. [It] is like, we should expect this [discrimination]. And then, if you read on [in Acts] ... it says in that, develop steadfastness. You know it's like we're being perfected by that.

Both Ashton and Jesus Freak had the expectation that Christians would be persecuted for their beliefs despite having hegemonic sway over the social, economic, and political spheres of American society. This is not surprising given that they don't see secularity as a mechanism to protect religious freedom but as a threat, and by extension nontheists. These quotes serve as examples of the type of persecution rhetoric that is common amongst Christian supremacists in the United States.

Several participants affirmed this tendency for some Christians to latch on to and endorse ideas of Christian persecution and oppression. Joy in Illinois explained how in her formative years she was taught that nontheists would be lost and their souls in danger, but now she felt this attitude created "a superiority complex. Where 'Oh, well, I have God, so I'm safe, and I'm better.'" This sentiment was indeed found within the microaggression category *superiority of belief*. Through Joy's relationships with other Christians and her own deconstruction process, she had also observed the different facets of Christian persecution rhetoric and how it related to the Church as well as politics. She stated, "I think the Church tends to *weaponize* persecution. And make that, like a flag to stand behind to corral people in, on, [and] into like, a purpose and into a

mission. And in some horrible cases even like, to become party specific and like, political,” which she considered an abuse of power.

When I gave Andrew in Tennessee the scenario of a nontheist coming to him and saying they had been discriminated against and asked what he would do, he said he would mostly provide emotional support. He also classified himself as having a Type-A personality and therefore would maybe also try to fix it. When I gave the same scenario, replacing nontheist with Christian, and asked if he would do the same, he hesitated then smiled saying, “Honestly, I feel like it's... [it would] be more like... It's probably [a] misunderstanding! [*Laughs*]. Or they just didn't like what [someone] said.”

Later in the interview when discussing the religiosity of America, Andrew was concerned about the tendency for Christians to view themselves as a minority, stating “I feel like there are some people who [have] like a victim complex who want to focus on the quantity of the members of their community rather than the quality.” He went on to talk about the sordid history of Christianity and its role in trying to assimilate native peoples. He tied this to a subconscious fear he saw amongst Christians stating, “if things seem like they're becoming un-Christian then it means you're losing power. To some people, it makes it seem like, ‘Oh, if people become un-Christian, then things that Christians did are going to happen to us.’” He intimated that some Christians experience a persecution complex currently but notes there was also a subset who feared future Christian persecution that conversion could keep at bay.

Andrew also pointed out that because of a superiority complex Christians tended to assign morality to things that were not necessarily related to morality. He gave the example of the debate against people who are transgender and barring them from competing in sports. He believed it was rooted in religiosity, stating “because biologically speaking, there's not really a

lot of reasons why you would even need to separate women and men in sports. And all I can think about is it feels like it's just... It's just another phrenology thing that's happening.” He then connected this idea to how Christians used the Bible to bolster their ideas of being superior by giving themselves license to enslave others.

The above participants often spoke of Christian dominance and a propensity to feel superior to all other religious groups, as intertwined. Affirmers indicated that when Christians felt a loss of their privilege, they ultimately felt persecuted, thus leading them to discriminate against nontheists. They also noted that conversion served as a tool for Christian supremacists and could be used to ensure Christian hegemony, thereby retaining their social advantages. While affirmers were not exempt from using microaggressions against nontheists, their experience with intersectionality provided them with an understanding of marginalization that they could then apply to marginalized groups they did not belong to.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

This study establishes not only nine distinct categories of microaggressions against nontheists, but also reveals the contexts and processes that lead individuals to employ microaggressions. It shows that having a sense of righteousness and superiority is the linchpin to Christians using microaggressions against nontheists. This research shows that perceptions of Christianity being superior to nontheism reinforces beliefs that nontheists are inferior and unnatural, thereby intensifying the desire to convert them. It also shows that the belief in the righteousness of Christianity over nontheism emboldens a desire to weaken the separation of church and state, often fueled by fears about creeping secularism. When the righteousness and superiority of Christianity perspective is combined with the fear and inferiority of secularism, and thereby nontheists, it compels those who hold these beliefs to push for Christian supremacy.

The processes that underpin the infantilizing, othering, and devaluation of nontheists are also found in other forms of group-based discrimination, as seen in racism, ableism, and sexism. Like White supremacy, Christian supremacist ideology can be espoused by those who would not consider themselves nor condone Christian supremacy but who nonetheless use Christian supremacist language. This supremacist rhetoric is being deployed by Christians in ways they perceive as positive and helpful toward nontheists because they sincerely believe they hold unconditional acceptance and respect for nontheists. This is one reason using a microaggression framework in the study of discrimination is important. The difference between overt and covert forms of discrimination, as demonstrated by my participants, is the situational context and *intent* behind discrimination-based rhetoric. The obliviousness to and unintentionality of the harm produced is key to classifying microaggressions, even when the most egregious rhetoric is used. Not a single interviewee openly stated they disliked nontheists. On the contrary, most

participants professed being very accepting and loving toward non-Christians and claimed they had one or more close nontheist friends. Furthermore, most participants believed in the fair treatment of others, regardless of religious (non)affiliation. This is not to say that the lines between covert and overt forms of discrimination are perfectly delineated—intentions *are* difficult to ascertain—but there was no clear intention to strip nontheists of rights nor an open toleration of discriminatory behavior toward them. Even if unacknowledged, supremacy in all its forms is detrimental to society, especially to those seen as inferior. This can be intensified when supremacist behaviors are denied or the harm unacknowledged. Thus, the harms Christian supremacy produces at individual and institutional levels warrant continued research.

Not all my participants used Christian supremacist rhetoric or espoused its ideology. Instead, the ‘affirmers’ among my participants served to demonstrate that they are the exception that underlines the prevalence of Christian supremacist ideology. When people are made keenly aware of injustices enacted against marginalized groups in society, or further have personally experienced those injustices, they become sensitive to the power differentials in our society. Those whose race, gender, or sexual orientation do not match the dominant groups in America are not able to benefit from the social and cultural statuses of belonging to the dominant group—thereby marginalizing and stigmatizing them. Their own experiences of marginalization serve as lenses through which they could recognize a lack of privilege for others. This is not to say that the marginalized do not use microaggressions against nontheists. Instead, it means they are much less likely to use microaggressions because they recognize the harms of marginalization.

From the richness of the data collected, I believe there are several directions this line of research could take. First, there is conflicting evidence about the relationship between the level of religiosity and the propensity to discriminate. If fear is driving Christians to perceive that *they*

experience discrimination and nontheists do not, it is reasonable to hypothesize that microaggressions would occur more often and in various ways with Christians who are *less* religious (Bader et al. 2020). This study could then be repeated with participants who reflect a lower religiosity score. Second, microaggressions against nontheists that are expressed by non-Christian religious populations remain unexplored. It is unknown whether there are differences in the microaggressions used among those belonging to a minority religion. It would be worth including multiple faiths to understand where microaggressions may overlap or deviate. Third, I believe with repeated qualitative studies, microaggression categories and their correlating statements could be turned into a scale that measures the likelihood that individuals discriminate against nontheists. Relatedly, this same data could also produce a scale that more accurately measures nontheists' experiences of microaggressions.

Finally, the qualitative data gathered from religious American Christians shows that some Christians *do* experience individual scenarios and situations that are hurtful, including discriminatory microaggressions employed against them due to their Christian identity. These experiences are worth documenting and discussing within the context of religious pluralism. The feelings and experiences of my participants are important and should not be discounted or undervalued. However, it should be stressed that Christians hold hegemonic power in America, and when they perpetrate religion-based discrimination it is oppressive to those who are not Christian. In essence, Christians cannot experience reverse religious discrimination any more than Whites experience reverse racism—who holds power is essential to the processes. The marginalization of nontheists is important to recognize because they remain a stigmatized and oppressed group, despite the perceptions of believers. This study highlights the processes and

contexts of the marginalization and oppression of nontheists by religious Christian Americans, who are largely ignorant of their role in harming nontheists.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions

- 1: In the eligibility survey you answered you attend church _____. What do you like most about your church?
- 2: What does belief in God mean to you?
 - a. How does it make you feel?
- 3: What do you think about people who do not believe in God?
 - a. How do they make you feel?
 - b. (Are they all same/different depending on answer)
- 4: Do you know anyone who doesn't believe in God?
 - a. How do you know them?
 - b. What do you think about them?
 - c. What experiences have you had with them?
 - d. Have they told you of any problems they faced because of their lack of belief in God?
- 5: When you hear the word discrimination what comes to mind?
 - a. Can you give examples of what could be considered discrimination?
- 6: Have *you* ever been discriminated against because you are Christian?
 - a. When? Where? With whom?
 - b. How did it make you feel?
 - c. If not, do you know someone who has? What happened?
- 7: Do you think nonbelievers experience discrimination (too)?
 - a. If so, what does that look like? What types?
 - b. If not, could you say more about this?
- 8: Have you ever experienced extra obstacles in life because you are a Christian?
- 9: Do you think those who don't believe in God experience extra obstacles living their life because of their identity?
- 10: What would you think or feel if a fellow Christian said they had been discriminated against because they were Christian?
 - a. What steps should they take to address it?

- 11: What would you think or feel if a nonbeliever said they had been discriminated against because they don't believe in God?
- a. What steps should they take to address it?
- 12: Have you ever attended an interfaith event here in ____ (city)?
- a. What was it like? Were there speeches?
 - b. Were there people who didn't believe in God there? If so, did you interact with them?
 - c. If never, was there anything that prevented you from attending one?
- 13: Thinking about local interfaith prayer vigils where community leaders speak, how comfortable would you be if a nonbeliever gave a speech at the vigil?
- a. If comfortable, how would you feel if they were told they couldn't participate by the organizers? What advice would you give them?
 - b. If not, where do you think they could connect with the wider community? How could they get more involved in the community?
- 14: I want to know about your worldview. Do you see America as a largely religious country or a nonreligious country?
- a. (Could probe definitions or demographics)
 - b. Has this affected you? How so?
 - c. (Could probe having/needing social support because of this)
 - d. Do you think this affects (Christians/nonbelievers) in a (nonreligious/religious) country?
 - i. If so, in what ways? (Could probe having/needing social support because of this)
 - ii. If not, what leads you to think that?
- 15: When hearing, America has secular institutions, what does "secular" mean to you?
- a. How do you feel about our secular institutions?
- 16: Thinking about our (secular) court system, does it treat Christians and nonbelievers the same?
- a. If so, what leads you to think that?
 - b. If not, which group is favored? What are (they/you) able to do that (you/they) cannot? How does that make you feel?

- 17: Thinking about our (secular) educational system, K through 12 and public universities, do they offer social support for Christians and nonbelievers? Is it equal?
- If so, what are those social supports?
 - If not, is one group favored over another? Which group? What supports do (Christians/nonbelievers) have that (nonbelievers/Christians) don't?
- 18: How do you feel about Christian student ministry centers on college campuses?
- If positive, how would you describe what they do? How do they help students?
The community?
 - If negative, what leads you to feel that? How might Christians have their social needs met on campus? (Could probe what role Christianity does/should play on campus)
- 19: How do you feel about nonbeliever or secular student advocacy centers on college campuses?
- If positive, how would you describe what they do? How do they help students?
The community?
 - If negative, what leads you to feel that? How might nonbelievers have their social needs met on campus? (Could probe what role secularism does/should play on campus).
- 20: Are there any other aspects about Christians and nonbelievers that I may have left out that you feel would be relevant to our conversation?

Survey Portion

- 21: What pseudonym (fake name) would you like to use?
- 22: What do you consider to be your Christian denomination?
- 23: What is your age?
- 24: What do you consider to be your race?
- 25: What is your highest level of education?
- 26: What is your gender?
- 27: About how much is your yearly household income?
- 28: What is your political affiliation if you have one? (Democrat, republican, etc.)
- 29: What is your political viewpoint? (Liberal, moderate, conservative, etc.)

Appendix B: Analytic Codes

Table 2. Analytic Codes

Codes	
Microaggressions Based on MANRIS Scale:	Location Based Culture:
<i>Assumes Inferiority and Stereotypes</i>	<i>Bible Belt</i>
<i>Belief as Default</i>	<i>Corn Belt</i>
<i>Denial of Prejudice and Discrimination</i>	Other Nontheism:
<i>Pathologizes Nontheists</i>	<i>Nontheism Acquaintance</i>
Microaggressions Based on Open Coding:	<i>Nontheism Close Relationship</i>
<i>Assumes Ignorance</i>	<i>Nontheism Positive Attributes</i>
<i>Desire for Conversion</i>	<i>Nontheists as Moral/Openminded</i>
<i>Religiosity as Social Norm</i>	<i>Pity Nontheists</i>
<i>Secularity as Threat</i>	Other Relevant Codes:
<i>Superiority of Belief</i>	<i>Dissonance</i>
Factors of Social Capital:	<i>Desire Single Interfaith Building</i>
<i>Affirms Christians Desire to Convert</i>	<i>Nostalgia</i>
<i>Affirms Christians Discriminate Others</i>	<i>Performing Christianity</i>
<i>Affirms Christian Persecution Complex</i>	<i>Separation of Church and State</i>
<i>Affirms Christian Privilege</i>	
<i>Affirms Christian Superiority Complex</i>	
<i>Affirms Negative Culture of Christianity</i>	
<i>Affirms Nontheist Discrimination</i>	
<i>Affirms Pervasiveness of Christianity</i>	
<i>Denies Christian Privilege</i>	
<i>Marginalization as Factor</i>	
<i>Overestimates Nontheism</i>	
<i>Perceives Discrimination of Christians</i>	
<i>Perceives Prejudice Toward Christians</i>	
<i>Perceives Persecution of Christians</i>	
<i>Political Factor</i>	
<i>Race as Factor</i>	

Appendix C: Religiosity Scale

The five questions listed below were asked of each participant in an electronic eligibility survey. Every response to each question was given a point value between one and five. To calculate a participant’s score, responses were summed and then divided by five to achieve a final averaged score. Participants needed to score at least a 3.6 to be eligible to participate in an interview. The following questions were asked of each participant:

To what extent do you believe that God exists?

- Great extent (5 pts)
- Moderate (4 pts)
- Somewhat (3 pts)
- Very little (2 pts)
- Not at all (1 pt)

	never	rarely	occasionally	often	very often
How often do you think about religious issues?	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts
How often do you take part in religious services?	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts
How often do you pray?	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts
How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God intervenes in your life?	1 pt	2 pts	3 pts	4 pts	5 pts

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