

Drawing Lines and Taking Sides: An Examination of Boundary Work among Oppositional
Worldviews

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ABSTRACT

Christians and atheists have clashed publicly over ideological tensions throughout the history of the United States. Active atheists and evangelical Christians have, and continue to, vie for legitimacy and access to power, often at the expense of those with whom they disagree. This research investigates identity, boundary work, and the relationship to the “other” between and within these two oppositional ideologies. Findings demonstrate how, in a variety of situations and settings, these two groups not only “other” each other, but use their “other” to bolster their own ideological community. The presence of a group with an oppositional worldview allows each community to further define itself, and individuals within each group to define and refine their own identity within the group. The data for this research is made up of 45 interviews and multiple sessions of participant observation. After analyzing the data, four substantive areas emerged as prominent fields for boundary work within and between both groups: Boundaries and Solidarity, Boundaries and Morality, Boundaries and Gender, and Boundaries and Technology. This dissertation contributes to the sociology of boundaries and identity as those concepts are stretched and manipulated to explore the inner workings and “othering” mechanisms of active atheists and evangelical Christians. This research shows how boundaries and identity work together for members of rigid ideological groups, regardless of their specific worldview. While data on both groups offers novel observation and insight, this dissertation also provides desperately needed qualitative data on the distressingly understudied atheist population.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

“This is an abomination!” someone yelled. Several hundred heads turned to the back of the auditorium. Moments before all focus had been on the stage, where a “humanist chaplain” had been delivering a keynote address. The event was an atheist conference called “Reasonfest,” held at a large midwestern university. The speaker stopped and waited to see what the intruders would do next. “Y’all are goin’ to HELL!” exclaimed the angry Christian protestor. Some conference attendees yelled back, others glanced fearfully around the room, and still others sat with a look of tired nonchalance. The small group of conference crashers identified themselves as followers of Jesus Christ and invited “Reasonfest” attendees to follow them out the door and out of Satan’s clutches. No one followed; soon the speaker began again and the program went on as planned. In quieter moments individual audience members would glance at the back door, just to be sure no one was there ready to interrupt again. This was not the first time such a scene has disturbed their atheist gatherings.

Christians and atheists have clashed publicly over ideological tensions throughout the history of the United States (Jacoby 2004). Ideologically oppositional groups have, and continue to, vie for legitimacy and access to power, often at the expense of those with whom they disagree. This research investigates identity, boundary work, and the relationship to the “other” between and within two oppositional ideologies: evangelical Christianity and active atheism. I specifically use “active” to distinguish study participants from the general atheist population. Research shows that most atheists are not involved in clubs or organizations related to their secular ideology (Bullivant 2008; Pasquale 2010). "Active atheists" refers to those who affiliate with some kind of atheist or secular organization.

This research investigates the question of whether or not boundary work against the “other” is necessary for evangelical Christians and active atheists using the qualitative methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation. I also address how these socially constructed boundaries impact individual and collective identity for members of these groups. This question presupposes several others: How does boundary work solidify the “us against the world” mentality both of these groups maintain? How is the “other” constructed and perceived by each group? How does boundary work manifest within each of these two ideological worldviews? How do boundaries and identity build on one another for members of these two ideologically distinct groups?

My research demonstrates how, in a variety of situations and settings, these two groups not only “other” each other, but use their “other” to bolster their own ideological community. The presence of a group with an oppositional worldview allows each community to further define itself, and individuals within each group to define and refine their own identity within the group. I asked members of both groups questions about their own ideological communities, their opposition, and their individual social lives dealing with those in their community and those outside it. Findings from these interviews, augmented by participant observation in settings from both worldviews, illustrate the aspects of social life these two groups have in common despite their ideological dissonance, as well as further identifying the contrasting features between the two.

I conducted 45 interviews and multiple sessions of participant observation. After analyzing the data, I distilled the findings into four substantive areas. These discussions, each a chapter in this dissertation, include: Boundaries and Solidarity, Boundaries and Morality, Boundaries and Gender, and Boundaries and Technology. Boundaries and

Solidarity provides overall context for the “othering” relationship between these two groups as well as illustrations of how each group functions in a society that in general disagrees (to some extent) with their worldview. *Boundaries and Morality* looks comparatively at morality as a component of self-presentation as well as examples of moral frameworks in action for members of these two groups. *Boundaries and Gender* explores how both of these thought communities navigate gendered interaction. *Boundaries and Technology* investigates how the Internet and social media can be used as tools for building identity and community. Online boundaries can be just as strong or permeable as those in “real” life. Each of the substantive chapters includes findings from both evangelical Christians and active atheists. Sometimes I discuss data from atheists and Christians comparatively, dealing with similar issues, and at other times commentary from one group will be contrasted with examples from the other. Boundary work, as well as the related concepts of identity and collective identity, carry through each of the chapters, however other theoretical approaches join in the analysis depending on the particular subject.

The following discussion highlights the theoretical frames on which this research hangs. First, I include an assessment of how these two groups function similarly, despite their oppositional worldviews, which endorses them as a compelling duo for comparative work. Next I offer a brief recitation of sociological literature on atheism – contemporarily and in the recent past. Work on atheism and secularity is increasing within the social sciences, though the topic is still woefully understudied. Then, I introduce the related theoretical stories of boundary work, identity, and collective identity. Finally, I look at the specific issues of the four substantive chapters as they relate to boundaries and identity.

Different Ideas, Similar Strategies

Their worldviews and subsequent ideology is very different, but both evangelical Christian groups and atheist groups often maintain a maligned underdog identity. Each group represents a minority in the larger society, but they use this status as a strategy to bond existing members, attract new participants, and keep themselves a visible, disadvantaged character in U.S. culture. Evangelical Christians see mainstream society – in this pluralistic era – as a place where morality is “an oddity” (Carroll 2002; Trinitapoli 2007). The pluralism itself helps to strengthen and solidify their exclusive nature (Trinitapoli 2007). When they stand up for what they believe in, they see themselves as standing against a sea of secular opposition.

Interpreting the threat of secularism and secularization is part of what makes evangelical Christians thrive (Peek 2005; Smith 1998). As pluralism dominates American society, conservative Protestant groups flourish under the perception that they are a beset minority, hence the subtitle of Christian Smith’s (1998) book: “Embattled and Thriving.” It is this constant threat of “the world” that gives conservative Protestant movements purpose and identity (Smith and Denton 2005). The perceived threat to their cultural values, and subsequently their identity, strengthens solidarity (Peek 2005). Additionally, the conviction of their absolute moral rightness propels the movement to mobilize in the face of their foes. They would lose a driving force that keeps members bonded together and stimulates action without this “embattled” identity.

Members of the atheist movement also share this underdog mentality. Their tensions with mainstream U.S. society keep their bonds strong and motivated (Cimino and Smith 2007). Secular humanist and atheist groups maintain a stance of actively facing

discrimination, and they believe they uphold a minority perspective in society. Jacoby (2004) reported a cycle where freethinkers (an umbrella label for the irreligious and atheist individuals) make progress and gain representation in society, only then to be vilified by what they see as the religious majority.¹ Reports on the general population's perception of atheists show negative assumptions, distrust, and animosity (Yancey 2010; Zuckerman 2009, 2014). An example often used by atheist groups to emphasize this point is the incidence of several states banning atheists from holding public office (Cimino and Smith 2007).² Whether enforced or not, the mere existence of codified discrimination like this demonstrates how atheists could consider themselves "embattled" just like their evangelical Christian counterparts.

Cimino and Smith (2007) discussed atheists taking inspiration from the evangelical Protestant perspective in order to use their status as an advantage. These scholars defined three strategies used by atheist groups, two of which directly involve the evangelical opposition. First, atheist organizations began to reclaim the derogatory language aimed at them, re-appropriating the labels with pride. For example, when Christian groups refer to the secular outside as "Godless" and relying on reason rather than faith (Sandler 2006), the atheist collectives have embraced this distinction rather than hiding from it. Recent atheist university student group t-shirts displayed the phrase: *The best goddamned group on campus!* The opposition has, in a way, assisted in defining the modern atheist movement.

¹ For the sake of clarity I will use the term atheist when discussing organizations and individuals affiliated with an irreligious point of view for the duration of the dissertation. However, when reporting information from previous research I will use the language of the original document.

² States with anti-atheist legislation: Arkansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. However, the sources note that laws banning atheists from office were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in the 1961 *Torcaso v. Watkins* case (www.thinkatheist.com, www.freethoughtpedia.com).

Just as the atheist movement accepts and then uses labels coming from evangelicals such as “godless,” “faithless,” and “worldly,” many evangelical groups welcome labels such as “Bible Thumper” or “Jesus Freak” which are printed on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and other modern Christian paraphernalia (Hendershot 2004; Sandler 2006). In these examples the ironic slogans may be more about young people “fitting in” rather than a strategic campaign decision, but the idea is the same. For both atheists and evangelical Christians, taking back language designed to tear the group down shows a thick skin, a sense of humor, and it bonds group members together.

Taking on a “minority discourse” in order to achieve public visibility and fight for equal rights in society is another strategy employed by both groups. Atheist groups are up against formal and informal prejudices in the United States. According to Edgell et al. (2006; Edgell forthcoming), atheism is the least accepted identity on a list of religious and ethnic minority categories. Marching under the “minority discourse” banner may help this movement attract attention that will lead to achieving equality. When one examines the evangelical Christian position on these issues of minority status and equality, it is clear that atheist organizations borrowed the “minority discourse” approach.

Evangelical Christians have been claiming the “embattled minority” stance for decades. In some areas of modern American society evangelical Christians maintain they are “displaced, marginalized, and denigrated” (Smith 1998, p.91; Elisha 2011; Sherkat 2014). Research on perceptions of various religious groups legitimizes this concern among conservative Protestants. Many Americans perceive rigid Christianity as closed minded and potentially prejudiced (Yancey 2010). Evangelical distrust of and disdain for many elements of the secular mainstream also keeps them on the margins of American culture. Smith (1998,

p.91) noted that many evangelical Christians describe themselves as “second class citizens,” maintaining that they are oppressed because of their rigid beliefs, opinions and subsequent lifestyle.

These two movements are very different in ideals, worldviews and societal goals. However their strategies for survival and growth in society are similar. Both maintain that the majority of U.S. society unfairly judges them and in some instances openly discriminates against them. In each case, one group sets the other up to be their opposition. For evangelical Christians, society is perilously secular. Anti-religion influences threaten their survival and way of life (Smith and Denton 2005). Atheists in the U.S. express discomfort living in an overwhelmingly religious society, where those who do not conform to religious ideology, particularly Christian ideology, are seen as suspicious, immoral, and dangerous (Edgell et al. 2006; Yancey 2010; Zuckerman 2009, 2014). Each group relies on the other to be that oppositional force they push against in order to establish their position in society. This study investigates these areas of push and pull, these boundaries, and their relationship as each other’s “other.”

The two ideological groups presented in this research are not each other’s only “other.” Evangelicalism, by its commitment to the inerrant truth of the Bible, is an exclusive group that proudly distinguishes itself from mainstream U.S. culture, other religious traditions, and other Christian sects (Altemeyer 2003; Smith 1998). Atheists too set themselves apart from many “others” (Yancey 2010). As such, these groups are precisely the right two cases compared for this research for two reasons. First, while these two groups have other “others,” both groups’ ideological stances set up this particular “other” as a direct opponent; Christians differentiate themselves against atheists and secularity in general and

atheists position themselves as the reasonable alternative to religion's irrational and irresponsible worldview. Each ideology maintains their supremacy at the expense of the other. They are nemeses. Second, despite their directly oppositional nature, these two ideological movements engage in similar boundary politics, even borrowing strategies from one another. Each uses their opposition to fuel their own campaign, thus, in that sense they need each other as examples of what is wrong with the world.

Atheist Scholarship Slowly on the Rise

Atheism has been a presence in the United States since its founding (Jacoby 2004). Sociological and historical work document secularist movements as they've emerged under a number of labels, including secular humanism, freethinkers, secularism, and atheism (Jacoby 2004; Smith 2003). As far back as 1971 (Campbell 1971) and as recently as 2010 (Zuckerman 2010), sociologists concerned about the dearth of research on atheism in America have implored the discipline, and social science in general, to remedy this oversight. These calls for research have not changed significantly more than 40 years. This is not to say that issues of atheism and secularity have been completely ignored; research related to irreligion exists, though few sources directly address atheists and their worldview as the focus of analysis (Ysseldyk, Haslam, Matheson, and Anisman 2011).

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s the General Social Survey (GSS) reported a doubling of the number of individuals claiming no religious affiliation (approximately 7 to 14%) (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007; Hout and Fischer 2002). There is a significant body of literature dedicated to exploring this finding, explaining the increase and speculating on the implications of this reported shift in ideology. Some research focuses on the survey

itself – the questions asked and how they may not truly represent religious participation and belief (Dougherty et al. 2007). Others argue that changes in religion's relationship with politics, and the conflation of religiosity and nationalism, have resulted in significant numbers of individuals turning away from religion (Baker and Smith 2009; Hout and Fischer 2002). Still others argue for a more longitudinal approach, focusing on stability, or lack thereof, within the “none” responses (Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam 2010; Sherkat 2008, 2014). The inquiries that are most relevant to my research focus on the “none” respondents of the research samples (Baker and Smith 2009; Lim et al. 2010; Sherkat 2008, 2014). Surprisingly little of the available research reaches out to the non-religious population to better understand the respondents themselves.

The body of qualitative research on atheism in the U.S. is quite small, but currently undergoing a growth spurt. Since 2000 an increasing number of sociologists have taken an interest in the irreligious population in the U.S., with several authors engaged in ongoing research and producing multiple publications (Fitzgerald 2003; Foust 2009; Furseth 2010; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Manning 2010; Smith 2011, 2013; Zuckerman 2009, 2010, 2014). Phil Zuckerman's (2010) anthology of atheism and secularity houses several brief pieces that begin the work of fleshing out research on American atheists. What makes these different than the survey-based articles described above – apart from their methodology – is their direct engagement with American atheist populations.

Important information can be gleaned from the large survey approach, however qualitative research has the potential to address a different set of questions with depth and nuance. Linneman and Clendenen (2010, p.89) comment that based on GSS data we know “people are concerned about atheists, but we have no idea what concerns atheists

themselves.” The authors try to remedy that, at least in part, by exploring atheist perspectives on GLBT rights issues. Alongside this article is a piece exploring the gendered nature of atheist experience (Furseth 2010) and atheist family structures and activities (Manning 2010). These are brief articles, offering only tentative findings, and the issues they address are greatly overlooked in the quantitative literature; some information is better than none at all.

Smith (2011), Fitzgerald (2003), Foust (2009), and Guenther et al. (2013) all tackle topics related to stigma and identity in their work. Their scholarship includes issues like engaging with identity and “coming out” as an atheist, dealing with the negative public perception of atheism, and finding like-minded others with whom they might form a community. Theism is the norm for most people in the U.S. Constructing an identity outside of this expectation of religiosity requires complex work, not unlike the process of “coming out” as having a non-normative sexual identity (Smith 2011). Individuals who openly identify as atheist consistently report suspicion and discrimination from others (Foust 2009). Researchers find that this “ideological nonconformity” (Fitzgerald 2003) requires ongoing identity management as individuals endure unending conflict with the theistic culture that permeates American society. My investigation of boundary work and identity for atheists who “congregate” fits in with the emerging discussion in this small but mighty sub-field.

Popular Media: New Atheism

Popular literature on atheism gained prominence and popularity in the early 2000s in the U.S. A group of four authors in particular all contributed best-selling books on secularity and became known as “The Four Horsemen,” a reference to Revelations in the

Bible. These authors - Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett – are also considered the original proponents of “New Atheism.” The popularity of their books, which include works like *The God Delusion* (Dawkins 2006) and *God is Not Great* (Hitchens 2007), created a New Atheist following that is still prominent within the secular community today. CNN described the sub-movement this way in a 2006 column: “What the New Atheists share is a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.” While the four of them differ in occupation and background, they share a similar attitude when it comes to religion and all things supernatural. Their motivation stems from concern, “even outrage,” at the ways in which religion influences social life globally (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>). Philosopher Richard Carrier (2013, p. 105) described it this way: “What distinguishes the ‘new’ from old atheism is precisely this feature: atheists are increasingly, and loudly, out and proud.” This anger toward any and all believers gives followers of the New Atheism “philosophy” a reputation for being confrontational and abrasive.

All the active atheists I interviewed for this research have been influenced in some way by the New Atheist school of thought, though not all participants would count themselves as New Atheists themselves. For example, one of the most dedicated and politically active individuals I spoke with shared his feelings on the topic: “It’s a brand of aggressive, in-your-face, confrontational atheism. It’s fairly popular right now and I don’t try and tear down that perspective. It definitely gets results, but it’s not the way I want to interact with people” (Colton, 26). Active atheists might share goals with New Atheism but

it should not be assumed that all atheists involved in secular groups and organizations agree with the New Atheist agenda or strategy.

Boundary Work

Human beings, as creatures of social interaction, constantly create, maintain, challenge, and re-create social boundaries. Boundary work establishes norms and rules for groups and individuals. “Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices and time and space” (Lamont and Fournier 1992, p. 9). Boundaries help to create individual and group identity by regulating inclusion and exclusion, and solidifying the concepts of us, not us, and them (Bellah 1987). A clear vision of who we *are not* both galvanizes who we are and whom we fight against.

Since Bourdieu (1984) and Lamont’s (2000; Lamont and Fournier 1992) theorizing in the second half of the 20th Century, crystallizing the concept of boundary work as an area of study for social science, many have taken the theoretical principles and applied them to a wide variety of situations. Social scientists show how we create boundaries and the implications and consequences of those actions on social life (Lamont and Fournier 1992; Lamont and Molnar 2002; Small, Harding and Lamont 2010). Scholars have analyzed social boundaries related to class (Carter 2006; Giele 2008; Kern 1997; Lamont 2000; Vallas 2001), race (Gans 1999; Shirley 2010; Wray 2006), and gender and queer theory (Ezzell 2009; Gamson 1995; Masesquesnay 2003; Shapiro 2007). The last 20 years of research are peppered with literature drawing on Lamont’s symbolic boundary paradigm to demonstrate and explain situations of in-group out-group dynamics, group formation and solidarity, and boundary work as an integral part of culture and social identity.

Tranby and Zulkowski's (2012) article took existing literature from the sociology of religion in order to demonstrate how the symbolic boundary paradigm works as a tool for analysis in many areas within the study of religion. They looked specifically at issues of gender, sexuality, and family life within the conservative Protestant subculture. Because symbolic boundaries emphasize solidarity between peoples and groups, they argue for utilizing a boundary work model to analyze issues of gender and sexuality from the conservative Christian perspective. A core function of religion is to unite people "into one single moral community," (Durkheim 1995 [1912], p. 44) and the beliefs and rituals shared by those in a religious community routinely define boundaries (Olson 2011; Taves 2009). According to Tranby and Zulkowski's (2012) assertions, sociology of religion is a prime space for a greater use of symbolic boundary work as a means to better understand how and why religious groups function in people's lives.

This recent scholarship is by no means the first to find the language and concepts of boundary work helpful in exploring religious groups. Kanter (1972) determined that strong boundaries between insiders and outsiders were a key component to successful religious sects or communes. Greil and Rudy (1984a, 1984b) in their work on conversion had similar results to report, finding that "encapsulation" – or the process of limiting interaction between members and nonmembers (Lofland 1978) – could successfully create a boundary between those "in" and those "out" of a particular reference group, and through that process become the "only game in town" for those on the inside (Greil and Rudy 1984b, p. 263). More from Greil and Rudy as the discussion shifts toward identity and collective identity.

My research supports Tranby and Zulkowski's (2012) claim that religious communities lend themselves easily to scrutiny from a boundary work perspective. I also

argue that the irreligious community is another prime location for symbolic boundary analysis. Previous research called attention to some parallels in how the two ideological groups form and function within the greater society (Cimino and Smith 2007), and this current research specifically investigated the boundary work both groups engage in on a number of specific topics. Investigating both social groups through a symbolic boundary lens allowed for comparisons and contrasts not observed in previous research. Due to their unique positions in society, both groups consistently engage in boundary work as they reach out for like-minded communities and simultaneously distance themselves from mainstream culture. Members of both groups in this comparative research demonstrated boundary work in their social lives, their gendered interactions, their connection with technology and social media, and their presentations of morality. Symbolic boundary work alone, however, does not engage with the full picture of individuals involved in these groups engage with their own worldview and those they consider “other.” Issues of identity and collective identity must also be considered, especially when discussing religious and irreligious groups.

Identity

Identity within the boundary work concept illuminates the individual’s role in collective interaction. The two ideas intertwine and relate the individual to the group and vice versa. Riesch (2010, p.461) goes so far as to argue for boundary work “as social identity building.” Constructing identity involves defining an in-group, which leads to differentiation between in-group and out-group. Building identity effectively builds group boundaries. The connection between identity and boundaries becomes clearer when discussing issues of conflict. Williams and Copes (2005) studied online forums of the

Straight Edge subculture. They pointed out this connection as participants used in-group/out-group boundaries to solidify their own Straight Edge identities. A substance free lifestyle is required of “authentic” Straight Edge members. Individuals on the forum used this boundary to position their own identity as within the group or on the outskirts, based on their stated use of or abstinence from drugs and alcohol. These individual disclosures reinforced the boundaries between true Straight Edge members and “posers” (Williams and Copes 2005). Sharp (2009) discussed the concept of “symbolic entrapment,” which occurs when the symbolic borders of identity – or a part of identity – prevent action. To use Sharp’s example, conservative Christian women in abusive relationships experienced symbolic entrapment when divorce was not a religiously sanctioned option for them (Sharp 2009). Crossing that boundary and pursuing divorce would disrupt or compromise the Christian identity. Respondents in Sharp’s (2009) study had to find creative ways of circumventing the entrapment in order to preserve their social identity. Any given individual has a number of social and personal identities, each of which necessitates boundary creation, maintenance, and negotiation.

A growing collection of research confronts these connected issues of identity and boundaries in the realm of religion (Alrough 2004; Good and Willoughby 2007; Peek 2005; Trinitapoli 2007; Ysseldyk, et al. 2011; Yukich 2010). Sharp (2009) focused on conservative Christian domestic abuse survivors and their conflicted responses to the church’s stance on divorce. His work emphasized the salience of religious identity as a driving force for decision-making. Participants in his study had to find a way to escape their abusive relationships without compromising their Christian identity. Religion becomes such a crucial component of identity in part because it offers “Truth” not found in other parts of our social

world (Altemeyer 2003; Ysseldyk et al. 2011). Research demonstrates that religion provides more than spirituality, but also peer networks and support, educational resources, and even economic opportunities (Chen 2002; Hurh and Kim 1990). Additional research points to the conflation of religion and nationalism or ethnic identity, demonstrated among both American Christians (Smith 2011) and Arab-American Muslims (Alrough 2004; Peek 2005) as explanation for religion's prominence in identity. Whatever the motivation, religion occupies an important position in terms of identity, and these identities dictate boundary work for the individuals and groups involved.

The body, as an integral part of identity, has recently been brought into focus, especially where religion is concerned. Davidman's (2015) work on identity change for individuals who left ultra-orthodox Judaism highlights the importance of embodiment as a site for both identity and boundary making. Religion is inscribed on the body; "the body is not only the location for the inscription of cultural or religious norms, but it is also the site where identity is created and maintained through routine embodied practices" (Davidman 2015, p.204). Bodily practices signal group membership (Davidman and Greil 2007; Kanter 1972; McGuire 2008) but also as Davidman adds in her most recent work, embodied religious practices aid in "constructing and reinforcing identity changes" (Davidman 2015, p.213).

Embodied elements of identity came out in narratives from my research as well, however the religious life of evangelical Christians is based on faith and declarations of allegiance rather than ritualized routines dictating myriad aspects of daily life (Davidman 2015, p.206). As Davidman (2015, p. 210) put it: "The extent to which religious bodily rituals shape members' identities and their daily routine practices varies along a continuum

from nearly total control to a loose set of guidelines.” Both active atheists and evangelical Christians belong somewhere on the “looser” half of this continuum. While not as strong as the body-identity relationship in other ideological groups, in the four substantive chapters below examples highlighting embodiment as a component of identity do appear for both evangelical Christians and active atheists.

In scholarship on religion, as well as queer theory pieces, boundary work and active differentiation serve to reinforce group solidarity (Tilly 2005; Yukich 2010). Coming together with a common worldview – as well as common “others” – helps to define and legitimize both the group (Riesch 2010) and its individual participants. By surrounding one’s self with a like-minded group – especially in a situation where a religious identity is new – one can limit the interference or influence from outside the group (Greil and Rudy 1984b). Masequesmay (2003) pointed to boundary work as not only a source of solidarity, but also a route through which individuals normalize their experiences. If everyone in the group has a similar identity issue, individuals with values and ideologies that fit become part of an “us” where their identity can evolve in line with group commonalities (Masequesmay 2003; Shapiro 2007).

Peek’s (2005) exploration of Arab-American Muslim identity further illustrated this idea. In this research, Peek developed a rubric for the evolution of religious identity; a three-stage process: religion as ascribed identity, religion as chosen identity, and finally religion as declared identity. This framework shows identity work as a process (Shapiro 2007), a process through which boundaries are established, challenged, and crystallized. “Religious boundaries and meaning are constructed both from within and without, in response to internal conflicts and choices and external pressures and rewards that drive identity

formation” (Peek 2005, p. 233). As identities transform, a key component becomes “seeing oneself and one’s world from the perspective of one’s reference group” (Greil and Rudy 1984b). Thus the development of an identity involves the individual as well as his or her surroundings – within and outside the identity group. The development of strong religious identity assumes ongoing boundary maintenance and negotiation. I argue that the same can be said for an irreligious identity.

Less research exists concerning these issues as they affect the irreligious community. Though much of the previous discussion of religion can be applied to the atheist movement, recent scholarship begins to fill in the pieces and make some essential contributions on the issues of identity and collective identity using atheism in the U.S. as the case for scrutiny. Guenther et al. (2013) showed the New Atheist movement as a case study for collective identity. While the definition of collective identity emphasizes similarity and togetherness as a result of moral, cognitive, and emotional connections between an individual and a broader community (Bernstein 1997; Cimino and Smith 2014; Ghaziani 2011), Guenther et al. (2013) quickly pointed out distance from opponents, “or targets,” as another vital component of collective identity. This emphasis on the opposition is a strong motivational factor in the New Atheist communities they studied. Just as research on religious groups can apply to the irreligious, a main point in the collective identity discussion of new atheist groups parallels Christian organizations as well. Guenther et al. (2013) underlined the tension with opposition as important for collective identity, but also stressed the existence of boundary permeability. In a society like the contemporary U.S., where the overwhelming majority of individuals are, or have been, theistic (Smith 2011), New Atheism welcomes the ex-religious. The rigid us-versus-them dichotomy does not account for this kind of shift.

The same is true for evangelical Christians, where congregants interpret time spent outside the group as a necessary step in the larger journey to/with God; a testimonial to God's love and acceptance, while also a condemnation of secular society outside the collective Christian circle. According to Guenther et al. (2013, p. 461): "members of a group use boundaries to create a shared sense of community and solidarity with each other that may depend as much on their shared difference from non-members as on their commonalities with fellow members." Previous research on collective identity demonstrates that the importance of tension with oppositional forces is not new, but a well-established trend, where "collective identity can be used to meet internal and external movement goals by positioning movement identities strategically vis-à-vis those of opponents and targets" (Bernstein 1997). The vocabulary used in collective identity research bears a strong resemblance to boundary work language as well. The "others" play a key role in helping to define and develop the self and the group.

My investigation of boundary work within and between active atheists and their ideological doppelgangers, evangelical Christians, builds on the existing identity and collective identity research in two ways. First, shifting the perspective to boundary work extends the identity concept beyond the individual to its social implications. Bellah (1987, p.219) argued that boundaries are a fundamental part of social life and "thus inclusion and exclusion are basic to the very idea of identity." Second, comparing the two ideological groups, looking specifically at boundaries, will better articulate the intricacies of their specific relationship, but also serve as a blue print for further investigations of boundaries between dissimilar groups and organizations. The comparison is crucial for understanding the complex relationships of oppositional social groups because of the ways these two groups

operate, borrowing tools and strategies from one another, while at the same time using their ideological tensions as fuel for their own group's solidarity and growth.

Boundaries and Solidarity

Durkheim's social solidarity is an important concept to couple with boundary work in general and in this study particularly. Just as religion is a bountiful field on which to explore boundary work (Tranby and Zulkowski 2012), religion is also a topic where solidarity proves to be an integral concept. Boundaries and solidarity echo one another conceptually, in that solidarity between peoples (and their social groups) allows for boundaries to be drawn and crystalized. Without solidarity the in-group/out-group dynamics in boundary work would be meaningless.

Religious groups, by their common beliefs, and the behaviors that stem from those beliefs, illustrate solidarity. Religion expresses a group's "collective ideal" and bonds them socially as well as spiritually (Durkheim 1995 [1912], p. 425). Further, "The individual soul is [thus] only a portion of the group's collective soul" (p. 267). The interplay between individual and group affects both. Individuals are shaped by society, a society created by those very individuals. Data from this research demonstrates the strength of group solidarity as individuals follow their evangelical community even when it disrupts other aspects of social life. The solidarity created by the tightly knit group also makes for rigid boundaries between those in the group and those outside. Individuals who are part of the evangelical community feel part of something greater than themselves. There is a clear emphasis on collaboration and collective experience when it comes to religion and solidarity.

The same could be said for the collective irreligious, as atheist groups also gather around shared beliefs and ideals. The atheist movement is in line with Durkheim's conception of religion. While he maintained that no "God," or specific ideology would last forever, he fully expected new conceptualizations of the divine, new symbols and rituals to replace the old (Durkheim 1995 [1912], p.429). Religion, as an organizing principle of society, would not disappear, but ebb and flow through time and societies as needed. Using Durkheim's conceptualization, secular thought within the social organizations of active atheists represents a new iteration of a kind of "religion." While not a "religion," per se, active atheism certainly represents a kind of "collective ideal" when it comes to seeking out a secular life in contemporary U.S. culture. Active atheists demonstrate social solidarity in their collective pursuit of a community and life without supernatural influence.

Solidarity and distancing consistently flow *within* both groups studied here. The particular comparison in this study – evangelical Christians and active atheists – is appropriate in that both groups, in their in-group solidarity, "other" the other ideological viewpoint, distancing themselves from those outside their worldview. They also construct somewhat rigid distinctions and affiliations within each of their ideological camps. In other words, active atheists continue to conflict about whether or not social justice issues should be a part of the atheist agenda; and evangelical Christians are quick to build bridges with those who share their particular brand of Christianity, but disengage with those they see as traveling the wrong kind of Christian path. Tensions between the two groups as well as within both groups exemplify the "ins," "outs," and permeability of boundary work.

Boundaries are drawn and transgressed within both ideological camps, creating tensions between individuals and social groups, affecting the solidarity of the groups at large.

Comparing and contrasting these ideologically dissimilar communities with a focus on their boundary work and modes of solidarity uncover not only how these particular groups come together but sheds light on ideological groups more broadly and how they relate to those who are like-minded as well as their “others.”

Boundaries and Morality

The topic of morality and boundaries yielded findings in two distinct but related areas for discussion. Based on interviews with active atheists and evangelical Christians I determined the need to explore both moral boundary work between and within these two groups, as well as morality itself, as a function of social life. Clearly, moral boundary work engages with morality as a concept in and of itself. Similarly, morality practiced and proclaimed in daily life involves boundary work. The two are closely related. However my findings from this array of topics were different enough to warrant two distinct tracks of discussion.

Moral boundaries, as a type of symbolic boundary (Lamont and Molnar 2002), focus on subjective measures of worth and standards (Lamont, Schmalzbauer, Waller and Weber 1996, p. 34). Where other boundaries, cultural boundaries for example, are drawn along lines of taste, education or perceived sophistication, “Moral boundaries are drawn on the basis of moral character. They are centered on such qualities as honesty, work ethic, personal integrity, sexuality, religiosity, solidarity and consideration for others” (Lamont et al. 1996, p.34). People use moral boundaries to distance themselves from what they deem “less worthy” as well as a mechanism to bolster themselves and their like-minded communities as

an example of rightness. Both ideological groups in this comparative study engage in moral boundary work on these grounds.

Durkheim observed: “A society is the most powerful collection of physical and moral forces that we can observe in nature” (Durkheim 1995 [1912], p. 447). It tracks that both groups would find moral bases on which to differentiate themselves from their “others.” For evangelical Christians being on the “right” side of the boundary is in some ways assumed or understood, as many (the evangelicals in question included) associate religion, specifically Christianity, with positive moral character (Smith 2005, 1998). Atheists, on the other hand, are forced to be more intentional with their moral boundary work, which manifests as part of their overall othering of religious groups and individuals. Guenther et al. (2013) found this to be the case in their study of atheist activities online and stated: “The group’s oppositional othering involves establishing and highlighting difference from the other, namely those who participate in religion and their leaders...this othering focuses on perceived differences in morality, fairness, and rationality” (Guenther et al. 2013, p. 471). Moral boundaries have a significant role in the oppositional relationship between evangelical Christians and active atheists.

Both groups felt strongly about morality itself and frequently made commentary on the topic. I refer to the latter as “morality in motion” to help differentiate between moral boundary talk and commentary focused on morality as an element of social life. “Morality in motion” refers to instances of thought or behavior used by participants to demonstrate their own good moral character. Morality in motion includes the things we do and say to show we are good people in our social world. Once focused primarily on norms and values, current sociology of morality has expanded to include a broader perspective on social life (Hitlin and

Vaisey 2013). According to Hitlin and Vaisey (2013), “recent sociological research shows that religions, occupations, generations, educational categories, organizations, and social movements can all have their own moralities” (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). Taking these new foci into account, the two ideological groups examined in this study contribute to the revised sociology of morality and analyses of these groups with an eye toward morality lends new information to the evolving field itself.

The issue of assumptions and perception comes into play again when discussing evangelical Christian morality in motion. Casual correlation between religion and positive morals gives evangelicals an advantage; people tend to associate religion and morality. Active atheism on the other hand came to this from a position of terrible perception from the general public (Downey 2004; Harper 2007; Heiner 1992; Koproske 2006). However empirical work demonstrates strong moral compasses among the atheist population. Zuckerman (2014) in trying to unpack the complex concept of “secular morality” used data from more than 50 separate studies to show atheists in the United States displaying less racially biased attitudes than religious individuals, more humane results on issues such as the death penalty or use of torture, and more conscious and proactive patterns about global issues such as climate change and overall inequality. Concluding this list he wrote “secular people clearly feel that it is good to do good in this known lifetime” (Zuckerman 2014, p.22). My research picks up where these results from survey research close and show how both active atheists and evangelical Christians present themselves and their worldviews as morally upstanding. Members of both groups made sure in our interviews to point out morality in motion.

Boundaries and Gender

Gender is a prime site for boundary work. Scholars and popular media commentators often use gender as a point of investigation when looking at various aspects and iterations of social life. Interaction within the two groups I researched proved no different. Both communities create and maintain boundaries based on gender in one way or another. The specific nature of these boundaries, though, was very different between the two worldviews represented.

Active atheist groups face conflict within their organization(s) about gender as a component of social justice. The atheist movement at the national level has been navigating ongoing claims of misogyny, harassment and general inequality in recent years. The gender related boundaries they intentionally draw and transgress exist within the confines of their worldview community. Demographic research shows that the atheist population includes many more men than women (Lim et al. 2010; Sherkat 2008; Zuckerman 2010).

Disproportionate numbers do not necessarily mean deeper problems, though in this particular case, the lack of women in leadership positions as well as rank and file membership may be contributing to the issues currently plaguing the atheist community when it comes to gender politics. I used examples from the national stage as well as commentary from the narratives of my own interviewees to illustrate some of the gender-based points of contention within the atheist community.

Evangelical Christians draw boundaries between themselves and other groups, or out-groups. These boundaries manifest when it comes to issues of role and behavioral expectations and conformity to traditional ideals for family, as well as conflicts with feminism and LGBT rights issues. Literature on gender and religion, specifically

conservative religion, is vast and demonstrates the complex nature of these issues (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Chong 2008; Davidman 1991; Jenkins 2005; Manning 1999; Rose 1987). This canon contains a variety from scholarship focused on submission (Bryant 2006; Chong 2008; Griffith 1997), to conversion and de-conversion (Davidman 1991, 2015; Kaufman 1989; Manning 1999; Stacey and Gerard 1992), and even attempts at feminism within conservative Christianity (Gallagher 2003, 2004; Ingersoll 2003). This scholarship provides a substantial pool on which to draw from for my current research. Approaching the topic from a boundary work perspective helps to bring new issues to the forefront and clarify existing observations. For instance, gender relations within families came to the surface as a boundary related issue in several interviews. Also respondents spoke about marriage equality and LGBT topics, but showed much more concern about lesbians than the gay community as a whole. I discuss these issues and more in the gender centered chapter (Chapter 5). Tranby and Zulkowski (2012) argue that sociological explorations of religious life should utilize boundary work in their analyses. Boundary work, as it relates to gender for evangelical Christians, dictates different responsibilities within families and congregations based on gender. A focus on boundaries illuminated demonstrations of heteronormativity and the apparent discomfort with individuals and families outside the traditional model.

The comparative nature of this study – looking both at the very religious and the very irreligious – lends itself to new ways of interpreting the issues at hand. These two groups do not approach gender in the same way, experience boundary tensions and conflicts in different aspects of social life, and the previous scholarship examining gender in these two communities is vastly mismatched. The sources, in every sense of the term, may be

dissimilar, but both groups acknowledged and articulated gender as a point of tension in some way in their community. Whether it was harassment on a national scale for active atheists or the very personal question of sharing faith with non-believing family members for evangelical Christians, gender was a component of boundary work for both groups.

Boundaries and Technology

Technology and social media became an important site for investigating boundary work in this research. Early on in both interviews and participant observation, it became clear that the Internet, particularly social media, was a significant site for the display of identity and group boundaries for my respondents, especially the atheist participants.

Just as technology itself has grown and changed dramatically in the last few decades, so has social science scholarship investigating the roles of these technologies and their influence on social life. Early research – as well as some contemporary work – was particularly skeptical, warning that computer mediated communication (CMC) could negatively affect communication and interaction in general (Mallaby 2006; Marche 2012; Olds and Schwartz 2009; Turkle 2012), and that connections made in “virtual space” were shallow and weak compared with face-to-face interaction (Fernback 1997; Turkle 2012). Tufekci (2013, p.13), responding to a recent wave of popular articles that claim social media is “eroding human connection,” reminded readers that, historically, great changes in social life always produce a strong reaction. She pointed all the way back to Cicero claiming children had stopped obeying their parents – perhaps the first ever “kids these days” rant – and Plato concerned that writing, as an invention, could “rob people of wisdom” (Tufekci

2013, p.16). These ancient examples serve to demonstrate that concern over changes to social life are not unique to modern innovations in technology.

Social media and technological advances have drastically changed communication and social interaction in society (Chayko 2014). Most empirical work establishes how this new era of communication helps individuals and groups to facilitate community (Baym 2000; Baym, Zhang and Lin 2004; Kendall 2010; Parks 2011). Members of groups who interact online tend to refer to themselves as communities (Chayko 2008; Parks 2011). As online relationships become more salient in the lives of those who take part, the definitions and parameters for concepts like “community” change. As Rainie and Wellman (2012, p.12) put it: “new media is the new neighborhood.” For those seeking community, the community found online can be genuine and grant a significant “sense of place” (Chayko 2014; Polson 2013).

Critics of online interaction argue that the connections made through Internet and social media are weak compared to real life connections (Turkle 2012; Fernback 1997). Recent scholarship refutes this common concern from a number of angles. First, social media and other engagement online foster connections and ties of all kinds (Tufekci 2013). Just as “real life” interactions may be fleeting or inconsequential, online communications may develop into deep and lasting relationships. Chayko (2014) added that even if ties are weak, weak connections have utility in social life too. Additionally, scholars have seen how online connections often translate into face-to-face interactions. Social media and smart phone usage provides an efficient, inexpensive way to make connections and then plans for the “real” world (Chayko 2014; Rainie and Wellman 2012). In today’s culture online and

face-to-face social interaction are not two separate spheres. Online activities are very much a part of lived experience for most people (Chayko 2014).

If genuine communities are forged through CMC, then there must be some boundary work at play in those interactions. Data from my interviews indicated that active atheists in particular use social media as a component of their atheist identity as well as their interaction with like-minded others. Technology, as an emerging way to develop and engage in community, is explored for both evangelical Christians and active atheists in this dissertation.

Issues of boundary work and identity flow through each aspect of this research and influence the other theoretical ideas that become relevant in each of the substantive sections. Using boundaries and identity as the guiding lights in this comparative study allow these two ideologically oppositional communities to be compared and contrasted over a range of topics. Whether looking between these two groups or within each, boundary work – and the related ideas of identity and collective identity – illuminates rich data that gives insight into these two groups as well as ideologically rigid communities in general.

This dissertation contributes to the sociology of boundaries and identity as those concepts are stretched and manipulated to explore the inner workings and “othering” mechanisms of active atheists and evangelical Christians. This research shows how boundaries and identity work together for members of rigid ideological groups, regardless of their specific worldview. While data on both groups offers novel observation and insight, this dissertation also provides desperately needed qualitative data on the distressingly understudied atheist population.

Chapter 2: Historical Overview and Methods

In order to better situate where the two groups in this comparative research are coming from, I include a very brief historical overview of each, enumerating the highlights of their journeys in the United States throughout the 20th Century. These summaries aim to provide context for the arguments and discussions to follow in this dissertation.

Evangelical Christianity in the 20th Century United States

Evangelical is a difficult term to accurately define. Several sources discussed it as problematic and maintained that evangelicals themselves find it to be at times less than helpful in conveying meaning to their system of beliefs (Collins 2005; Hunter 1983; Smith 2000). That said, scholarly sources as well as the Christians themselves use the term regularly. Collins (2005) provided a list of four “enduring emphases” of evangelicalism that appeared across definitions from multiple sources. The first was the inerrancy of the Bible, interpreting scripture as the inspired word of God. Second, the necessity of conversion, the idea of being “born again,” was included across definitions. To be born again one must accept Jesus Christ as a personal savior and pledge to live a Christ-centered life. This is often, but not always, a public statement. The third core idea was the notion of Christ, through his sacrifice and atonement, as the sole mediator between God and humanity. Finally, evangelical Christians pursue evangelism, spreading the word of God and their relationship with Christ to others. Collins (2005, p.21) finished the definition with this: “Indeed, each of these four themes has repeatedly emerged in the literature, with more or less emphasis, as evangelicals have grappled with their own identity.”

Decades earlier, Hunter (1983) argued as well that evangelical was a hard term to define, but articulated evangelical religious participation in one sentence: “Behaviorally, Evangelicals are typically characterized by an individuated and experiential orientation toward spiritual salvation and religiosity in general and by the conviction of the necessity of actively attempting to proselytize all nonbelievers to the tenets of the Evangelical belief system” (Hunter 1983, p.7). The drive to share the “good news” with others along with the rigid interpretation of the Bible, and the Christ story specifically, differentiate evangelicalism from other types of Christianity.

It is important to distinguish evangelicals from fundamentalists not only because they are different groups, but also in the context of this discussion and this research project the difference between the two should be made clear because evangelical engagement with mainstream culture – politically and otherwise – differs from the fundamentalist perspective and trajectory. While evangelicals have maintained their theologically conservative stance while still involving themselves to some extent with mainstream society, fundamentalists maintain a separatist approach. As Ammerman (1987, p.4) put it, “compromise and accommodation are among the most dreaded words in the fundamentalist vocabulary.” Fundamentalist groups have a separatist perspective that evangelicals do not share, though both are theologically conservative. As Smith and Denton (2005) described it, evangelicals strive to be “in but not of the world.” Both groups believe in salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a literal interpretation of the Bible, and the inevitability of an afterlife in either heaven or hell. In many ways fundamentalists are the “closest relatives” of evangelicals (Ammerman 1987, p.4); they hold similar beliefs and share some history.

The differences in approach of these two sects of conservative Christianity dictated their interaction with the rest of society, particularly as the 20th Century progressed.

In many ways, the fundamentalist perspective of militant, even “aggressive opposition,” to liberal theology and certainly mainstream secular culture pulled them out of the U.S. social history. Evangelicals, on the other hand, engaged with culture enough to influence aspects of society and be an integral part of the U.S. story. Smith (2000, p.18) wrote that evangelicals, more than fundamentalists, were “dedicated to seeing Christian morality and values influence American culture.” Evangelicals had to be involved in the process to reach such a goal. In contrast to fundamentalists, evangelicals “believe that political activism is an appropriate way to change American society to better reflect God’s will” (Smith 2000, p.19). This drive to sustain a presence and make changes in mainstream culture made for a turbulent 20th Century in evangelical history in the United States.

Hunter’s (1983) work focused on the evangelical trajectory in the U.S. as a reaction to and attempt to grapple with modernity. Religion in general, and evangelicalism in particular, had enjoyed a relatively prominent position in this country before the 20th Century. Theologically conservative Christianity (not to be confused with political conservatism, though the two become conflated) developed from the mainstream and not from the margins, as some assume (Hunter 1983, p.32). Hunter (1983) drew attention to the late 1800s as significant for Protestantism in the U.S. Up until that point Protestant Christianity had dominated higher education. With the introduction of new curriculums – namely science – and development of subject based departments, religion was suddenly relegated to its own sphere, no longer responsible for education and job training across the board. Destabilized by these changes, internal struggles within Christian groups upset the

situation even more until, “the future of the conservative evangelical tradition in America was clearly uncertain” (Hunter 1983, p.32). As religion was becoming a “private matter” rather than a significant influence in mainstream culture more broadly, evangelicals had to get actively involved in issues in order to maintain a meaningful presence.

Evangelicalism in the early part of 20th Century endured a difficult period as their worldview and subsequent lifestyle shifted from mainstream to the margins (Hunter 1983; Smidt 2015). Protestantism at this time was splitting off into two distinct paths: the more conservative, fundamentalist branch and the more liberal, modernist branch. Again, though evangelical and fundamentalist describe two different types of conservative Protestant today, in the early 1900s those who scholars would eventually label evangelical were still discussed as fundamentalists. Also in the first decades of the 20th Century, evangelicals and fundamentalists were focused inward, building their own institutions, such as Bible schools, mission agencies, and radio networks (Carpenter 1980; Smidt 2015). By the 1940s the rift between the modernists and the fundamentalists hit a breaking point. While both sides feared the direction U.S. culture seemed headed in, they disagreed on how to respond: to separate from the (doomed) culture, or try to save the (doomed) culture in Jesus’ name (Smidt 2015). The emerging evangelical movement tried to find a position from which they could influence mainstream society while still remaining true to their convictions.

Multiple sources pinpoint the 1942 establishment of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) as the beginning of a concerted effort by evangelicals in the U.S. to take part in political processes and maintain influence on society more broadly (Hunter 1983; Steensland and Wright 2014). The NAE deliberately positioned itself as theologically conservative but still amenable to mainstream culture. Hunter (1983, p.41) pointed out the

difference between the fundamentalist attitude of “no cooperation, no compromise” versus the NAE strategy: “cooperation without compromise.” Steensland and Wright (2014, p.706) claimed that in previous iterations evangelicals could easily be politically liberal or conservative, but the NAE establishment affirmed a decidedly more conservative position: “Concerns about secularism and the increasing scope of the federal government were central to evangelicals’ move to the right.” That move to the political right led to the contemporary relationship between evangelicalism and the Republican Party.

According to the historical sources consulted by Steensland and Wright (2014), the evangelical movement and the Republican Party “co-evolved” in the second half of the 20th Century. The alliance between the two was “the consequence of strategy, mobilization, intellectual production, and institution building” (p.706). In the 1950s, concern over the Cold War and potential threat of communism led evangelicals to become more politically involved (Williams 2010). They did not find strong allies in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, however later presidencies proved much more helpful. Just as the evangelical movement changed to become more politically oriented, the Republican Party in the 1970s shifted to be more religious in its conservatism, focusing on “family values” issues with strong anti-abortion, anti-ERA, and anti-gay rights positions. From the evangelical perspective, the goal of protecting the Christian worldview motivated the increased political involvement (Worthen 2013).

This partnership contributed to the resurgence of evangelicalism more broadly in the 1970s and early 80s (Bloech 1973; Smidt 2015). The evangelical-Republican relationship truly blossomed during Ronald Reagan’s tenure in the White House. While Jimmy Carter was a self-proclaimed evangelical, many within evangelicalism found his policies too liberal

for their tastes. With Reagan, evangelicals showed up to vote in large numbers, and the newly elected Republicans placed the issues evangelicals cared about on the agenda. Since the late 1970s evangelicals have been a significant part of the Republican Party's voting constituency (Brint and Schroedel 2009). The close relationship the evangelical movement maintained with the Republican Party has helped both sides keep powerful positions politically and socially in the U.S. However, such visibility has also made evangelicalism a target for scrutiny.

In the same era a number of public figures, not just politicians like Jimmy Carter, publicly expressed "conversion stories" and added to the popularity of evangelicalism. Musicians, for example Eric Clapton, and even "pornographer" Larry Flynt professed to be born-again (Hunter 1983, p.46). It seemed that in the late 1970s "born again" became once again a culturally acceptable, perhaps even desirable, worldview. At this time evangelical denominations were the only ones gaining members in the United States (Smidt 2015). The political and popular gains made by the evangelical movement in the '70s and '80s came with backlash from inside and outside the evangelical community. The close relationship between political conservatism and religious conservatism was not universally embraced from within the evangelical community (Steensland and Wright 2014). Smidt (2015) noted a cyclical pattern of evangelical engagement with politics, followed by withdrawal, throughout U.S. history. Keeping the balance between allegiance to their Christian theology and drive to save the un-saved is a constant struggle. In the contemporary climate, Smith found that "most ordinary American evangelicals are not very fairly represented by many of the single-minded and often self-appointed conservative

Christian leaders who claim to speak for them” (Smith 2000, p.194). Tensions between evangelicals and mainstream culture were, and continue to be, a concern as well.

Because of their rigid theology and subsequent goals for society, many reject the evangelical theology and lifestyle. In some cases, though, that rejection serves to bolster the evangelical position and mission. Collins (2005, p.13) described the relationship between evangelicals and their detractors like this: “Simply put, given the mission of evangelicalism, the movement must always reckon with “the other,” whether it be Roman Catholicism or theological liberalism, whose contrast in turn helps to illuminate, at least in part, the major features of this American religion.” Culture may have changed dramatically over the last century, but evangelicals have remained true to their theological perspective both in spite of and because of clashes with those outside their worldview. Marginalization has intensified their bonds with one another and their mission to create a society that reflects the will of God (Smith 2000).

In the contemporary era this is where we find evangelicals in the United States. From the perspective of mainstream society they (may) seem rigid, exclusive, perhaps even extreme. That tension with mainstream culture keeps them bound together, committed to their goals, their vision for a Christian society, and to one another. According to Smith (2000, p.195), there is a significant cost to maintaining a public affiliation with conservative Christianity: “As it stands, American evangelicals remain one of the last social groups in the United States that people can speak disparagingly about in public and get away with it – at least in the general circles in which I move.” The extent to which this statement is true is arguable, and in some ways irrelevant. However, the mere perception that it is true continues to fuel the fire of subcultural identity politics for evangelical Christians in the

U.S. Their position as underdogs fighting for their beliefs amid a pluralistic society binds and bonds them in their Christian pursuits. And even if Smith's (2000) assessment is true, evangelicals are not the only group openly scorned in the United States. Atheists face at least as much suspicion and disdain.

Active Atheist History in the 20th Century United States

Smith could easily replace “evangelicals” with “atheists” in his comment about which groups can still be openly mocked within U.S. culture. That position, as the butt of a joke or the target of ridicule, is part of what these two opposing worldviews have in common. Survey research demonstrates the negative perception the general public has of atheists (Edgell et al. 2006; Yancey 2010; Zuckerman 2009, 2014). Scholarly work where atheists speak for themselves uncovers experiences of judgment and even discrimination for openly atheist individuals (Cimino and Smith 2014; Foust 2009; Smith 2011). Arguing about who is least accepted in mainstream society is less interesting than examining the journeys of these two groups and how their opposition drives each to persevere as maligned groups in contemporary U.S. culture.

Survey data shows that over the past several decades the number of individuals in the United States who claim no religious affiliation, often discussed as the “nones,” has grown significantly. Since 1980 the number of nones reported in the General Social Survey (GSS) has more than doubled (Dougherty et al. 2007; Hout and Fischer 2002; Sherkat 2014). While not all of the “nones” are atheists, and even fewer belong to atheist groups and organizations, the accelerated increase in irreligiosity had led scholars from a variety of

disciplines to ask: what is causing this turn away from religion? And how did this trend come about; how did we get here?

Of course there have always been individuals who did not believe in God or other supernatural phenomena throughout U.S. history (and probably all societies, for that matter) (LeBeau 2003; Jacoby 2004; Stark and Finke 2000), but it was not until more recently that atheists in the United States have been open about their worldview in any substantial way. Brown (2013, p. 243) had this to say about atheists in the U.S. and more broadly over the past hundred years: “The twentieth century was the first in which atheism became demographically significant. In many nations, it was the first century in which it was legal and socially acceptable to deny the existence of God.” Looking at the pre-20th Century religious landscape in the U.S., Williamson and Yancey (2013) described the governments of the American Colonies as “theocratic,” and that the separation of church and state – a topic of debate still today – referred specifically to the Federal level of government. In other words, each colony was free to practice whichever brand of Christianity it chose without interference from other colonies or, eventually, the Federal government. However the more local governmental influence was decidedly theocratic.

From the beginning the relationship between religion and the state in the U.S. has been a topic of discussion. While the United States did not come into existence with an established church the way, for example, many European nations did, society was still overwhelmingly theistic and consequently isolating for non-believers (LeBeau 2003). When irreligious, some would say progressive, ideas did circulate it was among intellectual and academic circles, sometimes even coming out of seminaries, since higher education was also an institution under religious influence before the 20th Century (Williamson and Yancey

2013). While writings and discussions questioning the idea of God took place at this time, everyday people were not privy to them in any organized way.

Things began to change in the 20th Century, but progress early in the century was slow. Some national organizations were established between 1900 and 1930 but they were not popular and did not achieve any sort of organized atheist movement (Spencer 2014). One incident that did raise awareness and even more so put a spotlight on the tensions between religion and irreligion in the U.S. was the Scopes trial in 1925. The case was to decide if Scopes, a teacher in Tennessee, broke the law by teaching evolution in his classroom. The impact of the trial itself had more impact than the verdict – which was, of course, guilty (Spencer 2014). Scopes’ lawyer Clarence Darrow, unapologetically secular, technically lost the case, however through the proceedings he succeeded in making the fundamentalist opposition to evolution look foolish and backward (LeBeau 2003). Like any public stunt, the ripple effects of the Scopes trial galvanized both sides – religious and secular – to mobilize their supporters to influence society as a whole.

It was the mid 20th Century when change began to come quickly and the stage was set for some greater shifts in society affecting both atheists and evangelical Christians in the U.S. Mid-century history laid the groundwork for aspects of the relationship between the two worldviews that still exist today. In the 1950s, paranoia about Communism led to categorizing atheism along with all things “anti-American” (Cody 2010). This association at such a sensitive time significantly contributed to anti-atheist sentiment in U.S. society. People were concerned about Communism as a threat to the “American” way of life. The successful coupling of Communism and atheism in people’s minds conflated the notion of where the threat was coming from. If atheism was inherently anti-American, then

Christianity and support for the U.S. must also go hand-in-hand as well. It was at this time that nationalist artifacts began to bear theistic sentiments, i.e. “In God We Trust” added to U.S. currency in 1957 and “under God” added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 (Cody 2010). Political and religious conservatives succeeded in marrying the concepts of Christianity and patriotism. Similarly, rhetoric in this era linked morality and religion, specifically Christianity (LeBeau 2003). These unfair associations and the further infringement of religion in everyday life pushed atheists in the U.S. to a point where they felt the need to organize and push back, and they did.

Most of the strides made by atheism in the U.S. happened after 1960. So much was changing culturally in the second half of the 20th Century. Marginalized groups throughout society stood up to be acknowledged as integral parts of American life; “Religious pluralism paralleled the rise in social and moral pluralism” (Williamson and Yancey 2013, p.102). Just as these changes affected the course of evangelical Christianity, atheism in the U.S. too forged a new trajectory in the second half of the twentieth Century. Social changes including, as Cody (2010, p.246) described, “a creative explosion in the arts, an explosive civil rights movement, and loosening of the authoritarian structures crafted during the early Cold War,” demanded change from older institutions, like religion, but also made way and made room for “new” ideas to enter into public discourse. Large national organizations like American Atheists and the Freedom from Religion Foundation came into existence during this time. American Atheists was founded in 1963 by Madalyn Murray O’Hair (Cody 2010), arguably the most famous atheist in the U.S. at that time. In the same year she started her organization, she won a Supreme Court case against mandatory school prayer in Maryland (LeBeau 2003). In the next decade the Freedom from Religion Foundation

(1978) began and is now the largest Freethinking organization in the U.S. with members in all 50 states (Williamson and Yancey 2013, p.30).

Public visibility and engagement did not come without controversy. Many in the U.S. still feared and distrusted atheists, a perception intensified by the entangled allies of conservative political and religious forces. The United States exemplifies a “strange case,” according to Brown (2013), as survey research indicated a rise in lack of religious affiliation (the “nones”) taking hold in the 1970s while at the same time high levels of participation and gains in power made by conservative religion. The polarization between religion and secularity that still exists today really took shape in the last third of the 20th Century.

Those on the “right,” the Moral Majority as they were dubbed at the time, went to great lengths to minimize the influence secular and atheist ideas had on mainstream society. Cody (2010, p.229) noted, “American history has not been kind to atheists, agnostics, and secularists...the traditions of atheists, agnostics, and secularists have been generally supplanted by myth, mischaracterized by historical revision, and silenced through scholarly omission.” Those on the side of religion and conservative politics perpetuated the idea planted earlier in the 20th Century that equated atheism with anti-American sentiment. Thus in the Reagan Era 1980s school curriculums and even textbooks were “purged” of reference to influences that could be considered anti-American and/or anti-God (Cody 2010).

The opening years of the 21st Century saw the emergence of what is called New Atheism. The term originated in the popular press to describe a spate of books advocating atheism from numerous perspectives such as biology, philosophy and political science (Zenk 2013). According to a CNN column archived from 2006: “What the New Atheists share is a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and

exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.” The reputation of New Atheism is characterized as aggressive, militant, and even menacing (Zenk 2013). Whether the term, its definition, or the perception of this segment of the larger atheist movement is accurate, for Zenk (2013) none of the above is true, New Atheism does describe a segment of the atheist population who not only advocate secularism but vehemently put down religion of any kind, in any form, as a harmful and dangerous aspect of society and push for the elimination of all religion.

The goals of New Atheists have not been met, but New Atheism as a social phenomenon has been successful in getting atheism on the cultural map, enhancing the profile of atheism in general to mainstream culture (Cimino and Smith 2014). The visibility of New Atheism is just one of the components Cimino and Smith (2014) point to as a turn toward a more optimistic future for atheists in the United States. They also highlight the 2008 election of Barak Obama as a victory over the religio-political right, and a potential win for secular citizens. While previous presidents may not have considered atheists true “citizens” or “patriots” (Cody 2010), Obama has included secular citizens in his statements to the nation.

In the United States numbers of both atheists and evangelical Christians continue to grow, as does the polarization between these two worldviews (Williamson and Yancey 2013). Scholars agree that the tension between these two opposing groups is an important factor for the survival and success of each (Cimino and Smith 2007, 2014; Williamson and Yancey 2013; Zuckerman 2009, 2010). Visibility of one group motivates the other to gather strength and push for awareness and acceptance of their agendas. Cimino and Smith (2014, p.30) described this relationship as an ongoing “dance” between the two sides: “The past

and present of American secularism and evangelicalism suggests an alternating dance between protagonists and antagonists, with each claiming to be either embattled minorities or victors, depending on cultural obstacles or opportunities.” In a very real sense the two sides need one another.

Methods

It was clear from this project’s inception that the questions posed demanded a qualitative approach. Because I investigated the formation and maintenance of group boundaries, identity within a worldview, and interaction with ideological opposition, I needed to hear directly from those involved. The bulk of data for this project, thus, came from in-depth interviews with members of evangelical Christian communities and active atheist clubs and organizations. In addition to the connection between the inquiry itself and qualitative methods, I felt strongly that the data collected should be in the words of the participants themselves. Too often in an eager attempt to make a contribution researchers end up speaking for people, speaking over people, instead of letting participants speak for themselves.

Interview Recruitment

As a comparative study, this research project required participant recruitment from two very different social groups. For my own mental clarity I began the recruitment process focused on one group at a time. Starting with the atheist side of my research sample, I sought out individuals who actively participated in some sort of secular group or club. I categorized active participation as meeting with other group members, in person, at least once a month. Many of my participants also interacted with other secular individuals online,

but to fit my criteria they had to also engage with other members of their ideological worldview face-to-face. Most of the secular community organizations I researched for this project welcomed agnostics into their groups as well as atheists. I followed suit and interviewed a number of participants who preferred the label agnostic to atheist. Politically, philosophically, and socially these two points of view are very similar, however the important distinction between the two is that atheists believe there is no God or other “higher power” and agnostics see no evidence of God but believe that it is impossible to know for sure (Zuckerman 2010).

As a researcher based at a large, midwestern university I started my search for participants close to home, with the campus club for atheist and agnostic students. I attended weekly meetings and got permission to announce my project and my interest in interviewing individuals at several of those meetings. My first set of interviews came from this campus group. A key informant from the campus club posted my project’s information on his website, which got me in touch with secular community groups in surrounding and nearby areas. Participants from these groups tended to be older than the college student participants, adding to the age range of my sample. By the end of my time in the field I interviewed 30 active atheists.

Recruiting interviewees for the Christian side of my sample proved to be a bit more difficult. I used a list of guidelines for participation: a literal interpretation of the Bible as God’s word, salvation through commitment to Jesus, and a mandate to spread the message of salvation through Christ alone to others. While the university campus offered a variety of religiously affiliated clubs and organizations, they tended to be denominationally tied, and

since my criteria for participation was belief focused rather than denominationally bound I did not initially approach a campus group as I did with the atheist half of my sample.

To find my interviewees I initially contacted several churches in the area via email and phone call. Someone in a leadership position from three different congregations responded to my inquiry. In two of those cases I spoke first with these community gatekeepers, further explaining my project and my potential involvement in their communities. They then announced my project to their congregations or forwarded my information on to specific members of their churches, giving legitimacy to my request. In the third case the church leader simply included my call for participants in the congregation newsletter. From these initial responses I was able to collect my sample using snowball techniques, asking each participant if s/he knew others who might be willing to speak with me. This process was slower to get started and remained that way throughout my fieldwork. Whether it was my approach, the time of year (summer), or any number of other factors, the evangelical Christian population was hesitant to volunteer for interviews. Interestingly, this half of my project's sample started in the wider community and ended with several interviews with college students, the opposite of my procedure with the atheist interviews. I completed 15 interviews with evangelical Christians for this project.

Sample Demographics

In total I completed 45 interviews for this research— 30 atheists; 15 Christians. My participants ranged in age from 19 to 73 and both halves of my sample included a wide range of ages. Both the atheist and Christian sample groups included men and women; in both cases more men than women agreed to participate. My research sample displayed an

unfortunate lack of racial/ethnic diversity. Of my 45 participants, 41 were white, two were Indian (both born in India but now permanent residents in the U.S.), one was Philippino (now a permanent U.S. resident), and one was African American. This racial homogeneity may be due to a number of factors, including the geographic area of the study compounded with the trends in ethnic make-up of the groups interviewed. Atheist activists in the U.S., for example, tend to be an extremely “white” group of people (Pasquale 2010).

Consent/Confidentiality

Each interviewee read and signed an informed consent document prior to the beginning of her/his interview. This document assured participants that their names and identifying characteristics would be excluded from any publication related to the project. This document also stated that participants agreed to be audio recorded during the interview for later transcription. All audio files, transcripts, and other research documents were kept in a secure location for the duration of the project. Rather than identifying individuals by name these files and documents were saved under a number and letter combination code. For example, in all places other than the signed consent form, participant Jane Doe was referred to as 204F1. In addition to individuals’ names and personal information, the names and key characteristics of the congregations and clubs where the interviewees participated have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

In one case an interviewee explained that he did not wish to be audio recorded. Instead I took copious notes during the interview and typed those notes immediately after the interview concluded in an effort to retain as much from that interview as possible.

The consent document also informed participants that they could stop the interview at any time, skip any question they chose not to answer, and remove themselves from the sample at a later time should they decide they no longer wanted to be a contributor. Each participant was given a copy of the consent form for her/his records. The form included information on how to reach me and how to get in touch with my advisor, in case someone had a concern about the interview or wished to withdraw from the study at a later time. To date no participants requested their information be removed from the study.

Interviews

Interviews generally took between an hour and 90 minutes to complete. They took place in a variety of locations including participants' houses, my office on campus, or a quiet public place such as library or coffee shop. I provided options but let the participants decide where they would be most comfortable. Shortly after each interview I typed notes describing the interview to be attached as a cover sheet to the transcripts later on. In a couple of paragraphs I summarized the main points of the interview, described the interviewee, the environment and circumstances of the interview, and my own miscellaneous observations at the time of the interview. These notes served several purposes. I used them as a way to re-introduce myself to each participant when it came time to transcribe and analyze the interview data. The notes also assisted in preserving situational details that could be used later when introducing specific participants in the findings of my dissertation.

The majority of the interview schedule remained the same for both halves of the research sample. The interview started with questions about religiosity as a child and growing-up, then moved to interacting with ideological community members and those who

opposed said ideology, and finally questions about the specific community where individuals spent time. I came to each interview prepared with my interview schedule but consciously remained flexible to the direction each interviewee steered the conversation. As the research process progressed and I learned more about the populations and individuals I interviewed I altered and developed questions in order to maximize the data gathered. When the research began my questions were guided by the academic literature on the relevant topics (Cimino and Smith 2007; Jacoby 2004; Sandler 2006; Smith 1998; Zuckerman 2010) and geared toward my overall research questions; by the end of my time in the field the schedule also included questions based on what other participants expressed along the way. As I am sure is the case in all qualitative research, some interviews contained more information and insight than others; some participants had more to say than others. All narratives in some way contributed to my understanding of these two opposing worldviews and thus contributed to the overall research project.

Participant Observation

In addition to in-depth interviews I also carried out participant observation in each group, club or congregation where my interviewees participated. In the Christian communities I attended Sunday church services as well as a few campus group events. In the atheist organizations I also went to campus group meetings and attended both social and intellectual presentations. Where it seemed appropriate I took notes at the time of the observation (i.e. it is not uncommon for evangelical congregations to highlight Bible passages or take notes on the sermon. In this situation my writing notes during the service did not seem out of place). In other situations – more socially oriented activities, for

example – I made an effort to absorb all I could at the time and took detailed notes shortly after the observation session.

Including some participant observation in my dissertation research enhanced the project in multiple ways. First, it allowed me to relate my participants' description of group rhetoric and interaction with my own observational examples. Having seen group proceedings myself I could better understand the narratives shared by my interviewees. Also, as this project was a comparative study, engaging in participant observation of the group interactions from both worldviews further increased my capacity to offer comparative commentary about the two ideological groups I studied. The more data I could collect the more well rounded, comprehensive, sociologically grounded my research could be. Participant observation added depth and dimension to my interview data, which was the main source of information in this study.

Transcription

I carefully transcribed each interview in its entirety. Through this time consuming process I discovered several benefits to doing my own transcription. For one thing, spending that time with each interview re-acquainted me with the interviewee and her/his story. Listening so intently helped me to get to know my sample better than I did when actually interviewed them in person. The transcription work also served as a preliminary analysis step. While transcribing I kept an additional Word document open to jot down thoughts or observations that occurred to me during the transcription process.

Analysis

I used Nvivo data analysis software for this research project. Nvivo included many helpful features that made my analysis process organized and efficient. I downloaded all transcripts and field notes into the program. The whole project, in a sense, was housed within Nvivo. I then created a coding structure for the interview data. In this first pass through the transcripts I created codes for each of the questions I asked. This straightforward method made it easy to code each interview based on the questions. I read through the transcripts one by one and tagged each passage based on the question asked and the corresponding code. Once this endeavor was complete I could call up any code, for example “Religion in Childhood” and immediately view a list of responses to my question about religious participation in childhood.

The next coding pass through my data was thematically based. At this point in the research process as a whole I had conducted each interview, transcribed each interview, and coded each interview based on interview questions. Patterns and topics beyond the literal questions and answers came to the surface and I coded according to these emergent ideas. Themes that emerged from the coding process itself lead to the themes for the dissertation chapters: Boundaries and Solidarity, Boundaries and Technology, Boundaries and Gender and Boundaries and Morality.

It is important to recognize that the interview data I collected reflects a specific conversation, co-created by researcher and participant and not a black and white “truth.” Similarly the observational data cannot be seen simply as “what happened” but my interpretation of the events and interactions I observed while in the field. The mere presence of a researcher affects all aspects of the research process. In my position as researcher it was

important to be present in the project without stealing focus from the participants

(Frankenberg 2004). My interviewees and I shared the interview process, but it is *their* story

I aimed to tell, not my own.

Chapter 3: Boundaries and Solidarity

This chapter highlights specific discussions of boundary work within and between the two ideological groups featured in this research. Issues of solidarity and distancing language pervade the substantive topics explored. Beginning with boundaries between the two groups, I explore how and when these two groups “other” their ideological opposition and present specific examples where their worldviews directly conflict on topics other than the existence of God. I illustrate challenges both groups face from forces outside their ideological community, from everyday dealings with strangers, to negotiating with family members who do not share their worldviews, and navigating work and school situations. Members of both groups struggle to maintain their ideological identity in the face of perceived systemic opposition. When looking at boundaries within each community, it becomes clear that sharing a general worldview does not necessarily mean consensus on who truly belongs in the community and how the group or movement should proceed. The evangelical Christians interviewed made strong statements distancing themselves from some factions within the general definition of Christianity and also provided commentary concerning who and how religious services should be performed. The active atheists had a more inclusive attitude toward their group, though strong disagreement emerged when discussing how they should portray their worldview and organization(s) to the general public and whether or not recruiting others should be part of the atheist identity and mission. As both groups occupy a place on the outskirts of mainstream society, issues of boundaries, solidarity, and identity remain integral to their self-conceptions as they struggle for legitimacy and influence in U.S. society.

Identifying and Positioning “Others”

This research project hinges on the supposed oppositional relationship between active atheists and evangelical Christians; therefore it assesses directly whether or not members of each ideological group do, indeed, perceive the other as an “other.” Both camps face criticism and hostility from multiple sources, but their polarity on the topic of religion and the implications stemming from religious belief, put the two groups on opposite sides of a formidable divide. Most participants, when asked what group or force they felt most in conflict with, either stated “atheists” or “Christians.” Two-thirds of the atheist respondents counted Christians as their strongest detractors, and a similar percentage (almost three-quarters) of Christian interviewees cited the atheist movement as their most oppositional force. Many atheist participants were more specific, referencing fundamentalist Christianity, the Christian Right, and a few pointed to Catholics in particular. A comment from Eric, a 38-year-old law student, echoed what many active atheist interviewees had to say. He answered: “I would say most atheists get the most resistance from the creationist Christian crowd. The typically conservative, Bible literalists, that segment of Christianity...Those people are the most diametrically opposed.” Eric called out a specific segment of religious people as the troublesome “other” for the atheist movement.

Christian respondents often reported atheists as their main ideological opponents as well. Jacob (25) split his time between nursing school and work as a volunteer for the college groups at his church. He summed up what several interviewees expressed: “In America, probably atheists...I personally feel like the most fearsome opposition has come from that group. Not that all atheists are like that, but my personal experience has been the most opposition coming from that group.” By atheists “like that,” he was referring to those

active in promoting secularism like the active atheists in this study. While the majority of secular people do not seek out other non-religious individuals or promote secularism publicly (Zuckerman 2014; Sherkat 2014), my research focuses exclusively on the active atheists, the atheists that Jacob would deem “like that,” meaning active and public with their secular point of view. Eric and Jacob in their comments exemplified the tension between these two oppositional worldviews and the “dance” Cimino and Smith (2014) characterized both sides as participating in throughout recent U.S. history.

In interviews, both the evangelical Christians and active atheists explicitly affirmed their worldview at the expense of their ideological “other.” The atheists who responded in this way said “ignorant people” are their greatest opposition. The atheist movement values reason, logic, and evidence-based knowledge so, from their perspective, the choice to focus on the supernatural over the natural world is antithetical to the atheist cause. While I will not go so far as to say the atheist respondents meant “Christian” when they said ignorant, the two are linked for those atheists who characterized ignorance as a force they fight against. Sheila (40), a high school English teacher, did not hesitate to make this leap in her response. Who disagrees most strongly with atheists and the atheist movement?

“Oh ignorant people. And what goes along with ignorance, in my opinion, is that attraction toward religion and a fundamental radical kind of belief.”

The purposeful rejection of reason, logic, and evidence is frightening for Sheila as an educator, especially considering the influence religious groups have in areas like government and education in the U.S. The friendly relationship shared between the Republican Party and conservative Christianity for the last several decades is common knowledge, and unsettling knowledge for secular individuals like Sheila. Respondents put themselves in the position of

“not-ignorant” by labeling this oppositional force as “ignorant.” Making the enemy ignorant automatically makes the opposing position something that fights ignorance. This kind of labeling by active atheists reinforced the distance between the two worldviews and firmly established atheism as the superior ideological position.

The Christian response that mirrored this labeling tactic did so with a similarly sweeping tone. A few respondents answered my question about who they had conflict with by asking “you mean everyone else?” or, “like the rest of the world?” These responses reinforced both the in-but-not-of the world idea (Draper and Park 2010; Smith and Denton 2005), where Christians focus energy and attention on their faith and faith group rather than engaging with society outside their Christian sphere, and the evangelical identity as an embattled, underdog, minority status (Smith 1998; Cimino and Smith 2007; Hendershot 2004; Trinitapoli 2007). Social solidarity among evangelical Christians is high as they intentionally surround themselves with like-minded individuals, eschewing relationships outside their faith group. Placing oneself in conflict with “everyone else” allows for many points of division and clarification. If you are an evangelical you are *not* “everyone else,” you are distinct among the masses.

Two Christian interviewees voiced spiritually based concern, maintaining that the greatest opposition to Christianity was Satan. The conflict then becomes not merely us-versus-them, but good-versus-evil. In both cases the interviewees argued that the atheist movement was, indeed, an oppositional force, but that it was one part of Satan’s strategy on earth. Joshua, a 27-year-old social studies teacher, mentioned a few forces that worked against Christianity but he opened and closed his comments on the topic with the concepts of evil and Satan: “I think all these atheists and the people who have been hurt [by the church],

that's all part of the big scheme of Satan himself." Christian musician Deborah (37) reached a similar conclusion: "it is a collective big, big, big enemy out there. It's Satan honestly! There are many ways he works in people's lives and people's hearts." Putting the opposition on the other side, as pawns in Satan's plot, affirmed the Christian position as undoubtedly in the right.

Just like the responses from the active atheists, the distancing language used by evangelicals solidified their own identities even as it differentiated them from other groups in society. Both groups demonstrated this type of boundary making as they described their relationship with those they opposed. While the substantive ideas of each group differed fundamentally they used similar patterns in describing their ideological "others" to contrast their own convictions. By juxtaposing their own beliefs against all those with whom they disagree, both groups constructed a description in which their own worldview was the only one to appear legitimate.

Opposite Sides of the Street

Interview data included several examples in which active atheists and evangelical Christians expressed completely opposite opinions on topics that were *not* explicitly solicited. These directly conflicting statements came organically out of the interview narrative and covered topics such as LGBT and sexuality issues, mortality and hope.

Many interviewees discussed LGBT related topics in reference to their belief system or to contrast the beliefs of others. Joshua (27), the Christian school teacher quoted above, said this about homosexuality: "Everyone is a sinner; I have my own sins that I need to account for, but those are things that I'm ashamed of, that you should be ashamed of. That

may sound offensive, but...I don't know.” Keith, a 25-year-old atheist college student, had the opposite opinion, and it was one of the reasons he left Christianity in his teen years. He discussed religion in terms of sexuality and how he wanted his daughter to grow up free from the negativity and rigid parameters religion tends to attach to issues of sexuality. He said: “I just don't want her to be brought up with a lot of the beliefs about shame and the body and sexuality that a lot of Christian teachings try to foster. If she doesn't turn out to be a heterosexual girl I don't want her to think that that's a shameful thing.” On the one hand, Joshua stated sexual minorities should feel shame and should try and change; on the other Keith wanted no part of such self-loathing shame for his own family.

Similarly oppositional dialogue appeared when respondents addressed the topic of heaven and an afterlife. The issue of mortality represented a fundamental difference in the way individuals conceptualized their lives. A number of atheist respondents expressed disdain for the way religion emphasized the “next life” at the expense of the current one. Dominic, an energetic 22-year-old who recently graduated from college, still participated in social gatherings with his college atheist club. Dominic expressed great frustration at the energy religion and religious people put toward the concept of an afterlife. He said: “What’s important is the here and now and what we’re doing to make things better for our families, our friends, our community, the world.” He stated that he desperately wanted to make a positive difference in the world and saw religious ideology’s preoccupation with heaven as an impediment to this goal. Another atheist respondent had personal experience with this afterlife fixation. Sam (48) left the Jehovah’s Witness faith almost 25 years ago, in his early 20’s. As a Jehovah’s Witness all his attention focused on the idea of life after earth’s imminent destruction. Now he perceived things very differently:

The very first response when someone finds out you're an atheist is this "what hope do you have?" The first and most important thing is that it's no longer about pretense. I don't believe in Santa Claus and I don't believe that this is a prelude to everlasting life. My belief, my hope, what gets me through the day is enjoying what IS.

His wife, Joanna (51), who left the Witnesses much more recently, agreed, but found her own mortality a bittersweet relief. It was not until her excommunication four years prior that she even considered the idea that this would be her only existence. Sam and Joanna Sutherland now make a conscious effort each day to enjoy their time together, to enjoy "what IS."

From an evangelical Christian perspective, Ruth (65) presented a contradictory view. She said: "I hope [people understand] that we're not telling them they're going to Hell if they don't believe what we believe because we're being stubborn and pigheaded. We're telling them this because we love them and we don't want them to miss heaven. And it's hard." She explained that she does not often directly tell others that they will go to Hell if they do not believe, instead living by example with the hope that others will see her choices and follow her lead for the trip to "The Kingdom of Heaven." Ruth lives for the promise of heaven in the future. Deborah (37) echoed these sentiments, commenting: "We [Christians] want you to have hope and have a purpose for living. We didn't come up with this purpose; it is a blessing from God and we are not ever going to be perfect. It doesn't make us superior; it just makes us saved from Hell." Both these women earnestly encouraged others to join them as "saved" Christians and thus beneficiaries of the promised afterlife.

The common thread in these comments is hope. Sam and Joanna Sutherland have hope for humanity, hope for peace and joy in this world. Ruth and Deborah carry hope for an everlasting existence in heaven, which they readily invite others to share with them

through a commitment to Jesus Christ. These two points of view reference the same topics and used some of the same language, but express directly conflicting views.

Challenges – everyday experiences

I asked interviewees about times they felt “challenged by others” who do not share their worldview. Both Christians and atheists reported having had some difficult, but generally mild experiences. Participants from both ideological groups reported incidents where they had come across curious outsiders. These encounters with questioning strangers might turn into a debate or intense conversation, or perhaps just be a friendly exchange of ideas. Participants on both sides seem to have an understanding that it is unlikely they will convince a stranger or acquaintance that their point of view is correct on the spot, but just getting the ideas out there was important to both sides. Michelle, a 27 year-old atheist woman who works in medical administration, described herself as “laid back” and rarely gets upset when a discussion becomes heated. She often backs out of a debate, she explained: “I usually end up saying ‘whatever, we’ll agree to disagree,’ because people will not stop unless you’re like ‘you know what, we’re not going to change each other’s minds, just forget it.’” Some Christian interviewees had a similar perspective, but with a spiritually influenced attitude. Many in the two different groups shared an understanding that one random conversation would probably not completely change someone’s perspective, however for some evangelical Christians these situations represented an opportunity to get someone started on the road to a relationship with God.

Another similarity in responses concerning challenges from outside the ideological group appeared when I asked interviewees if they do, indeed, try to change the minds of

others when engaging in dialogue with individuals who disagree about religion. Answers varied, but two main themes of response occurred in each group. Some Christians and some atheists responded “yes.” For respondents of both groups a part of their identity as Christians or active atheists involved sharing and persuading others to accept their worldview. This response was not surprising from the evangelical Christian participants. The evangelical movement is committed to making changes in society that reflect God’s will (Smith 2000). Sharing the “good news” and attracting new followers is a key component of evangelical Christianity (Smith 1998), hence the term “evangelical.” Similarly, the atheist participants in this research represented a specific subsection that chooses to be involved in secular activities. The sample includes the “evangelical” subset of the atheist population.

The other common response between the two groups builds off the above quote from Michelle, who does not attempt to change the minds of everyone she comes across. Particularly in casual conversations with strangers or acquaintances she is quick to offer an “agree to disagree” truce to ideological arguments. Members of both ideological camps conceded that in a random conversation they were not going to have success recruiting anyone, but that those situations gave them the opportunity to “plant seeds.” Both atheists and Christians used this particular metaphor when discussing their goals in terms of sharing information with outsiders in the hope of eventual recruitment.

When asked about changing others’ minds Mark (24) said first that he was reluctant to try and change others, but he does make an effort to share what he believes concerning religion and his journey into atheism: “So I’ve planted little seeds here and there with various people. Like pointing out some contradiction in their religious beliefs or something. And they might not realize it at the time, but that could be that one little catalyst toward changing

their entire point of view.” From the other side of the ideological spectrum, Ruth (65) shared this similar comment: “[I am] not a Biblical scholar, not interested in a Biblical debate, but eager to share. I’m more like, ‘well this is what God does for me. This is where I am.’ And hopefully people want to share in that. I think I’m a seed planter not a harvester.” Both individuals would like to be a part of changing the lives of others but do not intend to take full responsibility or credit for the process.

The “seed planting” notion appeared a few more times in interviews with evangelicals. An individual has a conversation, “planting the seed” for God to harvest later. Many added statements like Joey, a 20 year-old college student who does not see himself as a strong public speaker: “I don’t think it’s my job to get it out there and tell ‘this is the way it is.’ Like if I say something just trusting that if God wants that to gel in their mind that he’s going to make that happen. So kind of letting God do the work.” There is an understanding in the Christian community that the actual changing of minds is God’s jurisdiction, and current evangelicals need only point others in the right direction.

The inclination to share and potentially convince others is common between these two ideological groups even though the motivation for that sharing builds from oppositional intentions. Both groups, entrenched in their minority status, felt compelled to communicate their positions with outsiders when the opportunity arose.

Pushes to Convert, or at least Change

The concepts of evangelism and conversion manifest in different experiences for Christians and atheists out in the world. When discussing challenges from others only active atheists described situations where strangers or acquaintances actively tried to convert them.

Because these atheists publicly participate in groups or organizations, atheism became a part of their social identity in a way that is not true for those irreligious that choose not to “congregate” (Zuckerman 2014). Martin (31) was a successful chef with a young son. He accepted this as part of life in the contemporary U.S. He acknowledges that “if you put yourself out there at events and stuff, yeah, there’s always gonna be people who are going to come around and try to convert you.” Shrugging he adds, “People are trying to force you to play by their rules. That’s how it seems at least.” His publicly atheist identity not only serves to define him ideologically but it marks him as something outside the theistic norm and – in the eyes of the religious community – someone who needs conversion.

Tom (34), also a father, agreed with Martin that there are “negative consequences to being different.” He reported being approached by theistic individuals often while with his atheist friends in public. He described a situation typical for him:

There have been get togethers when you’re out with other atheists and somebody overhears what you’re talking about and decides to confront you. You’re having a personal conversation and the person behind you can hear what you’re talking about and will stop you and say “you’re an idiot. The Bible is true because blah, blah, blah.” And I’m going, “Dude – I’m having an A-B conversation here [so C your way out]!” What are you...why? Who *are* you? It’s happened in restaurants or walking down the street...it’s not uncommon to happen.

These experiences both alienate active atheists from the larger community and function to solidify the bonds they share amongst themselves. As Masequesmay (2003) and Riesch (2010) both theorize in their literature on boundary work, interactions like the one above with outside forces strengthen the boundary and promote in-group solidarity through shared

experience and identity maintenance. The more these like-minded individuals have in common, in their encounters with those outside their worldview, the closer they become to their own group and the more that group becomes that “collective ideal,” to use a Durkheimian phrase (1995 [1912], p.425). Tom and Martin might bond as they recount similar experiences of conversion attempts or aggressive evangelism, strengthening their own secular identities and reinforcing their community of atheists as they both endeavor to navigate through society.

Challenges that come from a passerby or an acquaintance can be disruptive or unpleasant, but many of my respondents discussed discomfort and conflict resulting from interactions with close friends or family members. Several respondents shared the experience of dealing with those around them being offended by their ideology, or the implications of their ideology. For Samantha (20), who was the president of a university atheist club at the time of our interview, her relationship with her freshman roommate started off quite positively. The two girls got along well until Samantha became involved with the campus atheist group. She described how her roommate complained that her atheist club sweatshirt was offensive and asked that she not leave it out in plain sight in their room. Here is how she responded to this request: “I told her ‘you know you wear your church shirts that say “believe in the Lord and you’ll be rewarded” and that’s against what I believe, but wear it if you want to!’ and she said ‘well that’s different.’ So we didn’t really see eye-to-eye after that.” Active atheists often deal with these situations where the mere presence of their affiliation puts off others. The reverse is also true, where atheists feel uncomfortable in religious situations. However, as the example demonstrates – a Christian presence is

“different” than a secular one in contemporary U.S. culture because of the ubiquity and acceptance of theism.

A few of the Christian interviewees reported ongoing challenges by members of their extended families. For Matthew, a 20-something physical therapist considering theology school, dealing with his fiancé’s family proved difficult. Both her parents and her twin-sister openly disapproved of their Christian community based anti-marriage equality views. Matthew did not always experience this conflict directly, but heard about it from his fiancé after visits with her family. In a similar situation, Deborah (37) had a difficult time dealing with ongoing tension between herself and her ex-husband and his family. One issue that surfaced several times during the interview was her ex-husband’s objection to her homeschooling their two elementary school aged children. Deborah was tired of her ex-husband, and others, associating her religiosity with stupidity. Despite having gone through a “Biblical divorce” (divorce because of infidelity is permitted in her faith) his disapproval still affected her: “He thought I was stupid because I actually believe this stuff. I believe in creation science and that was a big thing for him. He couldn’t respect me.” Her ex-husband’s opinion of her beliefs, she feels, both contributed to their unhappiness in marriage and continues to contribute to tensions concerning the education and upbringing of their children.

These challenges from extended family, unlike the experiences respondents have with strangers, are often ongoing and at times grow to define their relationships. For those I spoke with, even though these situations may be difficult, they lead to a galvanizing of belief. Matthew and Deborah use these tensions with their in-laws to entrench themselves deeper in their ideology and distance their own beliefs from those of their opponents.

Challenges at Work and School

Still on the personal side of things, but leaning toward more systemic issues, several respondents – of both ideological camps – reported feeling pressure to hide their affiliation in work or school environments. Joey, a 20-year-old college student, recalled challenges from non-believers throughout his high school and college careers and just recently took a religion class from a notoriously atheist professor. Of that experience he had this to say: “That was probably the most outright challenging thing.” Being taught the fundamentals of his religion from the perspective of an ardent non-believer proved difficult at times. The positive effect of that religion-scrutinizing environment was that it gave him the opportunity and motivation to delve further into his own Biblical study. High school was less helpful; he said, “I’ve definitely faced opposition and in high school I’d say loosely persecution, just making fun of religion...yeah, I’ve faced that.”

Christian parents also commented on difficulties their families face in U.S. public schools. Deborah (37), the mother of two whose ex-husband will not allow her to homeschool, had a lot to say about public school and her family’s faith. For a discerning Christian like herself “you can’t help but notice the attacks on our faith” coming from the elementary school her children attend. Noting everything from greedy fundraising efforts to poorly conceived discipline plans to questionable curriculum, Deborah concluded that: “The school system constantly, everyday it is a challenge; it is a slap in the face to the way we believe and the way we raise our kids.” From the student perspective and the parent perspective, public school poses a threat to the carefully cultivated Christian identity and ideology. Christian communities must work even harder to instill young people with the

values and practices they advocate to counteract the influence of “the world” they face at school.

Atheist young people and their parents too have trouble supporting their worldview in the school environment. Atheist fathers in particular discussed education with a passion similar to that of Deborah. Tom (34) had never been particularly interested in activism, but having a child made him start to think differently about secularism and social issues: “All of a sudden when you become a parent you start thinking about your kids education! You're sitting there going ‘I don't want this for my kid! I don't want my child to have to deal with this.’” For many of the parents interviewed, having children inspired them to become further involved in atheist activism. Martin (31) recently became a board member of a local atheist organization. He and his ex-wife – who is also an atheist – shared custody of their 3-year-old son. When I asked if becoming a parent changed his worldview or atheism he expressed these hopes for his son’s future:

No, it just made my motivation to see and live in a secular world much more real.

Like I said, I don't want him to grow up...if he grows up and it turns out he's gay and he wants to get married I want him to be able to get married, you know what I mean?

If he comes down with some debilitating disease I want there to be enough medical research out there to make it go away, or as least be as comfortable as possible. So yeah, to a degree I would say it probably did influence me as to how important it is to me to live in a society that's not ruled by religion or religious beliefs.

For Martin teaching his son to be part of the solution and not part of the problem involved a secular education.

Both Christian and atheist parents shared feelings of anxiety associated with sending kids off to school, as respondents from each group felt outnumbered ideologically. Members of both groups used these experiences as motivation to be more actively involved in their children's education as well as in the ideological community. This may be easier for Christians like Deborah, where children's religious education is built into regular Sunday services. Active atheists must be more deliberate in countering mainstream culture with their children. Some atheist clubs organize parenting groups and family oriented outings to provide a secular alternative to the fellowship and supplementary education many believers benefit from in church communities (Manning 2010).

The interviews revealed participants in both atheist and evangelical communities experiencing various challenges and tensions with those they interact with outside their ideological groups. In talking with and observing members of both evangelical Christian and active atheist communities not only did the divisions between the two become apparent, boundaries within each community also came to the surface. Divisions originating from within the communities could be just as intense as those things that challenge ideology from the outside and just as vital to boundary and identity construction.

Boundaries Within Christianity – Striving for Authenticity

Differences – large and subtle – in the community of Christian believers led to the variety of denominations and sects within the religion. The Hartford Institute for Religion Research states that more than 200 denominations have been identified by the “Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.” 145,691,446 Americans belong to one of the top 25 denominations. According to Gallup three out of ten non-Catholic Christians in the U.S.

consider themselves evangelical. Anticipating this inevitable variation I purposefully recruited participants based on ideological components rather than specific denominational affiliations. The result is a sample populated with individuals who describe their church communities as non-denominational and/or evangelical.

The issue of denomination was the first topic where within-Christianity boundary work presented itself in this study. I asked each participant what they preferred to be called; how they describe themselves in terms of their Christianity. Overwhelmingly the response I heard was “follower of Christ,” reflecting a foundational component of the evangelical tradition that mandates a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Sheler 2006). Along with their affirmation of the follower of Christ identity, several participants included commentary regarding denominational divisions in the Christian community. Deborah (37) became an evangelical Christian in 2005. In our interview she was adamant that denominational language only distracts from the Christian cause:

I think it was not intended that there be denominations. It is very clear in the Bible that the church is to be unified and united. So by making yourself superior or inferior in any way by a label is defeating the unity purpose and what confuses people as to what a Christian is or what it means to be a Christian. When you have the denominational differences people often don't even say ‘I'm a Christian,’ it's ‘I'm a Baptist’ or ‘I'm a Methodist.’ We're following Christ; that's the whole purpose, so that's what we should call ourselves: followers of Christ.

Deborah emphasized how Christ should be at the center not only of belief but also of the Christian identity itself. Denominations draw unnecessary, perhaps even distracting, boundaries within the community of believers. Here she began to separate those Christians

who aim to truly follow Christ from other, less dedicated, or merely “nominal Christians.”

Asher (23) was a college student at a large, public, Midwestern University at the time of our interview, but he previously graduated from a non-accredited school of ministry on the west coast. He seemed to agree in spirit with the point Deborah made, but also saw some merit in how denominations assist individuals in finding the type of Christian community where they feel most at home. On the one hand, he agreed: “To me denomination creates that division, divided nation, ya know, and I like non-denominational because it’s just about loving Jesus.” On the other hand, when asked if the different labels were important he seemed to concede that they might be helpful, though he would prefer to be one, united Christian community:

I think how I view different labels is...yeah, they serve a purpose of describing what they believe more, like if it's expressive worship or something, or a denomination that doesn't use [musical] instruments or something, so you can kind of tell where they're coming from, but for me it's kind of like I wish we didn't, like we could all just get together around loving Jesus. But it's not really that way.

The part that mattered most to both Deborah and Asher was the loving of and living for Jesus. This idea and the division between Christians who “walk the walk” and those who do not surfaced again when participants discuss the importance of Biblical Christianity.

“Biblical Christianity,” like the personal relationship with Jesus, distinguishes evangelical Christians from what many call “mainline” Protestant groups (Penning and Smidt 2002; Sheler 2006). Central to the evangelical Christian ideology is a belief in a literal interpretation of the Bible (Penning and Smidt 2002). Beyond the issue of denominational differences, my evangelical participants adamantly advocated for Biblical Christianity as *the*

correct way to practice Christianity. This religious tradition divides them not only from “the rest of the world,” (as Ruth put it) but also from those that describe themselves as Christian but do not adhere to a literal interpretation of scripture. This was another area where Deborah drew a rigid line between her community and those outside it. She argued that those claiming Christianity without the proper practice and follow through might be considered a greater enemy to *real* Christianity than people or groups completely outside the Christian umbrella because “they might be claiming the name [Christian] and living completely wrong. So the testimony they are giving for the name of Jesus is completely a lie.” Based on this criterion for dividing true Christianity from the rest, Jacob grew up as part of this “lie.”

Jacob (25) was raised in a Catholic family and went to church most Sundays as a child. While he always believed in God he did not understand the Catholic traditions and treated church as an obligation. Seven years ago he got “saved” and converted to evangelical Christianity. As a 25 year-old adult, and a leader in his evangelical community, he saw the stark contrast between Biblical and nominal Christianity. He had this to say about his religious education as a Catholic child growing up in Michigan: “the way I grew up, even though I was going to church, I was taught that you don’t want to push anything on anybody so you just teach nothing. I never got any religious education from my family, ever. I don’t think that’s fair either.” Having committed himself to Jesus and a Biblical Christian life seven years ago, he compared the two lifestyles in a discussion of why and how being a *real* Christian was harder today than in the past:

Nominal Christianity is okay because nothing you have to say is offensive, because nominal Christianity does not allow Christ the main throne of the world. Nominal

Christianity would not make Christ the only way for forgiveness and does not make the scriptures the Word of God solely. So in that sense it's more acceptable to have an "everybody's right" belief because it doesn't offend anybody. But my opinion is, if something is true I'm sorry it offends but if it's true it's true for everybody.

He went on to blame denominations and their various non-Biblical traditions for diluting the message: "at large Christianity has become shallower and shallower in this country." Several participants who grew up nominal Christians and later found evangelical Christianity made similar claims concerning the differences between the two and their allegiance to a truly Biblical religious practice. Based on the passionate interview narratives shared on this topic it appeared that these distinctions between believers are very important to Biblical Christians.

Joshua Harris (27) brought up the issue of Biblical Christianity when discussing how he and his wife found their current church community. Being new to the area the Harris couple first attended a Methodist church recommended to them because of its active small group program. Fellowship outside of services was an important aspect of Christian life for them, and Joshua had been happy in a Methodist church in college. However, the Harris' soon left the Methodist congregation "because some of the teachings coming from the pulpit and actions just weren't what we thought it should be; weren't Biblical; [it's] not about what we thought, but weren't Biblical." When I asked if their current church community "fit them better" Joshua was quick to correct me and clarify his statements. Their congregational change was not based on mere preferences. He continued, "I guess I just have a problem with the 'does it fit you' idea." Everyone has preferences, he claimed, but they should be secondary to the core of the church's teachings. Joshua explained: "There are some things

that we prefer, like I know my wife likes hymnal songs, but just the solid Bible teaching is the main thing for us. It doesn't matter how great your songs are if your teachings are off." For the Harris' a community not focused on Biblical truth is not a true Christian community. The move from the Methodist church to an evangelical one illustrates the strength of this particular boundary. Just because a church or congregation fits under the Christian umbrella does not, by that affiliation alone, make it a truly authentic Christian church according to my evangelical participants. Not all denominations are created equal and part of their identity as evangelicals or "followers of Christ" is to seek out and support those authentic, Biblically based communities.

Boundaries Within Christianity – Gender and Expression

Joshua's example citing disagreement concerning what was coming "from the pulpit" highlighted another topic where evangelicals drew boundaries within the research sample. As stated earlier, just because core beliefs are similar does not mean each member of a religious community carries identical values and opinions. Joshua's struggle with a female Pastor at his Methodist church was an example of a larger, ongoing argument in evangelical circles. Women in leadership has been a controversial topic within conservative Christianity for decades, if not longer. Scholars report a history of "evangelical feminism" throughout the second half of the 20th Century (Gallagher 2003; Ingersoll 2003).

Evangelical feminists – also called "biblical feminists" (Gallagher 2004) - maintained a biblical base from which to advocate for gender equality. By using scriptural support for their agenda of equality, evangelical feminism hoped to remain within the realm of evangelical Christianity where the inerrancy of the Bible is a fundamental belief. Biblical

feminism also used documented church history to show that what was considered the divinely traditional way to organize gender relations and male leadership was not a long-standing convention but actually a relatively new social system (Ingersoll 2003). The evangelical community as a whole did not receive these “revelations” positively, and consequently the movement was unable to affect much change. The examples below, from evangelical interviewees in this study demonstrate how the issue of women in leadership still causes tension among Christian communities.

One of the last straws for the Harris family was when their Methodist church called on a female, gay, former pastor to fill in while the regular pastor was out of town. Joshua (27) described the incident like this:

One week when the pastor was gone they brought in a former pastor who was a Methodist and she went up on the pulpit and it was all I could do that me and my wife not walk out of there. There’s a point, you know, where you take a place of leadership...there are certain standards!

He seemed to be concerned both with the fact that the substituting pastor was female and gay. For Joshua that was not a Biblically sound leadership choice. Deborah (37) also expressed Biblically based objections to women leaders in the church. She mentioned that women should not teach men which, for her, meant in church leadership and eldership positions all the way to her relationship with her father, who was not an evangelical Christian. When asked if she discussed her faith with her father she said this: “I can't to my dad because he's a man and I definitely believe women shouldn't teach men, I don't believe that's effective or Biblical.” For these evangelical Christians the Biblical foundation dictates rules and roles to live by. Evangelical ideology makes a direct connection between the

welfare of family life and the welfare of society in general (Rose 1987), thus a breaking down of traditional roles or hierarchy could have societal consequences. Sociological work on gender in conservative religions reports that often times women find ways of using Biblical models of gender and family to their advantage without challenging the established system as a whole (Brasher 1998; Chong 2006; Manning 1999; Stacey 1990; Rose 1987). There are those in the evangelical world, however, that still advocate for a change in the gender dynamics of their communities.

Christopher (21) came to this subject with a much more inclusive perspective. In our interview he spoke of his faith in ways similar to Joshua and Deborah, referencing scripture and focusing his faith on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Here he described his Christianity:

I think the vast majority of what I want to do each day is glorify God and to do what the Bible calls us to do, you know caring for the sick and those other people don't care about. Hopefully just being a ray of light and joy in that regard. Actually listening - in the book of James it says be doers of the word not just listeners of the word. So walking the walk not just talking the talk, that kind of thing.

When he moved to a new town for college and found a church he liked he had to see if their stance on women in the church lined up with what he believed was right before he could comfortably commit to being a part of the community. He explained how his family and experiences growing up influenced what he looks for in a church community now:

A big thing back home was that we left a church there because they didn't allow women elders. My mom has two Masters degrees and one of them is in theology from seminary. And so it was like how does that make sense? She has more

schooling in this than all of you, and yet because of her sex she doesn't get to join! So we left that church, not having any of that. And Vintage has women on the leadership team and is all for that and equality. In the beginning I was thinking "Oh please be good," because I really liked this church and I didn't want to have to leave. As he enthusiastically expressed his feelings on this topic he crossed his fingers, a gesture of hope, that this new church had the same value on gender equality that his family did. Just as Joshua could not stay in a church that condoned (gay) female leadership, Christopher could not stay in a church that prohibited it. This issue – regardless of what side an evangelical Christian is on – defined for many what a correctly practicing Christian community looks like for congregants. Even within the relatively small evangelical Christian bubble what is right, true, and authentically Christian does not look the same for everyone.

Asher (23), the former seminary student turned political science scholar, had a difficult time finding a community that appreciated the same aspects of Christianity that he did – both stylistically and substantively. He saw “expressive worship” as a significant component of church services. Asher said: “Experiencing the presence of God, that’s where you’re really changed and transformed.” After searching for several months he found one congregation that treated worship with the intensity he desired: “I like that about Radiance [church]; they’re more free about expressing their love for Jesus. In the Bible King David was really good about expressing his worship and dancing before the Lord. He didn’t care what people thought. I think that is important.” Asher’s quest to find a congregation that encouraged “expressive worship” highlights the embodied nature of Christianity for him. Though he preferred not to put denominational labels on his faith, Asher favored a church service more in line with charismatic Christian program where the body is very much a part

of the articulation of faith. “Charismatic Christian worship services are actively embodied, during frequent singing in the service, those in attendance may stand, sway, clap, or dance” (Davidman 2015, p.210). For Asher, an authentic, Biblical Christian experience included physical expressions of faith.

Another element of Christian faith Asher found lacking in the local churches he attended concerns healing through faith and prayer. Just as he cited scripture concerning expressive worship, this point was also Biblically anchored for him. He explained his frustration with people hedging in their prayers rather than truly trusting the healing power of the Lord:

When we go over verses here in Bible study people will instead of praying for the healing of someone they'll say "God, if it's your will," and it's like, if you look at the life of Jesus, he healed everyone who came to him. And there's the verse of "thy kingdom come, they will be done" from the Lord's Prayer. If you think about it "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" there's no sickness in Heaven, no sin. So if you're trying to bring the kingdom to earth, the kingdom to someone's life, you're bringing hope and healing and whatever. So I disagree with people who say "if it's your will Lord heal him." It kind of feels like a cop-out...instead of just being bold. If they don't get healed it's not my fault, I did what I believe to be true and what God says to do, but I can't base my experience and have that trump what the Bible says because the Bible is true.

From Asher’s perspective, complete trust in God’s ability to influence any situation coupled with the inerrancy of the Bible should be integral elements to Christian faith.

Both the gender examples and Asher's search for a genuine Biblical community demonstrated that even the common terms like "Biblical Christianity" or "authentic Christianity" do not mean the same thing for each believer. In striving to be the truest followers of Christ my evangelical interviewees constantly compared their version of that journey to other interpretations. What defined the Christian identity of these participants was often based upon what they do not have in common with others.

Boundaries Within Atheism – Terms and Representations

In this qualitative research with active atheists and their organizations I discovered that within the active atheist community, or atheist movement as some describe it, groups and individuals struggle with how to create and maintain identity in the overwhelmingly theistic landscape of U.S. culture. Just as the Christians interviewed labored over terms and labels for their belief system, previous research reported similar discontent in the atheist community. Cimino and Smith (2007) stated that given the distinct histories of the secular humanist movement and the atheist movement that the two lack unity in goals and purpose leaving them at odds despite their overall ideological similarity. They wrote "Atheists claim that secular humanists have diluted the anti-theistic message by adding philosophical and ethical teachings to their agenda." My own experiences with actively secular individuals did not reflect this divide in the community. While some participants expressed their identity as atheist in belief *and* humanist in philosophy – distinguishing one as describing their relationship with religion and the other describing their relationship with people – the individuals I spoke to and the groups they represent were not currently dealing with conflict between the humanist and atheist distinctions.

Most participants were content with “atheist” as a label either because people tend to be familiar with the term and would not need further explanation, or they delighted in the term because of its connotation of controversy. On why he used the term atheist, Alex (30) said “It’s a good unifying label; it’s something everyone knows, has a basic idea of what it means.” Coming from a more combative perspective, when asked if he preferred a different term, 59-year-old activist Warren said, ”No, I like atheist. It’s head on and it creates a lot of conversation and I love conversation. It’s conflict from the very beginning and I’m pretty good at keeping conflict at a level where we can talk.” No matter what the specific motivation, the participants I spoke with claimed to be content with the term atheist to describe themselves and their communities.

Where terms and labels seemed to cause some unrest for active atheists in the Midwest was the distinction between atheist and agnostic. Current and past leaders of the large university campus group discussed their intentional use of inclusive language and attitudes. As fellowship and social support are main foci for this group the most recent cohorts wanted to make sure non-religious students of all kinds felt welcome (though they do technically welcome religious individuals as well). Thus, the university group I observed included agnostic in their club’s name: Student Organization for Atheists and Agnostics (SOFAA) to reinforce the open-minded invitation. From the community-based groups, however, some participants indicated a lack of confidence on the part of those who claim an agnostic identity. Mark (24) said “there are plenty of people in our [community] group, which has ‘atheist’ in the title, that don’t really like the term atheist. They prefer to say ‘I’m agnostic’ or ‘I’m not really sure’ and I don’t know if that’s just kind of posturing for people challenging them or they just don’t want to commit to it or what; I’m not sure.” His

comments, echoed by others in his group, tended to assume the true identity was atheist even if the language chosen was agnostic. Others described agnosticism as a phase they “passed through” on the way to atheism, as if agnosticism was a step on the road toward becoming a “real” atheist.

One self-proclaimed agnostic among the sample stood firm in her beliefs and strongly apposed this agnosticism as weak atheism claim. Diana (22), who was about to graduate with a degree in physics at the time of our interview, discussed feeling judgment from both religious friends and atheist friends to make some kind of choice. Commenting on theistic pressure she said “You know there’s that assumption that if you’re an agnostic you haven’t really left, that you’re going to be easier to persuade than someone who says they’re an atheist. Once you say you’re an atheist people start to see you as a lost cause but if you say you’re agnostic people think you can still be converted.” Later on in the same discussion she aimed this comment at fellow non-believers who questioned her commitment based on her agnostic label: “I want people to understand that I chose to be agnostic for a reason. You can’t force yourself to believe something or not [believe something]. Being agnostic isn’t some kind of cop-out; I’m not doing it because I don’t want to take a stand. I’m doing it because; I’m agnostic because that is what I believe. I’m really not sure if God exists or not.” Diana was an active member of her atheist group despite this tension with terminology. Part of her interest in participation was to be a voice for the firmly agnostic.

While I did not find Cimino and Smith’s (2007) divide over the labels of the community, the goals and purposes of these atheist groups did come up as an ongoing issue of balance for many participants. Said Samantha (20), the campus atheist club president, “I think we definitely [fulfill our purpose], yeah, in terms of providing a community of like-

minded people. I mean we don't all agree on the best approach, but we do our best." While the inner workings of an individual community group may not seem particularly significant, in a fledgling movement like the atheist one, clearly defining goals, allies, and strategies for success may be vital to survival and progress.

Several interviewees from Samantha's atheist group brought up a specific event that crystalized their differences in opinion on how the group should represent itself to the wider community, in this case the campus community. As a fundraiser for Amnesty International the Student Organization for Atheists and Agnostics (SOFAA) set up an activity outside the University Center called "Stone a Blasphemer Day!" Samantha explained the event and purpose behind it:

So, it was national blasphemy day. There were a few goals for the activity: we wanted to raise awareness that everybody blasphemes against some religion, even if you're religious you blaspheme against other religions, so what you say and what you think is right is different than what others think. So us saying we don't believe in God is, yes, blasphemy to you, but remember that what you say is blasphemy to somebody else. So we had signs that essentially said the Bible has blasphemy too. The other goal was to inform people that people in other countries are still stoned to death for not following whatever religion their country is. You feel like that should be something from the Middle Ages, but it happens today. So for a dollar somebody could throw a water balloon at a blasphemer, which was us [SOFAA members]. We donated the money to Amnesty International. We had somebody standing outside yelling 'Stone a blasphemer! Only \$1!'"

Samantha and several other influential SOFAA participants believed in this event and the purpose behind it. However not everyone responded well to the demonstration. For one thing a university journalist wrote a negative column about the situation, calling it a “circus” and questioning the legitimacy of group itself. Also, and more relevant in terms of the boundaries within the atheist community, a number of SOFAA members were also upset by the endeavor.

Elliot was a soft-spoken 29-year-old part-time student who had been involved in the campus group for a number of years. His comments represented those within the group who did not appreciate the “Stone a Blasphemer Day!” demonstration. When asked about aspects of his group that he did not agree with he said:

They’ll do tabling [in University common spaces or for activity fairs], which is fine, but sometimes when they do the tabling they choose to do something absurd with it. Like the “Blasphemy Day” thing. It looked ridiculous! I was on the bus and I saw them over there holding up these signs. I had to get off the bus there and I was just trying to hide so no one would recognize me. I did not want to be associated with that!

Elliot and others disagreed with the stunt-like nature of the activity. They expressed concern that their group, centered on reason and logic, already a minority people view with suspicion, chose such a silly and shallow route to raising awareness on campus.

Sheila (40), from an atheist club called Plains City Atheists (PCA), had similar reactions to aggressive billboard campaigns her group considered adopting. Some atheist groups, she said, “go too far and that’s not a way to win people over and make them more

receptive to non-religious people.” When asked what specifically she meant by “go too far” Sheila explained:

There was one [a billboard sponsored by an atheist club] last year where they were comparing a religious figure - I can't remember if it was the Pope or Jesus - they were comparing them to Hitler. And I just thought that's not the way to go, you know. PCA discussed that as a board because we're getting ready to do a billboard campaign and we started our discussions last year. I mean you have people who want to be in your face with it and others who want to do it a different way. You don't want to be *those* atheists that people associate with it.

In both examples members of atheist organizations took issue with the way their group chose to portray (or considered portraying) atheism to the greater population. In a group already maligned by mainstream society these participants disagreed with the public image being cultivated by theirs and other atheist groups in the U.S. Even with worldview in common, individual and group goals, and the routes to achieving those goals, differed within the active atheist population. While some strive to get their message out to the public by any means, others advocate a quieter, more thoughtful approach. These types of divisions within groups could lead to changes in participation, or even members defecting and/or starting alternative organizations. In a relatively new community, such as active atheism, the drawing and redrawing of these boundaries helps to define individual groups and the larger movement itself.

Boundaries Within Atheism – To Evangelize or Not to Evangelize

In addition to issues of image, representation, and message, the question of whether or not to “evangelize” as part of the atheist identity – both individually and as a community – presented as a boundary within the active atheist community. Already those choosing to be part of clubs and organizations made their non-religious worldview somewhat public (though groups were sensitive to the fact that some members declined public affiliation, i.e. won’t be named, won’t be in pictures) and thus contribute to the growing public face of atheism in the U.S. But even within this vocal and visible subset strong opinions differed on the topic of spreading an atheist message.

As previously discussed, many atheist interviewees spoke about their interactions with believers and whether or not they chose to engage in religious debates in those instances. In Chapter 6 I will explore the Internet as a tool for outreach, a practice that may fit into this category of attempting to grow active atheist numbers. Here, though, I focus simply on the question of atheist evangelism as a component of the atheist identity or not and how opinions on that topic constructed boundaries for the atheists I interviewed from groups and organizations.

The strongest proponents of atheist evangelism came from individuals who were once enthusiastic believers themselves. For Alex (29) the transition from arguing for Christianity to arguing for secularism felt natural. The process of losing his faith may not have been smooth or pleasant but his drive for the truth and to share the truth with others was a constant. When asked specifically about his continued “share the good news” attitude he agreed that his evangelical tendencies carried over from his days as a Christian. He said:

There's an evangelical element to it, there's no doubt. And this is a clash I can have with [other] atheists. They say, 'you shouldn't, blah blah...people are going to believe what they want and you shouldn't force yours.' And atheists with those opinions have a fundamental objection to evangelism. A fundamental objection to trying to persuade people, and I disagree with them...Discuss, debate, have a dialogue. I don't see anything wrong with it.

Alex understood that not all atheists shared his opinion on the issue of persuading others. But sharing his story as an example to others remained important to him. Colton (26) also grew up sharing his beliefs with others. As a Jehovah's Witness persuading others was a very important component of his everyday religious life.

While Alex has taken his religious evangelistic skill set and applied it to his new atheist identity without hesitation, Colton slowed down his atheist evangelism as it reminded him too much of his religious past. When asked how he felt about spreading a message of atheism he replied, "Yeah, I used to spend a lot of time on that. I started to shy away from it, partially because it felt so familiar [from my Jehovah's Witness background] to just constantly be looking for an opportunity to bring up that thing I care a lot about that a lot of people disagree with me on." While the issue remained complicated for him, Colton saw how the transition from evangelical Christian could easily produce evangelical atheists. He said, "It's very common for evangelical Christians to become evangelical atheists. You change one thing and it doesn't change everything. I like talking about things and trying to convince people of stuff. I used to do that really as recreation. Now I don't as much. I'm more interested in understanding other people's views better." These two made a practice of sharing beliefs as Christians that carried over to their lives as active atheists.

Their message changed, however their drive to seek out and share truth remained strong. Perhaps the embodied nature of their Christian identities held over influencing how they constructed their atheist identities. Both Colton and Alex spent so much time and energy seeking out potential converts and sharing their faith with others as Christians that those ritualized practices (Davidman 2015) maintained a place in how they expressed their new secular worldview. Not all atheists who actively seek to spread atheist ideas come from a Christian background, but for those I spoke with many of the most evangelistic atheists were once strongly evangelical in their Christianity.

Just as discussing belief in the hopes of bringing more people to atheism folds into the atheism identity for the interviewees above, several others actively distanced themselves from that version of the atheist identity. When asked about changing people's minds, many interviewees simply said no, that was not part of being an atheist for them. In some cases they referenced religious evangelism and said things like ex-pastor Robert (75), "No; I'm not in the business of converting people." A few individuals stated that they do not set out to change minds, a common response discussed earlier in this chapter, unless confronted with someone who is pushing a religious agenda. SOFAA president Samantha (20) promoted atheist activism in general but did not seek out believers in order to change their minds, unless they started the conversation. She explained it this way:

No, I've never tried to de-convert someone. When they sit down and are trying to debate with me and convert me I'll debate back and tell them why I think their points aren't valid or why I don't believe that way, or what drew me away from religion in the first place. So in that sense I might try to change their mind, or give them

something to think about. But no, it's never been a goal to make someone into an atheist.

Dev (30) came to the Midwest from India during college. He had a similar response, stating that he would gladly discuss why he was no longer religious when a believer asked but that his goal was not for “everyone to become atheist or agnostic.”

Just as the pro evangelism atheists acknowledged disagreement within the community on the topic, so did atheists who choose not to persuade others. When asked if sharing his atheism and/or helping others find atheism was part of being an atheist for him, Elliot (29), who was embarrassed to be associated with “Stone a Blasphemer Day,” said: “No, I don’t think so. But there’s a lot of people who disagree with me there!” He laughed then, recalling arguments within his club about the potential end of religion in society. His perspective highlighted the promotion of reason and logic rather than the dissolution of religion: “If you keep on teaching how to use knowledge and logic it will be a gradual thing where people will become non-religious, but you're never going to wipe out religion. There will always be some form; people will always need that as part of their life.” Elliot’s comments echoed Durkheim, in that a specific “God” or set of symbols was bound to fade but would be replaced by others. Elliot hoped that the next iteration of “religion,” whatever it may look like, would lean more toward the logical and rational.

Conclusions

Clearly the boundaries between evangelicals and active atheists are “real” for those involved. These socially constructed divisions influence how members of these two ideological groups experience social life and help them define their own perspective against

those with whom they fundamentally disagree. In naming the other group as their opposition they “other” each other. Both evangelical Christians and active atheists shared narratives where they actively distanced themselves and shared instances where they felt distanced by others. It was in those distancing moments where they demonstrated some of the differences in their experiences. In the U.S. where theism dominates, Christians (as a social group) have more acceptance and thus more power to influence society. Atheists, while growing in number and public visibility, still face an overwhelming degree of prejudice, suspicion, and ignorance coming from mainstream society. Both groups make it a priority to distance themselves from their “others.” In some cases, though, the distance, or the opposition, bubbles up without much effort. As interview data showed, interviewees from the two groups offered up directly oppositional commentary on several social issues without direct solicitation.

The very process of othering, which in itself is boundary work, influenced identity and collective identity for both groups. Whether overtly drawing othering boundaries through statements about their opposition, or more subtly, in the times that members of each group happened to make oppositional statements, the sentiments expressed made clear indications about who the individuals or groups were, what they stood for, and who and what they stood against. Opposition enhances solidarity as both groups struggle to gain ground in mainstream culture and their “dance” (Cimino and Smith 2014) continues.

Starting with an assumption that the two groups do hold opposing views, these findings fell in line with expectation. Unanticipated were the findings of boundary work *within* both groups. Evangelical Christian interviews demonstrated strong boundaries when it came to beliefs and the embodied practice of those beliefs. Distinct camps for how to be

an atheist, or an active atheist, became clear in interviews as well. Both groups look for like-minded individuals within their minority worldview with whom to further connect, and both also critique others who do not adhere to their particular identity within the worldview.

In the following three chapters more specific examples of boundary work and identity creation and maintenance will add further detail to the differences and similarities between these two ideologically dissonant groups as they navigate the social world.

Chapter 4: Boundaries and Morality

This chapter explores two related but distinct topics that emerged time and again throughout the fieldwork: moral boundaries and morality as a component of social life. Both these ideas engage with the concept of morality and the everyday functioning of a moral or ethical framework. First I will discuss how evangelical Christians and active atheists draw and perpetuate moral boundaries. Moral boundaries, like other socially constructed categorizations, can be fluid and/or rigid and require ongoing maintenance. Lamont, Schmalzbauer, Waller, and Weber (1996, p.33) described moral boundaries as “the moral distinctions that people draw between more and less worthy individuals.” Where individuals draw cultural boundaries based on cultural knowledge, taste and experience, moral boundaries separate individuals based on issues such as standards, honesty, and selfishness (Lamont et al. 1996, p.34). In their research to determine what factors influenced moral boundaries, Lamont et al. (1996) concluded that religious lifestyle factors indeed guide the formation and focus of moral boundaries. Not only does this finding reinforce the link between moral frameworks and religion, specifically Christianity, it also leads to questions relevant to my specific research. How are moral boundaries drawn within and between the religious and the irreligious? How are moral boundaries, often associated with religious ideology, articulated in the active atheist community? Interview data address these concerns.

Clearly both groups draw moral boundaries between themselves and their ideological opponents. These boundaries help to create and maintain group and individual identities for evangelical Christians and active atheists. In addition to demonstrating moral boundaries, interview data on morality itself emerged, particularly from atheist respondents. Thus,

morality in social life became the second topic of discussion here. In sociological research morality is not simply a question of doing right or wrong, but rather how groups (and individuals) come to understand issues such as what goals are worth pursuit, what behaviors may be better or worse, and how people come to believe they should feel and act (Smith 2003; Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). In a 2013 review article, Hitlin and Vaisey (2013) described how recent sociological work on morality began to go beyond the traditional scope of morals and values to include things like identities, institutions, and boundaries. The authors stated, “recent sociological research shows that religions, occupations, generations, educational categories, organizations, and social movements can all have their own moralities” (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013). With this broader conception of morality I discuss what participants said on the topic and how they demonstrated moral conviction. As these two issues share the substantive subject of morality it follows that the discussions of findings for these two – moral boundaries and morality itself as a part of social life, what I call ‘morality in motion’ – should be linked.

I use the term “morality in motion” both to help differentiate the talk of morality as a concept from the moral boundaries discussion and because it describes the idea of morals as a moving component of social interaction. Participants specifically brought up examples of, or stories in which, their moral framework played a significant role. They described to me how morality dictated their action and/or reaction to situations. Interviewees described these narratives of morality in social life as ongoing and processual, and thus “morality in motion” became an appropriate phrase to characterize talk of morality in this study.

Atheists Outside the Lines

Existing literature has more insight into what people in the United States think of atheists than what atheists actually think themselves. Data from many sources indicated that people in the United States have a decidedly negative perception of atheists and atheism. Edgell et al. (2006) used survey data to demonstrate that people in the U.S. are suspicious of atheists and see atheism as an undesirable quality. Atheists are the least accepted group among a list of religious and ethnic minority categories. The authors hypothesized that this prejudice stems from assumptions about the connection between morality and religion. Using the Lamont et al. (1996) definition of moral boundaries, where moral boundaries are drawn based on perceived worth of individuals or groups, it is clear that the general population distinguishes itself from atheists on that moral boundary level.

Baker and Smith (2009) pointed to a lack of “qualitative understanding” of the moral and ethical backgrounds of atheists and agnostics. For example, a person could easily find the mission statement and belief profile of a particular religious group by visiting their meeting place or looking online. Similar information for the secular population may be more difficult to acquire. First, most atheists do not “congregate” and those who do tend to meet in public or other shared community spaces. Second, these secular groups are often much smaller, less centrally controlled, and less organized than religious bodies. Lack of accurate information may be a significant cause of the general public’s distrust of atheists.

Literature from a variety of social science perspectives all noted the negative perception atheism carries in the U.S. context (Downey 2004; Harper 2007; Heiner 1992; Koproske 2006). In an era where tolerance between differing religious groups has increased, the opposite occurred between the religious and irreligious (Edgell et al. 2006; Edgell

forthcoming; Farkas, Johnson, and Foleno 2001). Again, this seems to demonstrate a moral distinction between those with differing religious beliefs and those without religious beliefs. It is this moral boundary that keeps religion and irreligion apart.

Moving from research that exposes the moral boundaries themselves to that which shows data on the actual moral issues involved, next I discuss research on the morality of the atheist population in the United States. In a 2009 article highlighting research specifically focused on religion, irreligion, and morality, Zuckerman revealed that while atheists/agnostics do not believe in God, their lack of religious belief by no means reflects a lack of moral character or conviction. Not only do atheist individuals tend to have strong values and beliefs concerning social, political, and moral issues, research shows that generally secular individuals tend to respond as more “merciful and humane” than the general population when asked to react to various conflict scenarios (Zuckerman 2009, 2014; Jacoby 2004). From criminal justice issues like the death penalty and government sanctioned torture, to equal rights causes such as gender and marriage equality, results in the research presented by Zuckerman (2009, 2014) all counter the popular perception of atheist/agnostic citizens as amoral and untrustworthy (Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Jackson and Hunsberger 1999). While the findings Zuckerman (2009) brought to light represent a significant difference between outside perception and actual responses from the atheist community, they still reflect only responses to specific questions and hypothetical circumstances. The struggle for atheists to prove they are moral is ongoing and permeates myriad aspects of daily life and social interaction. In talking with interviewees from both ideological backgrounds about their families, communities, and relationship with mainstream

society I gathered new insight into how assumptions and perceptions of morality affect the lives of active atheists and evangelical Christians.

Boundaries and Self-Presentation

Regardless of individual moral frameworks, perception drives not only reputation but also self-representation. I encountered a striking difference in the ways Christians and active atheists incorporated morality into their presentations of self in my interviews. Evangelical Christians made fewer comments specifically concerning morality. Their morality is assumed as part of their religious ideology (Vargas and Loveland 2011). The tension they expressed was not focused on *if* they possessed a moral compass but rather *how* their religiously based morality dictated other aspects of their worldview and identity. What Christian respondents often articulated was concern with stereotyped cultural representations of Christianity coloring the opinions of others. Rather than a complete misunderstanding of ideology and worldview, as many atheists described, evangelicals in the sample tended to struggle with being unfairly pigeonholed into a certain Christian archetype that they considered inaccurate and unflattering.

Declan (38) made his living in the evangelical community as a co-pastor of Faith Walk church. Faith Walk was non-denominational, evangelical and attracted a variety of participants, but is particularly popular with local college students. Meeting in a middle school auditorium with cracking plaster walls, ancient wooden chairs and accessorized with lines of candles and a high-energy “worship band,” the Faith Walk atmosphere appeared simultaneously old and new. Declan and his family felt very comfortable in this faith

community and the surrounding town, however he still hesitated when describing his beliefs to others:

For me if somebody asks me what religion I am I would just say I'm a follower of Jesus. In all honesty I think the word "Christian" or especially the phrase "evangelical Christian" has a very loaded connotation to it in our culture - some of which is unfortunately well earned! So I'm not trying to hide the fact that I'm a Christian when I say that, but I'm definitely intentional in saying that because I'm wanting to identify myself with Jesus, unashamedly so, not with some of what has been put onto Him as a result of the political, social reality in America.

Declan actively aligned with part of the Christian identity while shying away from the less desirable aspects, whatever he considered them to be. He was careful in how he represented himself as part of the Christian community. Not only do some of the stereotypes and misconceptions fail to represent his particular beliefs, he was troubled to be linked with individuals and agendas associated with these views. His allegiance was to the Jesus of the Bible, not the Jesus of U.S. political or popular culture. Even within his Christian community Declan drew moral boundaries, evaluating the more or less worthy attributes commonly associated with Christianity. This example was similar to the distinctions respondents like Deborah (37) and Joshua (27) made between individuals who called themselves Christians without being fully committed and those who truly devoted their lives to Jesus Christ in Chapter 3: Boundaries and Solidarity. The categorizations respondents described between authentic and nominal Christianity could also be considered in the realm of moral boundaries.

Christopher (21), a young college student with aspirations in political science and social work, made similar comments. While he eventually found a Christian community he enjoyed in his Midwest college town, the California native was used to a much more diverse environment. He expressed frustration with the assumed loyalties that come with the Christian label in his new setting:

Out here Christian is instantly equated with conservative Republican. I understand that, seeing media and people like George Bush as President saying things about Christian values and all that, and then finding out later that they weren't really living it. Like someone who's had a bunch of affairs or something. It's like, wait a minute. So I can see why people get so frustrated. Gandhi has a great quote where he says: I like Christ but I don't like your Christians. I understand that at times and I definitely try to alter that, but I know living in a world where no one is perfect there are going to be mistakes. But I can see when people have a political agenda and then try and tie it to the Bible that can get pretty frustrating, especially as a Democrat Christian.

Here Christopher articulated one of the issues Hout and Fischer (2002) stated as a hypothesis for the decrease in church affiliation among survey respondents. The politicization of religion in the U.S. proves to be off-putting for the religious and irreligious alike. Believers like Christopher face expectations that their Christianity means something specific in political terms. And while there is correlation between religious affiliation and political attitude, both Declan (38) and Christopher (21) resented the assumptions that unfortunately came along with the evangelical Christian label in the contemporary U.S. context. As they made distinctions and chose to ally themselves with some and distance themselves from other perceived attributes of Christianity, they were drawing moral boundaries.

The message I heard frequently in interviews with evangelicals was a chorus of “that’s not us!” Many of those with whom I spoke actively worked to distance themselves, and in some cases their communities, from the one-dimensional picture of evangelical Christianity often portrayed in media and entertainment. Christopher (21) added near the end of our interview his hope that people could see beyond the stereotypes and said: “I want to say [to people] not all Christians are like what you see on TV.” Assistant pastor Jason (34) agreed that the common portrayals of Christianity were not only short-sighted but also hindered real understanding of Christ and his mission. He said: “I guess I wish people could see that Jesus is not what they think Christianity is, but also that they would see Jesus better expressed in the Christian communities they encounter.” Mainstream society’s idea of an evangelical Christian did not represent them. The evangelical stereotype failed to capture the genuine sincerity of their belief in and devotion to Jesus Christ.

Perceptions of Atheist Morality in Motion

While the evangelical Christians in my sample tended to state a “that’s not us” attitude when it came to their ideologies versus the popular perceptions of their ideologies, for active atheists the common expression tended to look more like “We’re not *that!*” The “that” they referred to consisted of all the negative assumptions and stereotypes found in the survey responses of attitudes toward atheists and more. Tristan (21), a politically active college student, summed it up like this. When asked what he wished others would understand about atheists he said: “We’re human. We’re just like everybody else. We’re not immoral; we don’t eat babies. We are just as moral, just as good hearted... We have the same problems everyone else does. We are all just human.” Jennifer (34) echoed this statement

with her own. She said: “I want them to understand that we’re not ‘baby eaters’ and that we have morals without somebody above us, judging us at all times. We’re good people.” The particular accusation of atheists as “baby eaters” did not show up in the literature on popular perceptions of atheists, however a number of respondents referenced this bizarre allegation.

While the exact origin of this hyperbolic accusation remains unclear, it is often used on atheist blogs and websites as an example of the outlandish claims believers make about the irreligious. Scrolling through atheist blogs and postings online, I found a range of engagement with the “baby eating” rumor. Some lean into the ridiculousness of the claim, such as atheist blogger “DisComforting Ignorance.” As a response to an anti-atheist website that mentioned the baby claim, he posted a lengthy satirical piece with step-by-step instructions from how to select a baby, to a baby soup recipe, and then how to enjoy the meal itself. The piece opened with this statement: “Christians are so impenetrable by sin, that they miss out on the finer points of life. Restrained by an armor of morality, they never experience the finer depravities of life. One such depravity is eating babies.” Others preferred to take a more straightforward approach.

Blogger and librarian “Skeptical Avenger” replied to the question “Can you explain the joke about atheists eating babies?” This is what he wrote:

I tried to do some research on the origins of the idea, but failed. I SUSPECT that the idea probably goes back quite a way. Atheism has always been associated with Satanism in the minds of the uneducated, and people liked to attribute to these contrary theological positions the worst traits possible: hence baby eating.

Whatever the origins, the idea is so ludicrous that modern day atheists decided to embrace it. I honestly don't think ANYONE really believes that atheists eat babies these days.

So when atheists make this joke, they are basically saying, "look at this ridiculous thing that was once accused of us. Maybe some of the other things you believe about us are ridiculous, too."

That's my take on it, anyway. I know that a small number of atheists find the joke offensive. Personally, I think they need to relax a little.

Despite the ludicrous nature of the accusation itself, as "Skeptical Avenger" explained, baby eater seems to be just another in the long line of rumored moral deficiencies atheists in the United States must combat.

Jennifer's (34) focus on the goodness of common humanity instead of goodness to appease a higher power also touched on a particular point of conflict between the religious and irreligious in discussions of morality: the specter of judgment and/or guidance from a supernatural place. For atheists "doing good" or moral conscience does not originate from a "higher power" source. The catch phrase active atheists often use is "doing good for goodness sake." This concept can be confusing for believers, whose entire moral fabric hinges on the teachings, warnings, and judgments of an all-knowing deity. Sheila (40) laughed as she shared an anecdotal example – one that has happened to her and her atheist friends on more than one occasion. After explaining to someone that she was an atheist, Sheila was asked "So what prevents you from murdering people?" As Sheila described these experiences she said: "That's one of my favorites! And I'm like, are you kidding me!?! If you need a religion to prevent you from committing murder then that's a whole other issue!"

Godlessness is equated with amorality. It is as if without God human interaction descends into violent chaos. The participants quoted above volunteer in their local communities, participate in food drives and fundraisers, and even perform in local theater. Yet, they have all been accused, or at least equated with, “baby eaters” and potential murderers because of their lack of religious belief. The atheists’ sense of morality does not line up with the Christian idea of morality so it must be missing something or somehow lacking.

Atheists spend considerable time and energy asserting their very humanity – a consequence of being publicly secular in the United States observed in survey research and qualitative work alike. One aspect of this situation that does not come to light in the survey research was the persistence of misconceptions about atheist morality, which observation showed ranges from the mundane to the outrageous. Cameron (31) described it, in his experience, as a purposeful campaign of misinformation. A respondent who remained rather reserved with his commentary throughout our interview became emphatic when discussing wrongful portrayals and false accusations toward the atheist community. He said: “I wish people would stop lying about who we are. We’re just normal people; we don’t worship Satan! There’s a lot of misconceptions and there are people who get corrected on it and still push the misconceptions. It’s stupid! And frustrating.” This was a constant issue atheists in the United States deal with in their interactions with a largely theistic culture. Not only does the general public have the “wrong idea” about atheists, many make no effort at finding a more accurate perspective and some endeavor to maintain the prominence of those inaccurate portrayals.

This ongoing conflation of religion and morality kept those without religious conviction in a marginalized position. When religion is equated with morality in popular

opinion, where does that leave the irreligious? As survey research showed and my interview data demonstrated, it leaves atheists trying to prove that morality and secularism are not mutually exclusive. Several interviewees spoke of this one-or-the-other attitude. Dr. Adil Katdare (45) was a resident in psychiatry who no longer discussed his atheist point of view with other residents. In our interview he spoke of one friendship in particular that ended because of his lack of belief. He was shocked when after sharing his atheistic perspective his friend not only disagreed, but also stopped communicating with him all together. He cited the misconceptions about atheism and morality as the reason his friendship ended. Said Dr. Katdare, "Somehow religion and morality are considered to go together and atheism and immorality, by contrast, are put together...As an atheist somehow there's this association that godless automatically means evil." Even in an atmosphere of educated and scientifically minded individuals, Dr. Katdare's atheism still isolated him from his peers. Sarabeth (66), also a mental health professional, kept her secularity fairly secret in an effort to avoid the kind of social conflict Adil described. She pointed to the Christian community specifically as the force that perpetuated the concept that morality comes only from religiosity. She explained, "The fact that one can be ethical without being religious, it'd be nice if religious people understood that. I don't know if that's going to happen. It's part of being Christian to think that people who don't agree are wrong." Religion, specifically Christianity, has successfully coopted morality and ethics to the point that those outside the Christian umbrella appear outside morality itself.

Morality through Belief

Evangelicals I interviewed rarely spoke about morality explicitly, however they did discuss their religious beliefs in terms of values, priorities, and behavioral choices. Knowing what is “right” when it came to raising children, consuming media, recreation and other everyday processes stemmed for my participants from their evangelical Christian perspective. While the sociology of morality engages with moral frameworks beyond the simplistic idea of “right vs. wrong” (Hitlin and Vaisey 2013) narratives from interviews with evangelicals often used “right vs. wrong” as the language to discuss their interpretations of what ideas, values or choices they considered worthy. Following the path dictated by my data I discuss examples evangelicals shared of Christian morality, or what is “right” from their viewpoint and their critiques of non-Christian centered moral frameworks.

Language about rightness appeared most frequently when individuals discussed their own families and raising children. Evangelical Christian parents expressed a deeply felt responsibility to show their children that following a Christian path was *the* correct way to live life. Jacob (25) had three young children at the time of our interview. He and his wife were very involved in their congregation. Jacob spoke about the importance of bringing up their children with a Christian perspective:

It's very important to me and with my children; the commandment in scripture is to raise up your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. And it's not this abusive, like forcing beliefs, it's raising them up in the wisdom of God. Teaching them the right way to live and be people who please God. Yes, I do teach my children the gospel of Christ and that it is the right way, because I believe logically that it is the best option!

For Jacob's family, the "right" way to live tied directly to what would "please God." Atheist parents also discussed these feelings of responsibility when it came to educating their children to be members of the community, or society. However this certainty of rightness was absent from their commentary. Unlike the evangelical Christians I interviewed, the atheist parents did not have one single, definitive source – the Bible – from which they drew their moral code.

For Deborah, 37, the concern was her ability to convey "the truth" to her children at home in order that they would be prepared for dissenting opinions out in the world. Having grown up outside the evangelical worldview herself, Deborah wanted to make sure her children did not struggle with the truth the way she had to. She explained:

It just really makes me want to know the Bible so well, to know what I believe and to be able to understand the arguments that they are going to come up against in school and be able to help them swim through all that. Being able to instill a right tradition in their lives is so important. I don't want them to have to struggle through finding truth the way that I did.

In this passage Deborah linked the truth with the Bible. Through biblical scripture she would be able to prepare herself and then prepare her children for real world dilemmas and decisions. The "right tradition" starts and ends with the Bible. When asked about the possibility of her children choosing a different, non-Christian path, Deborah responded using words similar to Jacob's, and said: "They may struggle and they may look for truth elsewhere for a while. I just pray that what the Bible promises is true, that if you train up a child in the right way he should go he will ultimately not depart from it." Deborah had faith

that if she followed the correct steps in raising her children that her children would then follow her example and lead Christian lives.

Values, as a component of morality, also have their origin in Christian ideology for the individuals I interviewed. Several participants spoke to this relationship specifically in how Christian values dictated behavior. Cindy (51) did not grow up in a Christian household and always had non-Christian friends. At the time of the interview she struggled with the reality that not all of her children were currently practicing Christians. She made this comment in discussing why people around her might not accept the Christian lifestyle: “People might say ‘I choose not to believe’ but I don't think that’s really it, if that makes sense. I think it’s more likely ‘I don't want to believe because I don't want to change my values or what I'm doing with my life so I'd rather not believe in God.’” A sincere acceptance of Christianity would necessitate a change in morality and Cindy’s perception was that this deterred some people from becoming Christians. Values, and consequent behavior, for the evangelical Christians interviewed came straight from their religious traditions. A moral code or compass from outside Christianity would quite simply be wrong.

Two young men from the evangelical Christian half of my sample made very similar comments about their Christian values and peer groups. In both cases interviewees remarked that it was not necessarily their activities that others noticed but what they chose *not* to do as a result of their Christianity that stood out to others. Joey, a 20-year-old college student made this statement when describing frustration with other young people being judgmental about his Christian based behavioral choices. He said: “A lot of times it's what you choose not to do that people are like "what the heck" rather than what you do do. When I'm out with friends and I don't drink or when I, you know, choose to stay abstinent or something, it's

definitely shocking to people. And they let me know.” In a large, public university and the surrounding college town, these abstentions set Joey apart from other students and young people. For Logan (22), it was a change in values that others – his friends particularly – noticed. After rededicating his life to Christianity Logan no longer recreated the same way, but so far it was not detrimental to these pre-Christian friendships. He had this to say: “It’s funny because some of them have noticed things like I stopped drinking, stopped smoking, but a lot of them like the changes, which I thought was interesting. Although they all still do those things, but they completely respect it 100% and I’ve never felt pressure from them to keep doing those things.” Both Joey and Logan displayed Christian values among a larger population that choose a different path. Behavioral differences between themselves and non-Christian young people simultaneously distance their Christian identities from those outside Christianity and demonstrate their own commitment to their Christian values (Gurrentz 2014).

Joey’s experience of friends and others noticing his behavior as deviating from the norm leads to examples from Christian interviewees who viewed the area in which they all lived as dangerously secular, in part because of the large university there. In this “college town” Joey and Logan’s behavioral choices did not fit the norm for young people in the area. Cindy (51) lived and worked in the university area and from her perspective many in the university community did not have their priorities straight. She linked a focus on school rather than God with making other decisions out of line with Christian values and said: “Well in our community I think education is the God. You know, just because it’s the U, everything the U and getting an education is the highest priority rather than your relationship with God. And I think that’s what people focus on more.” Deborah (37) also commented on

distractions from Christian priorities. While she too had concerns about public education conflicting with the values and morals she worked to instill in her family, in this case she spoke more generally: “If the TV is on all the time, well it’s not in our house. We think it’s more important to be grounded in our Bible than to be listening to CNN or being entertained by whatever shows are out there where people show off lives and relationships that don’t line up with our priorities, with God’s priorities.” Whether it be the local University or nationally broadcast entertainment, the evangelicals I spoke with saw distractions from and challenges to their carefully cultivated, Biblically centered morality from myriad sources. In prioritizing their religious values over things like education, entertainment or other engagements with “the world” (Draper and Park 2010; Smith and Denton 2005), Deborah and Cindy – just like Joey and Logan – showed their commitment to their religious identity while distancing themselves from the concerns of mainstream culture (Gurrentz 2014).

Another common message that interviewees from my sample actively objected to was the idea that there is no right or wrong way to live life. Several participants had encountered a “live and let live” perspective and actively rejected it. Deborah spoke about this when discussing the attitude her children’s school projected of inclusiveness toward non-traditional families. Deborah disagreed and did not think they should be promoting single parent households, cohabitating households, or same-sex households. She described the lack of traditional family values and said: “There’s no RIGHT there’s just an IS. And we just don’t believe that; it’s not what God planned.” Pastor and father of a young son, Jason (34) also disagreed with the “live and let live” philosophy and critiqued it along with a string of other things wrong with mainstream society’s morals. Here is his entire statement on the topic:

I do think that the "gods" in our culture are individualism, consumerism, pluralism...if anything the water we swim in is "hey it's okay to believe anything, just don't tell me what to believe." While I can appreciate that and don't want to force my beliefs on someone there is tremendous pressure to say "everything is okay" and I personally don't think it is. I think consumerism and materialism is a god in our culture. And individualism too; there's a selfishness in us, a modern individuality where we become our own gods. I think those things are probably currents of social sins.

For Jason, the "everything is ok" attitude allows for a selfishness and individualistic mentality that runs counter to his idea of how individuals and society should live. Just as Cindy (51) expressed the idea of education being a "God" in society, Jason used the same turn of phrase to describe consumerism and pluralism. In either case, these false gods distract from the Christian path. "Everything is ok" and "live and let live" are not Biblically based attitudes and thus run counter to the moral teachings evangelicals in this sample choose to follow. While participants did not use morals and morality language often they did speak about values, "right and wrong" and emphasized the idea that how individuals live their lives matters. These conversations were the manifestation of Christian morality through the evangelical lens.

Proving a Moral Compass without God

Based on my conversations with active atheists I concluded that concern over the perception of morality and ethics drove them to demonstrate these values through commitments to social and political issues. Many interviewees spoke of their interests in issues like marriage equality and abortion rights. I also found participants passionate about

economic inequality, the state of education, and prejudices of all kinds in U.S. society. According to Jacoby (2004), atheists have a history of activism for social and political causes despite their continued marginalization from mainstream society. Atheism by itself does not stand for anything. Thus by bringing these topics up and taking a position they assert a moral perspective as a part of their atheist worldview. Their atheism may have put them outside the moral boundaries of the United States' theistic culture, but by actively engaging with public "causes" atheists are in a way re-drawing the boundaries to include themselves. While I will go so far as to describe these declarations of social and political issue affiliation as ubiquitous among my atheist sample, participants characterized the relationship between these topics and their atheism differently. Some integrate the secular worldview with their activism, while some see them as separate issues entirely.

Coupling social justice with atheism was the mission of the Atheism Plus campaign, a sub-movement within contemporary atheism in the U.S. I also discuss in Chapter 5: Boundaries and Gender. Briefly, Atheism Plus, "or A+", refers to those within the atheist community who strive to incorporate social activism into their irreligious worldview. The Atheism Plus label was created in 2012 by blogger/activist Jen McCreight. It is defined this way on McCreight's webpage: "Atheism Plus is a term used to designate spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to promoting justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside the atheist community" (Reality Enthusiast 2012). While some in the atheist community welcomed this new moniker and the social responsibility the A+ distinction brought, others rejected the alliances it demanded with issues like race relations and feminism. The Atheism Plus controversy is discussed further in the next chapter. The A+ idea became relevant to the

topic of morality and atheism as respondents described their affiliations and allegiances with social justice issues. Interviewees may have been describing Atheism Plus, but no one used that term in any interview or group meeting I observed. At the time of the interviews A+ had just been coined, perhaps it had not yet caught on in the Midwest communities I observed.

Participating in the community through volunteerism, activism and outreach as a component of the atheist identity brings in Davidman's (2015) conception of embodied identity. For some atheist interviewees their social justice oriented behavior was an integral part of their atheist identities. Those individuals expressed that being an atheist meant doing positive work in the community. Their participation was an embodied extension of their identity as atheists.

Respondents' passion for issues and loyal participation in social justice work could help make the case for something like A+, a movement whose secular focus went far beyond their disbelief (Carrier 2013). Some active atheists very much blended their secularity with their social responsibility. But not everyone wanted their values and their worldview merged. Just like on the national stage, not everyone in the sample wanted the "+" attached to their atheism.

Some participants made quite a point of separating their atheism from their dedication to social issues. They would remark that atheism did not determine other aspects of their lives. For example, Eric, a 38-year-old law student and father, spoke passionately about issues concerning religion's influence on politics and lawmaking. Yet he was careful to separate these things from his own lack of belief. He said:

The most common misconception that I fight on a regular basis is that atheism is a single position on a single topic. It doesn't mean that I'm a liberal; it doesn't mean

that I understand science or believe in evolution. It doesn't mean that I know anything. If someone says they are an atheist that shouldn't come with any baggage in anyone's mind.

Atheism was clearly part of his identity and something he supported publicly, however he did not align his atheism and his political leanings or social activism. This appeared to be the opposite of the Christian method of tying all opinions back to the Christian faith. It is not clear whether this departure was a conscious choice to further distance secularity from religion or merely a personal preference.

Tom (34), like Eric also a father, expressed concern about religion influencing education and the social lives of children. He had strong opinions on how to approach complex issues with his son but stated that these were separate from his lack of religious belief. When asked how his atheism affected how he interacted with others he responded:

It doesn't...because it doesn't affect my politics, it doesn't affect my personality, it doesn't affect how I treat my friends. It doesn't affect how I act toward my wife or my kid. It's simply one aspect of my life. It doesn't control my job. It doesn't affect anything other than me saying I don't believe that there's a God. So, I mean, some people allow [their atheism] to consume them; some people allow religion to consume them...Some people allow atheism to run their life. "I can't go to coffee until I finish this debate!" You know, I'm just like "whatever."

Both of these gentlemen denied the "atheist movement" a prominent position in their personal identity. They happened to be atheists and they happened to care about certain social issues. The Atheism Plus style of participating in social justice work *because of* their secularity would probably not have been a good fit for either participant. Again, no one in

this study mentioned the A+ campaign by name, but their arguments for or against coupling their atheism with their concern for social issues mirrored what others have said when debating the merits of having a label like A+.

Despite their claims of separation the connection I saw between their atheist ideology and political activism comes back to the perceptions of atheist morality and moral boundary concepts. Atheists in the U.S. do not fit within mainstream culture's view of valid moral boundaries. Participation in social and political issues is a way to compensate for this deficiency. In a sense they are "doing good" to make up for living without God. If viewed as a strategy for cultural acceptance, this has not been successfully accomplished. However as a way to justify morality from within the community it has. The atheists in my sample felt positively about their contributions toward being "good for goodness sake."

Other respondents placed their atheism and their social activism as intertwined in their identity and presentation of self. As the president of her university atheist club, Samantha (20) felt it was important to link her atheism and activism. She said, "We're humans, we're just people. I mean, I'm an activist as an atheist because I'm fighting for equality and there's a lot of prejudice out there – and lots of it is against us, but my main thing is just to put a face on it. You know, I can be friendly and I can do charity work *and* I am an atheist." These things worked together for Samantha; as an atheist she was concerned with issues of equality, and as someone working toward equality she fought for atheism to be socially acceptable. Looking at it from that perspective her atheism did affect how she interacted with others in that it drove the things she cared about and worked to accomplish in society. Michelle (27) linked her atheism with her political perspective. She said "The thing about being an atheist is that it comes with being really, really liberal. So much comes from

being a part of something [like atheism] that says ‘something is wrong’ [in society].” Like many others Michelle emphasized her focus and energy on helping people and fixing problems in the here-and-now, rather than looking forward to some kind of afterlife. For her, atheism and the social concerns of the politically liberal in the U.S. coexist naturally. Michelle’s point of view fell in line with the stated mission of Atheism Plus, though she did not identify herself with that label.

For some, atheism and social concerns went hand-in-hand, while for others they appeared to be separate entities, but all the active atheists from the sample indicated concern for topics consistent with a clear moral compass and ethical point of view. Perhaps because atheism does not stand for anything in and of itself, using specific topics helped the secular population to place themselves (for their own sake and for the sake of those observing them) within the fabric of society. The issues act as a moral anchor since the worldview does not – either because atheism does not “come with baggage,” or because people do not see it as a moral choice.

Christian Morality from the Atheist Perspective

Though the religious might have the majority opinion that does not mean atheists as a group cannot make up their own conception of moral boundaries, and clearly they do. Their judgment of Christian morality revealed their own moral boundary making. Atheist respondents often adjudicated the worth of the Christian approach to morals and ethics in our interviews.

Atheists described experiences of Christians judging their morality – or perceived lack thereof – but these atheists also had strong opinions about Christian morality and the

consequences of religiously based ethics. Throughout my research I heard atheists question the legitimacy of basing moral decisions on the Bible. They strongly attacked the so-called moral authority found in Christian ideology for a variety of different, but related reasons. Atheist interviewees of all ages brought up their frustrations with Christians using the Bible to argue for or against specific political and social concerns. Diana (22) was an agnostic student in Physics. She made clear that she does not object to religion in and of itself, but found that the Christians she knew tended to use their religious ideology to justify opinions that disrespect others. She spoke specifically of abortion and gay rights, emphasizing that different opinions on these topics might very well be valid depending on the origin of their argument:

I could see where you could argue against abortion without making a religious argument. However there is not a single argument, at least I've never heard one, against gay rights that doesn't involve religion. And for a religion to say they can mandate what is okay for this huge group of people and say what they can and can't do based on what their religion believes is, in my opinion, not okay.

An avid proponent of equal rights on all fronts, Diana expressed deep concern with political positions based on religious conviction. Colton (26) shared this view. Both respondents did not oppose religion as a whole; and Colton explained that he had no problem with many religions and religious people. He even admired the positive influence faith and fellowship could have on people. His quarrel was with how religious ideology can be used to justify inequality. He explained, "One of the reasons religion is so successful and frustrating is that you can use the same thing to justify numerous numbers of actions. So who I'm in opposition to are people who use religion to do bad things." The religious ideas were not to

blame for Colton, but how those ideas were used to perpetuate prejudice or inequality was the problem.

The idea of justifying action using religious reasoning was illogical and potentially dangerous to the active atheists with whom I spoke. After discussing the specific issues that concerned her, Diana (22) went on to protest the use of the Bible to make moral determinations in general. She said:

Frankly, the Bible can be used to justify racism. It's been used to justify so many things. It's a big book with so many things in there that can be interpreted a million different ways, that's been translated a thousand times, to the point that some of those things that people used to base arguments off of don't even mean that today! And then they just pick and choose whatever supports what they're most comfortable with. Samantha (20) echoed these observations. She worked hard to promote the image of atheists doing good things in the community and in the world. She got tired of society's acceptance of Christian moral superiority. She discussed the difference between her own moral compass and that of extremely conservative Christians. She said:

I think we have a very different opinion on what is morally correct. Usually fundamentalists find what the Bible says is moral, but I think that slavery is immoral. I think judging women as less than a man is immoral, and a law that says that if a man rapes a woman is to marry her is immoral [sic]. And those are all specifically from the Bible. It goes on and on and on!

Both Diana and Samantha saw Bible based morality as fraught with contradictions as well as directives that perpetuate violence, inequality, and prejudice. If moral boundaries help individuals and groups differentiate worthy from unworthy, it is clear that active atheists

draw moral boundaries that leave Biblical Christianity's perspective on morality on the less worthy side.

Conclusions

From a theistic point of view, atheists seem to have no moral compass and from an atheist perspective following religious texts leads to a mess of moral hypocrisy. Once again there are similarities in the ways these two groups view the perspective of the other; they "other" each other, setting up clear boundaries between "us" and "them." Distaste for and distrust of the other group's morality is something these two worldviews have in common. The big difference, as always, is that the general public overwhelmingly agrees with the conservative Christian side and reports suspicion and dislike toward atheists (Edgell et al. 2006). Many in the general public may also be wary of a strictly Biblically based moral code, but still remain vaguely aligned with a Christian perspective on morality.

Another common thread between active atheists and evangelical Christians was the importance they placed on morality and moral frameworks. While they expressed these sentiments differently, members of both groups discussed examples of right and wrong, the idea of "goodness," and even the concept of morality itself. Evangelical Christians consistently spoke about teaching their children, and society in general, the right way to belief and behave, according to their Christian values. To follow the example of Jesus *is* the way to live a good moral life for evangelicals. As active atheists struggle for acceptance in mainstream society they creatively assert their morality, through dedication to and participation in political and social issues. Additionally active atheist groups and individuals draw their own moral boundaries, boundaries that leave their evangelical opposition on the

outside looking in at the framework of secular morality.

All individuals (and groups) create moral frameworks from somewhere. Through this comparison it became clear that morality is closely linked to identity for members of both evangelical Christianity and active atheism. Morality is so deeply embedded in the Christian ideology that a Christian identity assumes a certain moral authority dictated by the religion. For many atheists, doing “good for goodness sake” was a significant part of their secularity. Even when atheists separated their morality from their atheism, the moral compass was still a strong component to their presentation of self and thus their individual identity. Morality was at the heart of identity for both groups, regardless of where it comes from or how it is constructed.

Chapter 5: Boundaries and Gender

Gender seems like an obvious arena for investigation when discussing group and individual boundaries. The binary nature of conventional gender constructs as well as gendered interactions in any and all social scenarios teem with boundary construction, maintenance, and transgression. Gender as a field for boundary work became apparent in both ideological communities interviewed for this project. The character of this boundary work manifested very differently in the two investigated worldviews. The topic of gender within the atheist community centered on issues of sexism, misogyny, and how or whether to ally with a feminist perspective or agenda. Gendered boundaries in the evangelical Christian community had more to do with behavioral expectations and conformity to traditional ideals for family and social life. For atheists the boundaries in question, the conflicts they experienced, were being drawn within their ideological community. On the evangelical side patriarchal gender ideology, though rigid, is generally accepted as the norm. They maintained strict boundaries when it came to community interaction and conduct and constructed out-group boundaries between themselves and those who did not conform to their particular conceptualizations of gender and family.

First I will discuss active atheists and issues the broader atheist community has had concerning gender, as well as what individuals from the specific communities I encountered chose to address. In this section I describe two specific situations from well-known figures in the atheist movement and then consider my participants' reactions regarding the gendered controversies in the larger atheist movement. Because of the public tension surrounding sexism and allegations of misogyny in the atheist community, I asked my interviewees

directly about such issues in our interviews. Their commentary demonstrated a variety of opinions on these topics and further illustrated how gender boundaries operate for active atheists in the U.S. Then I will move to the topic of gender and conservative religion, which has a long and well-documented legacy of research. My project brings new reflections to this established body of work. Not only were my observations in these two oppositional worldview communities contrasting, but also the existing scholarship on gender in these communities is dissimilar in both depth and breadth. While observations of boundary work surrounding gendered issues were different for these two groups, taking them together illuminated subtle similarities – particularly in the experiences of women in both groups and the strength of gender based boundaries, as displayed in respondents’ reluctance to cross them and/or harsh reactions to boundary transgressions within and outside the community.

Gendered Controversy in the Atheist Movement

Little sociological research on gender in the atheist movement exists beyond quantitative demographics (Lim et al. 2010; Sherkat 2008). Zuckerman’s 2010 two-part anthology *Atheism and Secularity* included two chapters dedicated to gender and sexuality in the atheist community. More compelling than the findings of these two works (Furseth 2010; Linneman and Clendenen 2010) – both pieces claimed to be tentative – was the way that they demonstrated the lack of qualitative investigation of gender and sexuality within the atheist movement. This scarcity of literature is not due to a lack of relevant material. The last four years, for instance, have been rife with controversy surrounding gender in the atheist community. Two examples in particular demonstrate the state of gender related politics in the atheist community, and thus deserve explanation.

In the summer of 2011, popular atheist blogger and speaker Rebecca Watson found herself at the heart of a fiery controversy concerning sexism in the atheist community. As a prominent blogger within the so-called skeptic³ community, Rebecca Watson felt as if she had found her place in the world within the skeptic community. “I thought I had found my people,” she wrote, “a community that enjoyed educating the public about science and critical thinking” (Watson 2012). While she noticed that most atheist and skeptic events included more men than women – both in the audience and definitely at the podiums and panels – she thought “hard work and good PR” could get more women to join in what she considered her safe space, the skeptic community (Winston 2011).

Watson decided to start using her platform to discuss topics that would be of interest to feminists and skeptics. She came to this after hearing from other women about experiences of discomfort and even harassment, and then experiencing some of those things first-hand. It was at this nexus of having found her “people” from a secular perspective, and wanting to both get more women involved and engage with issues of gender and sexuality, that Watson’s blog Skepchick.org was born. She started Skepchick.org in 2005 and 10 years later it has become the Skepchick Network, including blogs about secularity and parenting, secularity and disability, and several others (Skepchick.org “About Us”). It was in one of her early Skepchick.org blog discussions where she first got a taste of the wrath of angry male atheists. After a blog discussion of female genital mutilation (FGM) where Watson countered the argument of a male commenter who contended that male circumcision was equally as harmful and abusive as FGM, her blog site was flooded by rage-filled, violent,

³ Skeptic is used by many atheists who emphasize the need for evidence to support assertions of all kinds and seek to de-bunk erroneous claims. While there is much overlap between the two terms and all skeptics are atheists, not all atheists are also skeptics.

threatening responses. She gave one example of this type of comment in her 2012 Slate article (p. 2): “honestly, and i mean HONESTLY.. you deserve to be raped and tortured and killed. swear id laugh if i could”. Again, this venomous statement, and many others like it, came from within her own atheist/skeptic community.

Simultaneously Watson began to experience extremely sexualized “compliments” from male fans of her blogs and podcasts. Emails from atheists who agreed with the content of her posts also included detailed sexual fantasies and propositions. Watson used this type of response as an example of men in her skeptic community casually displaying misogyny.

Watson discussed all these issues in a panel at the World Atheist Convention in June 2011. There, next to the popular “New Atheism” leader Richard Dawkins, Watson presented her experience “communicating atheism online” and included the concerns she had about sexism within the skeptics world. Watson said “The audience was receptive and afterward I spent many hours in the hotel bar discussing issues of gender, objectification, and misogyny with other thoughtful atheists” (Watson 2012). At four a.m. Watson excused herself to go up to her room and a man from the group, though not someone she had previously talked with directly, followed her into the elevator and asked her to join him in his room for coffee. She declined, noting that this was just the sort of situation about which she had been speaking that day.

Days after the conference Watson posted a video discussing the conference as a whole, and addressing the elevator incident in the context of situations that may or may not make women feel uncomfortable at atheist gatherings. Below is a transcript excerpted from that video blog:

Just a word to the wise here guys, don't do that. I don't know how else to explain [that] it makes me incredibly uncomfortable, but I will lay it out that I was a single woman, in a foreign country, in a hotel elevator with you, just you. Don't invite me back to your hotel room right after I have finished speaking about how it creeps me out and makes me uncomfortable when men sexualize me in this manner. ("About Mythbusters, Robot Eyes, Feminism, and Jokes" June 20, 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKHwduG1Frk>)

Her candor once again enraged many men and some women in the atheist community.

"Elevatorgate," as the incident was dubbed, became the talk of the atheist web-a-sphere.

After calling out her own atheist community on issues of objectification and misogyny on her video blog, Watson received assault and death threats, harassment and vandalism on her Facebook and Wikipedia pages, and a satirical chastisement from her famous co-panelist Richard Dawkins (Watson 2012).

The elevator episode itself was small and fairly innocuous but "the incident has struck a chord perhaps because atheists and other skeptics pride themselves on reason and logic – intellectual exercises that theoretically compute to equality" (Winston 2011). In a piece picked up by numerous popular news sources, Kimberly Winston, a freelance journalist who reports on religion as well as atheism, articulated the "big picture" conundrum: how can a community so dedicated to rights and equality, a community that claims to be miles more progressive than mainstream society have such a volatile misogyny just waiting to emerge? The silver lining of this situation, as Watson herself put it, was the awareness raised by the public nature of the controversy. Not all skeptics reacted so negatively to Watson's story; many thanked her for being a voice for those who wished to participate in the skeptic

community and others thanked her for opening their eyes to the gender related problems in their skeptic population (Winston 2011). This shift in awareness was evidenced by the first secular conference dedicated to highlighting secular female influence in the atheist movement: Women in Secularism, held in May of 2012. The “Elevatorgate” debacle eventually died down and all parties moved forward, however it was not the end of controversy concerning women in atheism.

In May of 2013 uproar grew once again after Ronald Lindsay, CEO of the Center for Inquiry, delivered the opening remarks at the second Women in Secularism conference. Lindsay was asked to open the conference because the Center for Inquiry sponsored the event. Instead of welcoming the conference attendees and presenters – which he said in his comments were “understood” and should not take up time – he launched into a 30-minute address about misunderstandings concerning feminism and the misappropriation of the term “privilege.” He declared that feminists he had encountered (but failed to identify in his speech) claimed that no real divisions exist between “true feminists.” He then tore down this hyperbolic assertion in his lecture to a room full of professional activists, authors, and historians from a variety of feminist backgrounds and perspectives. Next he brought up “privilege” as it related to gender politics. He said what troubled him most was this:

The situation where the concept of privilege is used to try to silence others, as a justification for saying “shut up and listen.” Shut up, because you’re a man and you cannot possibly know what it’s like to experience x, y, and z, and anything you say is bound to be mistaken in some way but, of course, you’re too blinded by your privilege to even realize that. (Lindsay 2013)

He continued on about how this approach was dogmatic and shortsighted, ending with an exaggerated statement: “You’re a man; you have nothing to contribute to a discussion of how to achieve equality for women,” before relating women’s rights back to humanism and secularity more broadly.

Conference goers immediately started sending messages through the social media platform Twitter about the speech and how it seemed odd and even inappropriate (Watson 2013). Some, like blogger Ashley Miller (2013), were not particularly upset with the content of the lecture but felt “it was wrongheaded as an opening speech for this event,” and then said, “it’s inappropriate to use the opening speech to criticize the conference goals rather than introduce it.” (Miller 2013). During the speech Rebecca Watson tweeted this: “Very strange to open [#wiscfi](#) with a white male CEO lecturing women about using the concept of privilege to silence men.” Lindsay responded to his critics with what atheist blogger Adam Lee characterized as “a barrage of bizarrely hostile and disproportionate personal attacks” (Lee 2013). One example of these “bizarrely hostile” reactions was this response from Lindsay which appeared on the CFI website shortly after the speech: “Rebecca Watson inhabits an alternate universe. At least that is the most charitable explanation I can provide for her recent smear. Watson posted comments on my opening talk at Women in Secularism 2. It may be the most intellectually dishonest piece of writing since the last communiqué issued by North Korea.” Lindsay’s reaction turned the situation “into a colossal PR disaster” (Myers 2013), overshadowing the rest of the conference and enraging some members of the atheist community to the point where they pulled their support from the Center for Inquiry and called for Lindsay’s resignation (Marcotte 2013). Like the “Elevatorgate” controversy, it

was not the initial incident but the reaction to the speech and the criticisms of the speech where angst over gender issues really came to the surface.

In each of these two incidents, the initial catalyst – blogging about personal experiences and misguided remarks from a conference podium – were not, in themselves inflammatory. The reaction to these statements made them explosive, and those reactions demonstrated the intensity of emotion concerning gender related issues that exist just under the surface of the secular community. Both situations included a public critique of statements and/or actions by men in the atheist community. The two examples also had Rebecca Watson in common; in each situation she critiqued a male atheist and received immediate feedback. Loud voices in the atheist community told her she was out of line in both cases. Did Watson, and others like her, cross a line, transgress a boundary, by openly questioning their own community? The public persona of the atheist movement is one of progressive ideas and a demand for equality. However these situations showed a community incapable of self-reflection when it came to gender related concerns.

Another similarity between Watson's online experience and Lindsay's speech were the potential boundary transgressions each made by speaking about the opposite sex: men talking about feminism; women talking about men's issues. The violent comments Watson received after arguing that circumcision should not be equated with FGM could be a reaction because she was a woman maintaining a public opinion about a specifically male experience. In the eyes of some, Watson crossed a line. Feminist theory deals with how to include both sexes as well. The appropriate place for men within feminism has long been discussed and debated (Alcoff 1995; Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Flood 2011) with various strong opinions on all sides. Perhaps Lindsay was attempting to speak to this very

issue when he made his remarks about the failures of feminism and the danger of telling others (men) to “shut up and listen.” Regardless of the original intention, Lindsay’s reaction to his critics turned the situation into another example of the atheist community splintered over a gendered incident.

Sexism in the Local Atheist Community

Conducting interviews in the year between these two controversies, I asked my atheist respondents what they thought about the allegations of sexism in the outwardly progressive atheist community. Some respondents did not see a problem beyond the basic difference in number. Men outnumber women in each of the organizations I encountered, a fact that parallels the national trend (Pasquale 2010). Several respondents acknowledged sexism but only as a result of society’s sexism and not at all unique to the atheist community. Tom (34), the self-proclaimed “loner” who spoke in previous chapters about being left out of social events because of his secularity, said: “Every group has this; it’s not just the atheist community, it’s not unique to the theist community. There’s sexism everywhere. Sexism is a problem. It’s just one of those things.” Along with this “it’s everywhere” attitude, some argued that sexism was indeed a problem in all aspects of society, but secular communities in particular were not as bad as others. Diana (22) was a senior physics major in college at the time of our interview. She articulated the point this way:

I don't think it's a result of the atheist or skeptic community. I think it's more a result of the overall biases in the population that tend to get incorporated in any organization or group. To some extent, different areas will be better about sexism. I

know some people who are very outspoken atheists politically and stuff who are also outspoken feminists and such.

She saw a natural link between the feminist community and the skeptic community.

Robert also expressed the opinion that things within the atheist community were better or more likely to change than in other social arenas. At 75 he had just retired from the Census Bureau, but had previously worked in ministry. He said, “I think there’s always a sexist problem but I think it’s less in the atheist community, or at least in the part of it in which I’ve been involved.” Why less in the atheist community? “I think atheists are more open to learning things. That would be my first response,” he replied. Based on the progressive, inclusive nature of the atheist community and its pursuit of societal rights and equality, a connection between gender equality and secular organizations made intuitive sense to Robert like it did for Diana. However, not all respondents shared this optimistic view of their own ideological community.

A few respondents disagreed with the assessment that issues of misogyny and gender inequality must be better in the atheist community and took the opportunity to critique their own movement. Colton (26) had the most to say on the topic and perhaps the most experience with gender-equality related activism as well. When we spoke he was just about to complete a degree in business, but his career goal was to work with secular humanist organizations on college campuses. He described the state of sexism in the atheist community:

I think EVERYONE has a sexist problem. I think the atheism movement absolutely has a sexism problem that is different from some parts of society. I don't think it's much different than the sexism problem MENSA has, in that it's a lot of guys who

care about intellectual subjects and are socially stunted. And a big part of those issues is, in order to combat it you need to actively counter it. One bad apple really does ruin the bunch. So that is absolutely an issue. I've been involved with the feminist organizations on campus since I started and I was involved with lots and lots of Internet debating over this issue. I'm proud of everyone for talking about it a lot; that's progress. But it has to be dealt with in the secular movement if we're going to move forward.

Colton brought up two details specifically in this text that were echoed by a female member of an atheist organization who has dealt with these issues personally. Colton, in comparing the problem to one in the MENSA organization, generalized the male atheist community as intellectually smart but not socially smart.

This lack of emotional intelligence when socializing with women was something Sheila (40) directly experienced in her time as part of the Plains City Atheist community. While not personally offended by the way some men in her atheist community attempted to monopolize conversations, Sheila empathized with women who felt uncomfortable at secular social events:

You'll find that some of the guys, and this happened to me at one of our meet ups recently, this guy was just, totally, everything I had to say he would just contradict. I'm a bitch, so you can do that but I'll call you out on it - which I did! And I had some of the other guys who had my back. But that was the first time I had blatantly seen it. But I can see where other women wouldn't feel, or would feel intimidated because of how the men talk to each other. It's in the intellectual community as well.

Sheila maintained that she stood her ground with the conversationally aggressive male atheist; she also attributed her reaction to her personality as a “bitch.” She connected matching the tone of her male counterpart or “talking back” as something “bitchy” rather than an appropriate response based on how the conversation had escalated. Even in standing up for herself Sheila was conceding a gender double standard where assertive men are seen as knowledgeable and passionate but assertive women are “bitches.” Whether they’ve experienced it or not, many of the active atheists I interviewed could see where women might feel like they were not welcome – in the conversation and in the community more broadly – based on how some male atheists interacted with them.

There exists a dissonance between a movement that outwardly claims to be progressive, and is quite vocal when it comes to critiquing other groups – specifically religious groups – regarding their treatment of women, and yet has so much internal trouble with gender relations. The national incidents as well as personal experiences described by interviewees demonstrated that once a person peels back the surface there is a vocal and volatile “boys club” mentality within the atheist movement. There are not a lot of women; women don’t feel particularly welcome; and women (in general) are not encouraged to speak up. As Colton (26) said, all groups have sexism, but not all groups go after others for discrimination while ignoring the same issues in their own backyard. Respondents expressed such a range of opinions when asked about sexism within their ideological group, illuminating how this issue remains unresolved and contentious.

Some Interviewees also discussed issues relating to gender and feminism even before being specifically asked about those topics. In several interviews male participants brought up feminism specifically when commenting on the purposes and goals of their atheist

organizations. For Dominic (22) it came down to a matter of where the group should be concentrating its efforts. He said:

I feel like we tend to harp on women's issues or gay issues more than we should. Let's face it, we're about non-religion, we're not "Queers and Allies." We're not...that women's organization...we're not them. We're allies with them but we have our own agenda. It's nice to hear, like we've heard lectures on women atheists and we've had lectures on safe sex - one of our members does sex studies. And it was interesting but not really what our group is about.

This argument for distancing their identity from that of a feminist one insinuated that the organization could not be actively feminist without losing some energy or momentum for the atheist effort. That Dominic equated "lectures on safe sex" with "women's issues" and feminism indicated a lack of clear understanding of what concepts like feminism truly mean. Anything related to women or gender seemed to be lumped into one singular category, without regard for variation or nuance for some atheist respondents. Alex (29) expressed a different reluctance to supporting feminism, which also demonstrated a shaky understanding of the ideas he discussed. A self-described "evidentialist" Alex felt his organization should not align with feminist discourse where the arguments were not philosophically sound:

Ok, so feminism and atheism tend to overlap a lot and we tend to be very sympathetic as a group, but they do come from different backgrounds. Sometimes there are arguments made by the feminist community that don't match the critical thinking standards that come from the atheist community. So atheists will attack an argument because there's not good evidence for the claim, or a certain ideology within feminism

seems to be falsifiable...kind of pecking holes in philosophical problems within feminism.

Lack of empirical evidence equated to lack of legitimacy for Alex. This ultra rational perspective discounted the validity of lived experience and cultural interpretation, elements integral to some feminist perspectives (Harding 2004, 1991; Hartsock 1983). Alex continued and defended his “evidentialist” viewpoint:

I think sometimes that's perceived as sexism. I've had that situation where I made a blog and a group of feminists jumped on and said I was "man-splaining"⁴ and I was like ‘what? no! I completely support gender equality; I just disagree with the way this argument is being made.’ So yeah, that's one area of contention that can happen.

And it's a very emotionally charged issue. There's a very intense history there and I can see why people might get upset when you don't seem to jump on board 100% with what that [feminist] movement is saying.

As he described, others have confused this attitude with a lack of support for gender equality, but to Alex any theory or conceptualization must meet a “philosophical standard” and feminism was no exception. Alex did not elaborate on specific types of feminism or particular feminist arguments that bothered him. Putting his black and white, evidence only perspective next to Colton and Sheila’s assertions that scholastic intelligence and social intelligence did not go hand-in-hand for some highly analytical members of the atheist movement, one could see where Alex might be resistant to concepts outside his narrow

⁴ “Mansplain” is a term that first appeared in 2008 and is often attributed to Rebecca Solnit from her LA Times essay “Men Explain Things To Me” (2008). Lily Rothman further defined it in the Atlantic (2012) and wrote: “explaining without regard to the fact that the explainee knows more than the explainer, often done by a man to a woman.”

empirical rubric. Clearly active atheist groups are working through these issues in their individual communities as well as on the larger scene. Issues of sexism, objectification, and misogyny are ongoing, as are the community's discussion of these problems.

Atheism Plus

The notion Dominic (22) and Alex (29) brought up, as they discussed keeping distance between the atheist movement and feminism versus joining forces, now has a term: Atheism Plus. Atheism Plus, or "A+," describes the faction of nonbelievers who also participate in activism and social justice issues as a component of their atheism. The tagline for "A+" is "More than disbelief." The A+ terminology came from atheist, feminist blogger Jen McCreight in 2012 as she made the case for a "new wave" of atheism (McCreight 2012). Others agreed with McCreight and created a homepage for A+ as well as discussion forums and a presence on other sites, such as Reddit and Wikipedia. A+ goals include "promoting moral values and the discussion of societal problems," as well as working to make the atheist community more "welcoming of, and responsive to, women and minorities" (Carrier 2013, p. 108). McCreight's homepage includes this definition: "Atheism Plus is a term used to designate spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to promoting justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside the atheist community" (Reality Enthusiast 2012). The A+ mission calls for alliances with many minority communities and thus expands the definition and meaning of an atheist identity.

While on the one hand Atheism Plus has given those within the atheist movement the language to articulate how their atheism translates into social and political awareness, this

new classification has also created a divide within the movement as a whole. Some who do not subscribe to the A+ agenda have found the faction arrogant and quick to label any criticism from the outside as racism, bigotry, misogyny, etc. Online forums and blogs from the past three years contain myriad arguments for and against Atheism Plus. Here is one example of a response to A+ and what he considers the aggressive politics of the A+ crowd. Joe Black posted this as an affirming response to another atheist's video blog about the A+ controversy:

I'm an atheist who is pro-equality, gay-friendly, pro-choice, anti-racism, etc. But this community is so toxic, so devaluing of straight white able-bodied cis-males - they're often more negatively biased against this group than are many racists and sexists A+ rails against. It's unbelievably hypocrisy.

Until 6 months ago I called myself a feminist. Because feminism is just about equality, right? Riiiiight. Oh.. No. The dogmatism and vitriol of radical feminism and the way that more moderate feminists so often excuse or otherwise not call out those on the extreme, in my opinion, corresponds to Sam Harris' characterization of religious extremists and moderates (wherein the moderates give the extremists cover).

I'm a left-leaning egalitarian agnostic atheist and A+ and modern feminism make my skin crawl. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iIlgqryDhGI>)

His comments focused on the A+ affiliation with feminism, like my interviewees in the above discussion, though the Atheism Plus campaign allies itself with a variety of social problems not just gender inequality. For those atheists like Joe who separate their non-belief from any political or social issue affiliation – which some of my respondents did – Atheism Plus takes too much under the banner of atheism, diluting the central concern of the

movement and taking on baggage from other jurisdictions of the social world. Those within A+ argue that atheism *should* be about these other issues, that social responsibility is a part of secularity.

Storms of pro and anti A+ diatribes exist online in essays, blogs, and forums. One blogger even constructed a timeline starting shortly before “Elevatorgate” through the initial push for Atheism Plus. While this timeline included links to blogs and articles throughout, the language used fully indicated his allegiance with the anti-A+ lobby. He was one of many who blamed Rebecca Watson and her supporters for problematizing gender within the atheist community and causing rifts in the atheist movement at large. The boundary between A+ and simply “A” is not limited to concerns about gender, but my participants illustrated this question of whether or not to include social justice issues within the atheist identity through their discussion of feminism and gender equality.

Atheist Conduct Policies

As I discussed in Chapter 4: Boundaries and Morality, active atheists were very deliberate in their assertions that they were “good” people and in their narratives distanced themselves from the negative stereotype of amoral or even immoral criminals that some claim them to be. Along with that general statement of goodness, active atheist groups specifically prided themselves on tolerance and equality when it came to eliminating harassment and other inappropriate behavior at their events. These policies were not limited to gender/sex related topics, but most attention was placed on those issues. I heard statements from conference organizers at the large atheist events I attended about “zero tolerance” harassment policies. Some conference websites included detailed policies as well,

examples of which are excerpted below. As I mentioned, this research took place between the two national controversies discussed in this chapter – “Elevatorgate” (2011) and the Lindsay “privilege speech” (2013) – so I cannot speak on the extent to which atheist organizations and conferences included harassment and conduct policies prior to the “Elevatorgate” incident. Some attention to sexual and other types of harassment may be in reaction to that 2011 event and its aftermath.

The conference website for SkepticFest, a Midwest regional meeting, included both a “Code of Conduct” as well as a specific “Harassment Policy.” Here is the first paragraph of the “Harassment Policy”:

SkepticFest is dedicated to providing a harassment-free conference experience for everyone regardless of gender, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, or religion. We do not tolerate harassment of conference participants in any form. Conference participants violating these rules may be sanctioned or expelled from the conference without a refund at the discretion of the conference organizers.

Beneath this was a further statement about sexual harassment:

While SkepticFest does encourage an environment of sex positivity where sex and sexuality are discussed, we will make every effort to make our convention attendees as comfortable as possible.

Many of the statements from SkepticFest’s “Code of Conduct” simply reiterated the “Harassment Policy,” but it also included a consent related statement:

“Yes” means yes; “No” means no; and “Maybe” means no. Please accept no for an answer for any request or activity. You are encouraged to ask for unequivocal consent for all activities during the conference.

Rhetoric from these policies backed up the anecdotal commentary interviewees expressed about their secular community as a progressive, equality focused, safe space. These “official” documents certainly signpost boundaries for behavior and interaction in the conference space.

One more example, a national conference from one of the larger atheist organizations in the U.S., also had a “Code of Conduct” posted. It was very similar to the SkepticFest statements above, but the national conference also had an additional section specifically related to LGBTQ issues and accommodations:

To ensure that all members of the atheist community are welcome at our conventions, American Atheists is consciously working to create a safe space for members of the LGBTQ community.

One way of acknowledging transgender people's needs and experiences is to designate a number of restrooms gender neutral, which we will do with educational signs. In bathrooms, many transgender people face harassment that can lead to discomfort or even arrest and violence. Such conduct is unacceptable to American Atheists and we aim to create a safe and welcoming environment for all atheists, including our brothers and sisters in the trans* community.

The inclusion of this LGBTQ specific, and transgender sensitive, statement went a step further in presenting a tolerant and progressive space for conference goers. While decisions about what social justice causes atheism should affiliate with are still under discussion, the

atheist movement seems to try and avoid direct discrimination of any group or individual who might be interested in participating in their organizations. Certainly the effort toward LGBTQ and transgender inclusion made here was far greater than any I observed from the evangelical side of this comparative study.

I should emphasize here that not all large atheist organizations or conference websites included these policies. In fact, many sites had nothing in terms of conduct expectations. I included the policies I did find here to point out a few things. These conduct policies were another example of atheists presenting themselves as “good people.” Operating outside what many people view as the main source of moral authority – religion, often in the U.S. Christianity – active atheists must prove goodness and moral character creatively. These statements show that atheist groups care about the treatment of people, the comfort of people and expect individuals to act with integrity. These policies also highlighted some of the issues and social concerns where atheists strive to see change in society. Many interviewees brought up LGBTQ rights as well as marriage equality in their interviews. They cited religious belief as a significant force keeping the U.S. from embracing equality for all people. Publicly stating guidelines within their organizations that call for acceptance and equality demonstrates active atheists practicing what they preach, so to speak, and leading by example.

Additionally I included text from conduct and harassment policies to further exemplify the curious dissonance between the official stance of the active atheist community (generally) and what actually occurs at atheist events and all over the Internet. Sure, random angry Internet users who spout hate and threaten others should not be cited as an average atheist response, however both the instances described earlier involved prominent members

of the secular community. Determining the appropriate ways to act and react is a problem for the leaders of this movement as well as the rank and file participants. On the one hand it would appear by the inclusion of these policies that the active atheist community is trying to remedy the existing issues surrounding gendered interaction within their movement. On the other hand it is still striking that a community so aware of and critical of social ills in other worldview communities (namely the religious) could still have such trouble and lack of informed participants in their own community. While codes of conduct might be a step in the right direction, the active atheist movement lacks a consistent and successful model for appropriate social interaction.

Evangelical Boundaries between Men and Women

Based on my findings, the boundaries concerning gender in the active atheist community were markedly different than those in the evangelical community in a number of ways. For the active atheists the main issues in question seemed to be about the extent to which the community had a sexism problem within it, and if and how that situation ought to be remedied. The atheist movement drew gendered boundaries within itself. On the evangelical side the guidelines and expectations for interaction between men and women are part of the worldview and ideology. Rules and roles for social life are dictated by the religious tradition. Atheism as an ideology, on the other hand, does not contain a blueprint for gendered interaction. As previously discussed, many in the atheist movement expressed concern over gender and gendered activity in social life, but their atheism did not explicitly prescribe how men and women should function in society. Evangelical Christian norms call for strict boundaries for conduct and communication between men and women, however as a

community, evangelicals tend to agree on these within-group issues. Out-group boundaries are drawn between evangelical Christians and feminism or evangelical Christians and the LGBT community.

Within the conservative Christian community gender is an important component in determining roles and responsibilities for individuals, families, and society. Thus, the boundaries drawn concerning gender among evangelicals center on proper roles and role transgressions, gender and responsibility in families, and heteronormativity as vital for the social world to function according to their beliefs. The following discussion will highlight examples of each of these arenas for boundary work within the evangelical Christian culture.

The most obvious boundary examples regarding gender in the evangelical Christian community concern the separate spheres of authority designated for men and women by the belief system itself. This accords with previous scholarship. Much has been written concerning the topic of women's submission to men in conservative religious contexts (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Chong 2008; Davidman 1991; Jenkins 2005; Manning 1999; Rose 1987). These scholars, and others, emphasized the intricacy of the submission issue. For example, a vital part of this complexity was the idea that men and women were equal in worth but divinely created to embody and perform different functions, accomplish different tasks in society (Brasher 1998; Gallagher 2003; Griffith 1997; Stacey 1990). Gendered boundary work was built into the belief system. My interview with Deborah, the 37-year-old musician and mother of two, illustrated the salience of these boundaries in a couple different ways. A big part of Deborah's story involved tension with her family about how Christianity ought to be practiced. Growing up, Deborah's father was not only the head of the household, but also the head of the church. Her father conducted church services for her family, in their

home, highlighting a very selective version of Christianity throughout her childhood. She described her father and her family's church growing up:

My father was in charge. But he doesn't believe in the Bible or the Old Testament, only the Letters, only what Jesus said. He doesn't believe in church so we basically grew up in a cult, I believe. We did not have any idea that there were other Christians around us. We were lead to believe that anybody who went to church falsely believed. I grew up thinking my family was the only one who had it right. That is what we were taught. Everyone else was deceived.

Since finding what she considered to be a true Christian life as an adult in 2005, Deborah found it difficult to communicate with her father, the man whom she followed as a spiritual leader for so long. This discomfort was intensified because of Deborah's deeply held conviction to spread her Christianity to others. She spoke of ways she glorified God through everyday tasks and the issue of changing her father's mind came up through that discussion:

Whether it was ministering to my children by packing their healthy lunches or ministering to my mom who is disabled – I take care of her once a week – trying to bring Truth to that home. I can't to my dad because he's a man and I definitely believe women shouldn't teach men. I don't believe that's effective or Biblical. I can to my mom, in a respectful way.

Deborah felt she knew better than her father. She was convinced that his version of Christian faith is wrong, however because of the particular tradition to which she adhered, she could not tell her dad that he is wrong or show him the truth she has found. She could not do this because of her gender ideology. The divinely inspired gender boundary is stronger than her urge to share her faith with her father. Deborah's religiously dictated rules for gendered

behavior speak to the embodied elements of an evangelical identity. Though not nearly as ritualized as some other conservative religious groups (Davidman 2015), Deborah's hesitation to "teach" her father shows how her identity as an evangelical includes physical and psychological prohibitions based on gender. This example demonstrated not only that there is a strict boundary between men and women when it comes to authority, but how integral that boundary is for the evangelical worldview.

Deborah's (37) narrative continued to articulate the salience of this boundary when discussing small group activities as part of her weekly church related schedule. In addition to helping with children's classes and running a music ministry, Deborah counseled other women in her church community through marital troubles. She explained:

I also do marriage counseling for women, specifically one woman right now.

Because I've had a divorce and it was a Biblical divorce...It was a very trying time but I learned a lot about being a Biblical wife there. It sounds funny that someone who was divorced would do marriage counseling but I have a unique qualification.

So I do that weekly but I am in contact with her everyday.

Deborah would never counsel the husband of a couple with a struggling marriage, but in woman-to-woman situations she had experience and wisdom to share.

Other women I interviewed also discussed all-female Christian gatherings as a source of religious strength. Ruth (65), like Deborah, qualified her leadership, emphasizing she was not a Biblical scholar, but lead women's Bible studies at her church. And Cindy (51) regularly got together with other Christian women from work to offer support to one another and pray together. The practice of women congregating to pray and counsel one another was common among conservative Christian groups (Griffith 1997; McGuire 2008; Wuthnow

2011). In a community where men hold the official and public leadership positions, women tend to form female-only enclaves, creating their own spheres of influence and support for one another (Brasher 1998; Chong 2006).

The women I interviewed considered companionship, communication and fellowship social interaction that enhanced their Christian identity. For men in the Christian community male-only interaction is called “discipling.”⁵ Declan Goode (38), the Pastor from Faith Walk, discussed an important influence on his religious development as a teen. He briefly described that relationship:

There was one guy who really took it, took responsibility in a healthy way to invest in me and two other young guys from our church. We would say, our language would be he was discipling us; he was showing us what it looked like to live like Jesus. He loved us; he spent time with us and invested in us. Then that, in turn, put us in environments where there were other college age students who were followers of Jesus and wanted to be friends with us.

The discipling relationship could not have occurred had the mentor in the situation been a woman. Another difference between the all-female fellowship and all male fellowship is the leadership-training component. The relationship was not merely companionship or socializing, but emphasized spiritual growth in order to cultivate individual faith and commitment to the Christian community. Declan had this relationship as an emerging adult and then became a pastor; he now acts as that spiritually experienced mentor to others.

⁵ Discipling was only discussed by respondents in this study in a male-to-male context. However the term can be used to describe counseling, mentoring relationships between men or between couples as documented by Jenkins (2005) in her work examining the International Church of Christ (ICOC) movement. The term is common within Christian literature (see Christian Education Journal or Journal of Applied Christian Leadership).

While conducting observation in his congregation Declan introduced me to a young man who recently decided to pursue ministry full time. The young man made this decision in part as a result of the time he's spent with Pastor Goode. These discipling relationships create a legacy of male leaders in the Christian community.

Not only do these relationships reinforce gendered boundaries, but additionally they show evangelical systems in place for same-sex socializing, problem solving, and leadership training. All groups have socialization for members to strengthen and maintain bonds, but in the evangelical examples gender serves as a significant piece of the socialization puzzle. The evangelical Christian community sets up a system in which men need other men, for mentorship, leadership training, etc. and women need other women for counsel and support as well.

Gendered Boundaries in the Family

Gender based boundaries also appeared important when evangelical Christian respondents discussed their families. As Deborah (37) mentioned, she, as a woman, was not in a position to “teach” her father about her religion. She also had trouble when speaking of her son's future. I asked Deborah how she might react if either of her children (she had a young daughter and a young son) turned away from Christianity at some point in their lives. She responded that she would be sad for them and concerned, to a point, but as long as they were already “saved,” if they had already accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior, they would not be excluded from heaven. She said, “I believe that your salvation cannot be taken away. My daughter is already saved; she is very, very much a believer. So if she were to explore [other paths] my job would be to pray that God would call her back.” For her son,

though, she had a greater level of concern. He was not yet saved and she remarked, “My son, I don’t know, he loves his daddy. I don’t know what is in store for him.” Deborah’s ex-husband, the father of her children, did not agree with her Christian worldview. Her son’s allegiance to his father represented not just a preference of one parent over the other, but a turning away from Christian salvation. Deborah struggled with this situation; how to get through to her son without transgressing boundaries based in part on the prescribed roles for men and women in the family.

The relationship between fathers and sons came up frequently in interviews with evangelical Christian fathers. I asked interviewees about their own faith changing as a result of becoming a parent and the most passionate responses I received were from fathers with male children. Jason (34), an assistant Pastor from one of the churches I observed, saw his responsibility in raising his son as a direct reflection of his faith. He discussed his spiritual journey after becoming a parent:

It impacted my faith in that I had to go to a new level of it because I was dealing with the weight of having a son and being a dad. Believing what I do, I believe that my role as a father has a significant impact on how my son is going to see God. I take that responsibility seriously. I don't want my son to think of God as a tyrant or a vindictive person. Nor do I want my son to think of God as someone who is flippant and doesn't care what you do either. I want him to have a healthy Biblical sense of who God is. My understanding of who God is is viewed through Jesus and I want my son's view to be seen through me, as much as I can. And that's daunting. That kind of responsibility is daunting.

At the time of our interview Jason only had a son, so there is no comparison to how a daughter might affect his faith, however, in the above excerpt, he emphasized the father-son relationship as something very spiritual for him. Like the discussion of discipling relationships Pastor Goode described, these male relationships carry the weight of the religious legacy of fathers and sons. In the evangelical Christian tradition men are responsible to God in a way women are not, thus they carry spiritual responsibility in a different way. Discipling relationships allow men to mentor one another, teaching them to be the “benevolent leaders” the community expects them to be (Bartkowski 2000). This men-only mentoring and fellowship was brought to popular attention by the male Christian group “The Promise Keepers,” research on which continues to inform discussions of Christian male relationships (Bartkowski 2000; Donovan 1998; Heath 2003).

Jacob (25), devout father of three (having daughters and a son), also brought up the parallels between fathers and sons, and God the Father and Jesus. In answering the same question posed above: did becoming a parent change your faith, he said this:

Well it made me appreciate the gospel more, because God gave up his son and I just think there's, I don't think I could ever do that. God is much better than me to be able to do something like that. That is such a deep love to be able to do that. If I had to choose between somebody I even really like and my son I would choose my son; I would save my son before saving the other person. So it gave me a greater appreciation of the gospel, because without that I'd be lost and left in my sin. I would have to pay the punishment of my sin, so it made me appreciate it more.

The fathers like Jacob directly related their experiences to the Biblical ones they encountered in their faith. Responsibility, sacrifice, sin, all these concepts seemed to be heightened by

the influence of the father/son, God/Jesus parallel. When asked about parenting in general, these respondents referenced the father/son relationship, how Christianity steered their parental journey, and how that father/son bond further informed their faith and their identities as Christian fathers.

Keeping Distance, Growing in Faith

In keeping the theme of boundaries between the sexes, a few of the younger male participants spoke of periods where they segregated themselves from women socially as times of great spiritual growth. In the two most prominent cases, both spiritual awakenings followed a break-up and period of distance from young women. Logan (22) was born in the south and grew up in the Midwest. In addition to attending church as a family on Sundays, his mother would introduce a “Bible verse of the day” every morning at breakfast. Christianity was part of daily life in Logan’s household. While he always considered himself a believer, he told one specific story about coming into his own religiosity near the end of high school. He pinpointed the spring of his junior year of high school as the time “when I really devoted myself to Jesus and Christianity.” When asked to elaborate on that he sighed, then laughed and said “Yeah, it was typical if you ask any guy - typically it's over a girlfriend.” Logan’s first significant relationship ended after two years of dating and it broke his young heart. He said “I was struggling after breaking up with my girlfriend, like what is there for me? I thought this is what was going to be, thought I was going to marry her and live that life. Afterwards I thought there was just nothing in life for me. I was devastated.” The break-up shook Logan to his core and inspired him to turn his full attention to his relationship with the Lord. After the break-up he changed churches, joining Faith Walk –

which he still attended at the time of our interview, and put total focus on his church community rather than his adolescent social life.

Joshua (27), from the Fellowship of Christ congregation, had a similar story. He and his high school girlfriend stayed together their first year of college. They attended different schools in the same city and soon grew apart. After their break-up Joshua still spoke with her often – every Sunday, after church. He continued this pattern until it became too difficult emotionally for him and he severed all contact with her as well as purposefully avoiding any new relationships. Here he described what happened after he made that choice:

And so for that year after that I was just on fire for God. For a month or two I forgot about her, or I didn't forget, but I put it in the back of my mind. And I didn't care about girls. I looked for God that year and was very close; I had that seeking feeling of always wanting to be in his presence and loving God and spreading his love around to other people around me. I would say that was the time I was most in touch with God.

In both cases it took the end of a romantic relationship for these young men to “seek” God in their lives, and their spiritual awakenings took place in the absence of female companionship. These examples bolster the commonly held notion within conservative religion that women distract men from knowing the Lord. In research on conservative Christianity (Gallagher 2003; Manning 1999), as well as other religious traditions (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Davidman 1991; Stadler 2009), the onus is placed on women to keep men from straying in their religious path due to lust. There is a common narrative of men separating themselves from the temptation of women in order to fulfill their spiritual potential. The young men in this study created a boundary between themselves and young

women in order to grow in their religious lives. Constructing that boundary made them better able to focus on their religious journeys.

Heteronormativity and Curiosity

My interviews occurred while marriage equality was getting a lot of attention in popular media. It was an issue that atheists brought up very often in interviews and some Christians did as well. In the Christian interviews though, I found that much more often than the idea of marriage itself, my interviewees discussed the LGBT community in general, and specifically lesbians. Whether it was a matter of having more experience interacting with gay women (rather than men) or plain curiosity, most of the references to LGBT individuals concerned lesbians. For example, Joshua (27) and his wife ran a small Bible study group with other couples. Soon after the group assembled two of the women in the group approached Joshua to explain they were not merely roommates, but in a committed relationship. Joshua and his wife struggled with this information and while they still interacted with the gay couple in their group, Joshua seemed concerned with the situation during our interview. He said “that’s something my wife and I struggle with: we started a group with lesbians in it.” Joshua and his wife were having a problem figuring out where their boundary was in terms of accepting these gay women in their lives and in their faith. They were quick to say they loved them as people, though they disagreed with their “lifestyle.”

Jacob (25) also brought up his experiences with lesbians, which occurred most often at work. A nursing student, he worked in the local ER and saw the “a-religious” environment as a place where he could have some influence and show others his Christian

truth. He found the demographics of his colleagues interesting and said, “There are many people there with different beliefs. In the emergency room there are...it must attract a certain kind of people because it’s mostly men, some women, but mostly men and lots of lesbian women.” Jacob spent time talking to two gay women on staff in the ER in particular and said, “While I value my church and value the fellowship of Christians, I also value time with non-believers as well.” These women in particular represent society outside of Jacob’s Christian perspective. As non-religious gay women, not only do they not adhere to the Christian belief system – the truth according to Jacob - but the way they live their secular lives does not conform to the Christian blueprint for marriage, family, and consequently society. I hypothesize that the reason encounters with lesbians came out in several narratives from Christian men in my interviews is because of this multiple boundary transgression.

Conclusions

The nature of the boundaries each group constructs came into focus through this comparative study. Clearly both groups maintain complex systems of rules for sex/gender interaction and role expectations. In the case of evangelical Christians, these rules are overt and (generally) agreed upon. Biblically based, participants know how the gendered world of evangelicals works because that system is part of the larger belief system. Rules for women interacting with men, the responsibility of fathers to their sons, expectations for heterosexuality, all these things are common knowledge for evangelical Christians. What I found in comparing this worldview to that of active atheists was not that the atheists lacked these boundaries held so close by evangelicals, but that atheists had their own set of gender related boundaries.

For atheists these rules and roles are more covert. Where evangelical guidelines come out of the worldview tradition and have been cultivated for generations, active atheists in contrast are formulating these boundaries currently. A much younger organized ideology, for atheists it seems nothing is written in stone. This makes their gendered boundaries much more difficult to navigate and transgressions much more likely to cause controversy. Gender serves as a boundary marker for both groups – sometimes within the group (as was often the case with active atheists) and sometimes between those in the group and those outside it (which is how the evangelical Christians in this study positioned it). Comparing the two in this study allowed the veiled nature of active atheist boundaries to come out.

Active atheists, the prominent leaders as well as those in the groups I interviewed, had a lot to say about the ways religion contributes to inequality, especially when it came to sex/gender. They point to Christian patriarchy, women's submission, and religiously condoned violence against women as examples of unacceptable ideals and behavior. Even more than those issues, atheists interviewed consistently brought up marriage equality and general prejudice against anything that does not fit cis-gender heterosexuality. They explicitly blamed religion as the main source for intolerances toward LGBTQ rights. Despite the focus on the faults of religiously motivated gender ideology, what was demonstrated to me in interviews as well as the national level scenarios described earlier was that actual situations of sex/gender-based conflict were much more inward facing. Active atheism, and the atheist movement in general, has a difficult time navigating situations involving gender related tensions.

Evangelical Christians in this research also did some othering boundary work, but in the case of gender they were not specifically citing atheists as detrimental to traditional

family values. Rather they saw mainstream culture more broadly as a danger to the ideal family and society they aimed to create. What they demonstrated in interviews were boundaries within their worldview that help keep things functioning in line with what they believed to be right. Their paradigm of gendered boundaries includes multiple layers. Evangelicals practice gendered boundaries that distinguish them from mainstream culture, but within their sphere there are many rules and roles that the within-group boundaries seem very rigid as well. They not only distance themselves from the general population, in terms of how they conceptualize and enact gendered interaction, but intricacies of their rubric for interaction in all relationships represents another set of boundaries. Figuratively, it is as if there is a wall between evangelicals and “everyone else” and a grid system within the evangelical sphere dictating how to interact. The field is complex but explicit, so individuals always know where they stand.

Neither side is interested in the strengths of the other, which was not true in all cases. Atheists borrow from Christians for how to do fellowship, community service, even some group meetings mimic church services in some ways (Sunday Assembly or Oasis for example). Previous scholarship (Edgell et al. 2006) uncovered strategies they shared as ideological minority groups. But in terms of gender related issues neither would move to emulate the other. Atheists perceived evangelical gender relations as patriarchal and discriminatory and did not respect the Biblical intention from where their traditions originated. From the evangelical Christian perspective, anything not Bible based was wrong and straying from a strictly Biblical path would only lead to breakdowns in the family and eventually society. Whether or not these two groups could learn something from one

another, on the topic of boundaries and gender active atheists and evangelical Christians have no interest in finding common ground.

Chapter 6: Boundaries and Technology

In today's social world, the Internet in some way mediates much of our interaction. Social networking and other virtual interactive venues – YouTube, twitter, blogs – represent powerful but relatively new vehicles for asserting identity, claiming affiliation, and thus drawing boundaries. Many academic disciplines from communications, to psychology, to political science flocked to investigate the effect the Internet and virtual spaces have on social interaction.

In the following chapter I will first discuss a few highlights from the existing research as they relate to my own findings regarding identity, community, and boundaries online for evangelical Christians and active atheists. Then I present findings concerning technology and social media as a part of evangelical Christian communities. Patterns and examples from two evangelical congregations demonstrate some accommodation to society's ubiquitous use of computer-mediated communication (CMC). These congregations seem to have found a way to take advantage of some aspects of online and social media resources, incorporating them into their Christian communities, without losing the integrity of their message and purpose. Findings indicated that active atheists were much more dynamic in their use of the online world as a component of their atheism. Discussion of atheist engagement with technology and social media includes three sections of findings. First, the ways in which atheists use the Internet as a way to find community and get involved. Second, using social media as a mechanism to draw boundaries and make group distinctions known. Both of these processes affect identity, in this case the construction and maintenance of an atheist identity. The third section includes findings highlighting atheist use of social media and the

Internet for outreach and activism and the potential costs and benefits to making friends and enemies online. Both worldviews in this research incorporated current technology into their lives and ideological identities to some extent, but the data shows that active atheists depended more on the Internet and social media for their individual and group identities as public atheists in the U.S. than did their Christian counterparts.

Scholarship Keeps Up with Technology

Literature from the 1990s tended to discuss new media and virtual interaction in a debate context concerning whether or not this technological progress would ultimately be positive or negative for humanity and our social world. Edited volumes like Jones (1997) *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* and *Communities in Cyberspace* (Kollock and Smith 1999) included scholars discussing philosophical concepts, such as self, identity, and community, in the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Within this discussion of how technology altered human interaction some saw the possibility of the Internet as a refuge for marginalized, even disenfranchised, segments of society. This view depicts the “virtual community” (Rheingold 1993) as a *real* space, “essentially a reconceived public sphere for social, political, economic, and cultural interaction” (Fernback 1997, p. 37). In this conception, community referred to a group of people engaging with one another over mutual understanding or toward some common goal, regardless of physical proximity. Even those who advocated the positive consequences of building community online warned that this virtual fellowship, while positive, differed from more traditional relationships and interaction. Scholars reported that social connections made in online communities are accessible but shallow (Fernback 1997; Turkle 2012), and

thus may lack the structure to sustain presence in people's lives. More recent scholarship moved past the pros-and-cons debate and focused more on what actually occurs in online interactions and relationships. For better or worse – perhaps better *and* worse – cyber communication is pervasive in U.S. culture. According to the Pew Research Center's "Internet Project" 74% of adults who use the Internet participate in social networking sites of some kind, as of January 2014. Data from the previous year, 2013, showed that 71% of Internet using adults use Facebook, the most popular social networking site (<http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>).

With so many individuals in U.S. society taking part in social media and other CMC, it makes sense that popular media continues to report on the issue of technology as part of daily social life with some skepticism and plenty of sensationalism. In 2012 the Atlantic asked "Is Facebook Making us Lonely?" (Marche 2012) and in 2013 published several opinion pieces including "Your Phone vs. Your Heart" (Fredrickson 2013) and "The Hoax of Digital Life" (Egan 2013). While some still critique technology as an intruder in social life (Olds and Schwartz 2009; Turkle 2012), a healthy body of empirical work shows a more complex state of affairs in which many people find social media to be a benefit to their lives. As Rainie and Wellman (2012, p.12) put it: "The new media is the new neighborhood." Taking part in CMC not only assists individuals with finding their community, their "neighborhood," but social interaction online "tends to inspire and strengthen social connectedness overall – in online and offline contexts" (Chayko 2014, p.977).

In order to take advantage of the online community phenomenon one has to have an Internet presence. A growing body of literature focuses on identity, presentation of self, and social capital online (Davis 2010; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2010; Kennedy 2006; Zhou

et al. 2008). Scholars are interested in how people present themselves in the online world and how they interact and participate in these online networks. Within sociology, several works have observed hierarchies of participation, from passive participation, or “lurking” (Bishop 2007), through a range of active participation that peaks at interacting in real-time using multi-player interfaces and visual representations (Adler and Adler 2008). Just like “real life” communities, participation can be layered, nuanced, and changeable over time. Online interaction can serve as a substitute for face-to-face community or as a component, augmenting real life contact. As Chayko (2014) and others (see Dutta-Bergman 2005; Ellison et al. 2009; Haythornthwaite and Kendall 2010; Rainie and Wellman 2012) report, online and face-to-face social interactions are likely to work together, enhancing and solidifying relationships.

The Adlers’ work (2008) dealt with a population very different from my sample, but some of their research proved relevant in my investigation of the role of the Internet in boundary work for active atheists and evangelical Christians. According to the Adlers (2008, p.50):

The Cyber world represents an ephemeral space of creation and destruction. It offers people who are dispossessed by mainstream society a reservoir of cultural hiding places where they can form their own cultures and communities, even though normative standards and assumptions are not totally absent.

Individuals from both worldviews in my research perceived their group as a marginalized minority. Both evangelical Christians and active atheists strive to carve out space for themselves in a larger society that often disregards them as extreme in their ideology. Thus, it makes sense that both groups might use the Internet as a forum for communication, a place

to foster sense of belonging, a tool to build and sustain their communities without completely disengaging from the rest of society.

Findings from interviews with individuals from both worldviews show that while communities from both ideological camps incorporated new media into their organizations one group – the active atheists – utilized cyberspace to a greater degree as a field for the development of identity, boundaries, and activism. For evangelical Christians, engagement with the secular media and technology can be dangerous for two reasons. First, it poses a threat to Christian norms and values. Secular media includes themes and images in its content that do not align with the Christian perspective (Draper and Park 2010). Scheitle (2005) found that conservative Christian congregations tended to be exclusive in terms of what groups they associated with and what outside media they support, but consumed quite a bit of religious themed media. Second, secular media represents a waste of time and resources that could otherwise be spent working toward religious goals (Draper and Park 2010). Secular media and technology, though, can be useful in the evangelical pursuit of spreading Christianity (Stout and Buddenbaum 1996). As examples of what not to do, situations from secular media can be cautionary tales for those pursuing a more Christ centered life. The ubiquity of the Internet in the contemporary social world makes it impossible to completely ignore. Thus, the relationship between evangelical Christianity and media/technology is a complex and shifting one.

Christian Communities and Technology

While the Internet has been a significant component of religion and religious life for decades (Campbell 2010), this particular sample did not discuss online interactions as part of

their religious community – for fellowship or for outreach. I did, however, witness technology’s influence on religious life in each congregation observed. All the churches in my sample incorporated a digital backdrop in some way. These accommodations to contemporary mainstream culture served to enhance the religious experience and thus the larger goals of the church communities.

In the following discussion I will focus on the two Christian communities in which I spent the most time: Fellowship of Christ and Faith Walk. Both congregations considered themselves non-denominational, evangelical churches. Fellowship of Christ was a more established community and was affiliated with the Evangelical Free Church of America. Their church building was located at the crest of a small hill, along a street with several other churches. The surrounding area was mostly residential, though not far from busy commercial blocks. The grounds of Fellowship of Christ were also home to a colorful playground open to the community at large, not just church members. The atmosphere inside and out was unquestionably family-oriented. Faith Walk by contrast was a young church, both in its tenure as a fixture in the local Christian community and in the make up of the congregation itself. Services were held on Saturday evenings in the auditorium of a local middle school rather than a traditional church building. While the church welcomed anyone interested, college students made up approximately one quarter of the congregation as a whole. Setting up and taking down any signage, religious materials, and other props for each service, Faith Walk embodied the Christian aphorism that “church” refers to the people gathered to worship together not the building used for the celebration.

Both Fellowship of Christ and Faith Walk used PowerPoint to post song lyrics during worship, complete with the song’s publication information if it was not original. During my

season of attendance Faith Walk also utilized this screen to post budget related slides and to advertise upcoming events and activities. During the sermon key Bible passages appeared, fully annotated, to aid those who wanted to follow along. In this type of congregation it is common for parishioners to follow the Biblical outline of the sermon with their own Bibles or to take notes on the presentation for later study. This practice demonstrates engagement with the service and the drive to better know and understand scripture. The physical ritual is an enactment of evangelical identity. Faith Walk, in particular, prided itself on “meeting people where they are” and maintained that a person needed no previous experience with the Bible to fit in with the group. Projecting the relevant Biblical passages and theological questions for the whole congregation worked as a way to include beginners and get the congregation as a whole on the same spiritual page.

The Fellowship of Christ congregation integrated technology and media literacy even further. While the physical atmosphere – the building, the way the church was arranged and decorated – remained quite traditional, a steady stream of contemporary influence flowed through. Upon entering the sanctuary for Sunday morning services, individuals could either take a bulletin (program for the service) from one of the greeters or instead use a Smartphone to access the same material through the Quick Response Code (QR-code), which was always posted at the doorway to the sanctuary. Having the weekly material available digitally cut down on printing costs while also demonstrating an accommodation to contemporary technology and digital lifestyle.

Another observation of Fellowship of Christ’s engagement with popular media concerned the themes of the sermons. Each week’s lesson was part of a larger series, which lasted between 8 and 12 weeks. For the duration of the larger series the church displayed

banners, both inside and outside, announcing the theme. The graphics and text of these announcements very often mimicked something from mainstream popular culture. For example, the Verizon Wireless company produced a series commercials boasting of their “4G” network capability. The commercials featured a lightening bolt in the background and a large “4G” next to their “V” check-mark logo. Fellowship of Christ altered this image to read “4G, Living 4 God,” using the same color scheme and lightening strike background from the Verizon Wireless ad campaign. Sermons in that series all related back to the topics of honoring God with your actions, using gifts God gave you, and listening to God’s influence in your life. This example of transforming a secular media image into a Christian one echoed observations documented by McDannell (1995) and Hendershot (2004), both of whom studied Christian material culture. As Park and Baker (2007, p.501) remarked “experiencing or connecting with the sacred often includes mediation through or with material objects or goods.” Pastors, like the one at Fellowship of Christ, play an integral part in mediating this relationship by steering their congregations through contemporary material culture in the U.S.

Both congregations also maintained a functioning web presence. The websites for each church contained calendars and event announcements, statements of belief and church missions. Each page provided links to past sermons on audio files as well as external links, routing curious individuals to Christian resources outside their immediate congregation. While online interaction certainly has not replaced real life interaction in evangelical congregations, research going back a decade reported evidence of and anticipated that the Internet would become a component of Christian life (Foltz and Foltz 2003; van der Laan 2009).

The only real engagement with social networking I gathered in interviews and observation with evangelical Christians was from Pastor Lake at Fellowship of Christ. At the end of each sermon he wrapped up by summarizing that week's lesson in the form of a "tweet." He often joked that the character limit on Twitter posts (140 characters) posed a challenge for someone like him. Brevity was not his strength. In the spring of 2014, near the local university's Spring Break, Pastor Lake started a series titled "Unashamed" the first lesson of which was called "Self Control." He remarked at the beginning of the sermon that he had originally planned to preach this topic weeks earlier but had been warned by God that those who needed to hear it most were not in the pews that day and so he postponed it. The tweet that followed his "Self Control" sermon was this: "Sometimes we lose self control because we are unwilling to admit we are not in control. Yield to God." The second week of the "Unashamed" series shifted focus to advocating pride in Christian beliefs. The tweets that corresponded to this week included: "Convinced of a Creator by science and observation. Convinced of a Savior by scripture and experience," and also "When it comes to evangelizing the unchurched – the bridge of relationship must be strong enough to handle the weight of truth." When discussing his tweets at the end of Sunday services Pastor Lake addressed the congregation playfully. Could he really sum up his presentation in 140 characters? These tweets though, and the ones that appeared between church services demonstrated a connection between the church and its congregation. Pastor Lake used Twitter to keep his church community focused and prepare them for the coming lessons.

As Pastor Lake composed each Sunday's tweet for the congregation he provided an atmosphere where engaging with contemporary technology and social networking was tolerated and even encouraged, as long as it was in service of spiritual life. Modern

mainstream culture can distract from the evangelical prerogative to be “in but not of the world” (Draper and Park 2010; Smith and Denton 2005), but using these tools purposefully as part of the Christian calling is acceptable to participants in these churches. Contrasting the religious enclave lifestyle of Davidman’s (2015) participants, where daily routines avoided any distraction from the contemporary world, evangelicals in this research did make some accommodations to modernity. Aspects of “the world” may infiltrate and be incorporated into the evangelical identity there they can be used to advance the mission and community toward its Christian goals.

The Internet, media, and popular technology were clearly a part of how these congregations operated. Each of the churches I attended had some Internet presence. However congregants did not lean on this web-based component of their community in the way so many atheist participants described. When asked about finding a like-minded community, challenges from others, or changing the minds of others, no one in the Christian sample referenced Facebook or any social networking interactions (beyond Google searching to find a church). They did not need to look to cyberspace to find community. On an individual level, the Christian label is something with which the vast majority of people in the U.S. are familiar and understand broadly. At a collective level, each church is part of some larger system of congregations and even independent churches can be viewed as a part of the larger Christian community. One can walk into a randomly selected Christian church and, for the most part, be familiar with the message and proceedings. The same is not true for atheists and atheist organizations. Their buildings and meeting rooms are not identifiable by sight, and their meetings do not follow pre-determined schedule or adhere to a singular text.

While both groups maintained a subcultural minority identity (Smith 1998), their needs as communities struggling to sustain a presence in spite of judgment from mainstream culture differed greatly. Differences in how technology and social networking emerged as part of identity and community building are manifestations of these divergent needs.

Cyber Interactions of Active Atheists

Individuals draw lines of community in many different ways, through words, actions, participation, and/or financial support. For members of atheist groups and organizations, the Internet has become another important site for the creation and maintenance of social boundaries. Almost half of my interviewees (13/30) reported some level of online engagement with secular communities as part of their atheist activity. I found this information to be significant in part because I did not ask specifically about online activities when discussing their participation in secular groups and organizations. Once someone mentioned the online world I probed for a better understanding or clarified when it was unclear what type of participation they were describing (in person vs. virtual). But the discussion always began with the participant including online activity in their description of involvement in secular communities.

In analyzing data about atheists' online participation two prominent patterns of interaction emerged: using the Internet for community and using the Internet for outreach. These two types of interaction are by no means mutually exclusive. To start with, the Internet is an efficient way to find a group of like-minded individuals. Atheists and Christians alike might employ an Internet search to find local groups or a church to join. This practice proved especially true for the active atheists. When asking how they originally

got involved with secular groups and organizations the vast majority started with an Internet search. Some, more specifically, started with a search within social networking (Facebook, Meet up, etc.) and began to interact in virtual space before meeting people face-to-face. To the question “How did you first come across this atheist club?” one third of my participants responded with “Google” or “I searched ‘atheist’ and ‘my town’ to see what was close by.” Meetup.com in particular has been a popular method for atheist groups to advertise and atheist individuals to find groups and activities (Guenther et al. 2013).

One practice that speaks to how boundaries operate in an online scenario entails people finding the initial point – perhaps a Facebook page – and from there becoming linked in further and further. Martin, who discussed working toward a more secular society for the sake of his son, was a 31-year-old chef in a Midwest metropolitan area. He explained how his atheist Internet surfing lead to significant involvement with one of his city’s atheist organizations:

I first got involved with it just kind of trying to keep up with secular news. I would go onto Richard Dawkins’ website from time to time and read articles. There was an article about a new website and campaign called "We Are Atheism." So I read a little about it and turns out it came from this group in Lawrence, on campus essentially. I was like "Oh wow! This is so cool and it's local!" So I kind of reached out to them on their Facebook page, like, “look this is very important to me, it's become a big part of who I am right now, what can I do to get involved?” So the founder of We Are Atheism is also the director of philanthropy on the board of directors for Midwest Atheist Coalition. So she said I should join MAC and I had never heard of it at that point. When they said, "check us out," I did and it just progressed from there. They

recognized that I had a passion for it and, to a degree, a talent for it, so it just went from there.

Martin served on the board of the MAC at the time of our interview. Once a person gets inside the outer perimeter, if you will, the world of those inside that social circle expands. This is the pattern by which online communities often translate into face-to-face communities in general (Chayko 2014) and particularly for the atheists interviewed. The simple act of being part of a Facebook group or listserv, even a passive member of a national organization, could easily open the door to myriad opportunities for participation and community interaction.

The Internet was not just useful in finding a secular community but also functioned in a supportive, affirming, and sometimes even therapeutic role. While scholars may be correct in that roots of online communities are shallow when compared with more traditional communities (Fernback 1997; Turkle 2012), in the case of a marginalized minority worldview such as atheism these shallow roots can make a significant difference in people's lives. As Martin demonstrated above, the connections made through online searches can lead to community involvement both online and in person. Tristan, a 21-year-old college student and community theater actor, started his participation in the Plains City Atheist (PCA) group by posting questions on the organization's Facebook page. Before his de-conversion from a conservative branch of the Lutheran church, he and a few friends had been novice "ghost hunters" and he wondered what the atheist community thought about ghosts, and whether or not he should give up his hobby. Online communication helped him clarify his beliefs as well as introducing him to his new secular social network. That initial interaction lead

Tristan to get involved with the Plains City Atheists as well as helping to organize an atheist group at his community college.

Tom (34) made the point that the atheist Internet community lends emotional support for active atheists regardless of whether or how face-to-face connections exist. A self-proclaimed “loner,” Tom used social networking sites to stay tethered to the global secular community:

I'm around millions of different people who believe what I believe thanks to Facebook, MySpace, GooglePlus, whatever. I can finally connect on at least one level with somebody in Japan, or Russia. We may not be a large physical group but we are around the world. At any given point there's somebody around the world that's going through the exact same thing that I am.

Clearly Internet based social connections can be as trivial or worldview affirming as participants make them. This social support from afar can be vitally important for individuals in the process of leaving religion, particularly conservative religion. Interaction online opens up a global network of individuals who share ideas and experiences, fellowship that might be difficult to find in geographic proximity.

Virtual Lines Drawn

Boundaries function not only to clarify insider status, but also outsider status. Online interaction may build and define communities, but the Internet, for my atheist participants, was also a place where individuals and groups drew lines of exclusion. Several people – of various ages – discussed the social repercussions of being openly atheist online. Tristan had family members “un-friend” him on Facebook (a way of disconnecting communication) as a

result of the atheist affiliations and comments he posted on his profile. Generationally distant interviewees Samantha (20) and Eleanor (69) discussed dealing with arguments aimed at their secularly oriented online posts on a regular basis. Social networking sites made these ideological divisions transparent in a way that is different from face-to-face interaction. When a person reveals ideological affiliations via social networking profiles their worldview instantly becomes public on a global scale.

While Tristan (21) lost communication with parts of his extended family because of his atheism – in his case the family members explicitly told him that was why they could no longer communicate – he has been surprised by the reactions of others. He said: “A few of my younger cousins, people around my age and in high school, have ‘liked’ things I posted that were anti-religion. With Facebook and things it’s really easy to see who is on your side or not, you know?” His “out and proud” atheist status in the online world has consequently clarified his relationships in the “real world.”

Social networking sites like Facebook also produce evidence of activities, demonstrating where a person stands within their social networks. The religious/secular divide became clear to Tom (34) when he read about what his friends were doing via Facebook without him: “I see what they post on Facebook. I see what they do. I hear about get togethers that are with certain people, certain cliques. And you obviously were not invited or thought to be mentioned. So, yeah, there's negative consequences for being different.” Again, the transparent nature of online social networking sites demonstrated social standing and clarified relationships between individuals without them ever having to directly confront one another.

Activism and Outreach Online

The other dimension of Internet based interaction in the active atheist community that surfaced from interview data was the use of online networks as a forum for debate, activism, and outreach. As with the previous examples, the overarching theme remains how current technology and social use of the Internet affects or contributes to issues of identity, community, and boundaries. Recent research on “organized atheists” acknowledges the influence of the Internet as a resource for secular individuals and secular groups in the U.S. over the past decade (Smith 2013; Smith and Cimino 2012). The individuals I interviewed described these online experiences when asked about issues such as finding like-minded individuals, interacting with those who challenge their ideology, and strategies for changing the minds of others.

Some respondents reported spending quite a bit of time online arguing with believers. This deliberate assertion of identity and affiliation took place in the online world where it is uniquely public while at the same time potentially anonymous, or at least virtual, in nature (Smith and Cimino 2012). The veil of the virtual world allowed some who might be more timid in real world exchanges to express themselves boldly. This was the case for Cameron, a 31-year-old who embodied the stereotype of the shy, thoughtful nerd. In our interview he kept answers short and to the point, only adding detail and examples when questioned further. When I asked about situations where others challenge his belief system, his secularity, he referenced online interactions and claimed: “I seek it out.” Cameron deliberately looked for “fights” online but does not engage much in the real world. Real world confrontations have a potential for escalation that online encounters do not.

Another interviewee also displayed the mentality of “looking for an argument online.” His story was striking in that he held the same type of attitude when he was a devout Christian who trolled chat rooms looking for non-Christians with whom to argue. For years, Alex (29) participated in online forums and chat rooms arguing for his brand of conservative Christianity. The catalyst for his de-conversion and eventual atheism came from one such online exchange with an elderly history professor. Once comfortable in his new secular identity, Alex took back up the habit and continued to discuss and debate religious issues online. Like Cameron, Alex preferred not to get involved in random face-to-face debates:

I don't walk into a bar and say 'Hello stranger, let's have a debate'...In terms of the Internet though I have a YouTube channel. So this is a pretty big part of my life actually...I have people challenge my faith on a daily basis in terms of comments there. I can go look at a video and who wrote a comment today and debate them if I want.

With 30,000 subscribers he frequently has the opportunity to have religion vs. secularity debates online.

Both Jennifer (34) and Eleanor (69) shared stories of striving to be more vocal and more forceful in their online interactions with believers. Jennifer was a 34-year-old pharmacist who served on the board of the Plains City Atheist organization at the time we spoke. For several years, living in a different town, she felt closeted in her secularity. Now that atheism was publically part of her identity she was trying to participate actively in online discourse concerning religion. She referenced this shift: “But now I'm more of an asshole atheist, or I'm trying to be. So if someone puts something stupid on their Facebook page I'm trying to be like ‘that's not true; here's where the proof is.’ And there are a lot of stupid

people out there! On Facebook at least.” After years of self-censorship and feeling isolated because of her worldview Jennifer embraced opportunities to stand up for what she believed. Striving to be more vocal may result in more conflict, hence her classification as an “asshole atheist.” The general public’s disdain for the irreligious (Edgell et al. 2006; Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Zuckerman 2009) puts outspoken atheists like Jennifer on the defensive, a position she used to shy away from but now welcomes. Like the others, she made attempts to stand up for reason and science over the perceived divine, but it has taken a while for her to find the strength to do so.

Eleanor was a 69-year-old grandmother who became involved in midwestern atheist organizations a little less than two years before our interview. On the one hand she claimed not to be involved with the outreach and activism that some of the club members participated in – for example, from time to time her club demonstrated by holding pro-atheism signs and distributing literature in a busy city district – however her descriptions of interactions with others through Facebook told a different story.

Last year Eleanor posted a different creation myth on her Facebook page every week, making the point that many different cultures maintain some type of origin story. She said, laughing: “I put things out there and get some reactions, and some of them I wonder, like, where's your head?” Eleanor posted these items knowing she would get a reaction from her religious family. When they would counter with a Biblical statement she was quick to provide links to scientific journals or other evidence based claims that contradicted the religious argument. She may not consider this behavior activism, but she consistently attempts to “plant seeds” in the minds of those with whom she cyber-communicates. Social movement scholar Bobel (2007) made a distinction in his work between “being activist” and

“doing activism.” Eleanor’s situation – stepping back from demonstrations and protests but leaning into arguments and debates online fits into the “doing activism” side of Bobel’s categorization. Smith and Cimino (2012, p.22) called the type of online activism they observed in a textual analysis study of secularist websites and blogs “soft activism.”

Many of the frequent social networking users I spoke with discussed finding a balance in how they present themselves and their “soft activism” online. Dominic (22), in fact, had to tone down his online rhetoric in order to maintain friendships with non-skeptics. A recent college graduate in the biological sciences, he explained: “My sophomore year I got into a lot of Facebook debates where I will bring up controversial topics on my wall or somebody else’s wall talking about things and that led to a lot of issues.” He, and those with whom he was arguing, had a hard time keeping the conversation amicable. “Whenever you’re talking about somebody’s religion there’s always a chance that they’re going to be offended,” he discovered. Not willing to give up his virtual campaign for atheism, Dominic discovered a different tack. Rather than jeopardize friendships through Facebook wall posting wars, he found that conversations with strangers satisfied his desire to argue for atheism:

I’ve gone onto anonymous threads and talked to people through email where it’s like, for example, one person emailed our [atheist club] website once saying “Do you know that there is no God? Because if you say you do you claim to know everything and if you claim to not know then you’re really not an atheist are you.” So I started emailing with them and we went back and forth.

Through trial and error Dominic found an outlet closer to that of Alex or Cameron. All three wanted to share what they knew and what they’ve come to believe with other people. Internet communication has turned out to be an effective way to accomplish this.

Overly passionate dialogue can occur within online atheist forums as well. After 12 years as a police officer Eric, 38 when interviewed, switched gears and applied to law school. At the time of our interview he was just finishing his first year and loving the thoughtful, spirited academic environment. As a busy father and student he had a hard time attending the real life gatherings of the atheist groups in his area so he preferred to interact online. Unfortunately, his aggressive, argumentative approach proved too hard-hitting for the group's facilitator: "Sometimes I'm fairly funny and sometimes I'm a bomb thrower and say just the most ridiculous thing that still fits my beliefs in the face of someone's comments so I can make a point...they kicked me out of the online discussion - I'm too provocative for the Provocateurs group." He continued to post comments and engage in debates from his own Facebook page, but he was asked not to participate in the "Peacemakers and Provocateurs" group official online discussion.

Both Dominic (22) and Eric (38) found themselves in situations where their enthusiasm for the topic lead to alienation on the World Wide Web. Asserting their atheist identity and arguing for its legitimacy and superiority was not well received by their larger online audience. Each, however, found a way to channel their zeal and continued to participate in dialogue with believers. They kept at it because it was not just about the fun of debating online; they believed they had a greater purpose. Dominic and Eric put themselves out there in an effort to raise awareness and make it easier for others to find a voice. When I asked why he engaged in online debates and posting wars Eric expressed it this way:

I think there are a lot of atheists who are in the pew [participating in church], or who are "in the closet," or otherwise silenced because they don't feel like they can and I

feel like the more out there I am and the more in your face I am the more of them may feel more comfortable.

This talk of “closeted” atheism was a common way to describe atheists who do not publicly share their lack of belief. Scholarship on atheist identity has compared the process of going public with an atheist persona to the process of “coming out” with a non-heteronormative sexual orientation (Smith 2011, 2013). While parallels exist between the atheist community and the LGBT community in terms of issues like stigma, societal acceptance, and identity processes, it is unclear whether the cooptation of “coming out” language is considered a suitable appropriation (Linneman and Clendenen 2010).

Alex (29) even put his whole story on YouTube in order to share with others. Since then, leaders from the campus atheist club created WeAreAtheism.com, a forum specifically designed for secular individuals to share their stories. Many of my interviewees to some extent shared the goal of raising awareness, and online interaction has proven to be a good system through which to carry out that mission. Said Smith and Cimino (2012, p. 19) describing the findings of their textual analysis, the Internet has been “both means for dissemination and mobilization” for the secular movement. The active atheists I spoke with used Internet interaction as an outreach tool. Atheism is still highly stigmatized in many segments of mainstream society (Edgell et al. 2006; Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Zuckerman 2009). If it is not directly discouraged, non-theism is often absent from conversations about spirituality or worldview. My participants discovered the Internet as a space where their ideas could be heard and might even be spread to others.

Conclusions

In the current social climate everyone I interviewed engaged to some extent with technology in some form, be it computers, smartphones, tablets, etc. Looking at how these two groups utilized technology it became clear that the importance of social media as a resource was much greater for active atheists. Technological outlets were certainly places to proclaim affiliation for both groups. I observed a plethora of Christian pride on Facebook, Twitter, and various chat rooms. However, tools like Meetup.com and WeAreAtheism.com exist online to fill a role not being met in day-to-day “real” lives of active atheists. Theism is ubiquitous; atheism must be intentional.

The Christian congregations I observed made accommodations to modern technology and certainly used it to their advantage when and where they could, but as other scholarship has addressed, conservative religion has a tense relationship with culture outside of itself and a balance must be found so as not to take away from the greater Christian resources and goals. The young adult Christians from Faith Walk probably use their phones to post information and communicate with peers as much as any other group of young adults, but these behaviors are not the only way – or even the main way – they assert their Christian affiliation and locate like-minded others.

Active atheists in this research engaged with social media and other Internet based platforms to find other non-believers, to discuss their minority opinion with kindred others, to argue and assert their opinions with those who do not agree, and to reach out in the name of spreading secularity. As Chayko (2014) maintained, online communities *are* real communities for those who need them. Findings here indicate that active atheists in the Midwestern U.S. need online outlets as part of their atheist identity and community.

Boundary work, as performed through new media and social networking, appeared within both ideological camps. The tweets and postings made by Pastor Lake and his constituents proclaimed strong Christian conviction and advocated the particularly evangelical ethos. Those tweets identified them to anyone who saw as evangelical Christian. Active atheists too created and maintained boundaries with their online presence. The interactions between atheists and believers demonstrated practice of both boundary work and identity, as atheists often worked to find a comfortable balance when it came to standing up for their beliefs and/or spreading their secular message to others. As social media and other virtual interaction platforms continue to thrive future research will surely expand on the “online” components of boundary work and identity.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

The use of boundary work and identity enhanced understanding of the relationship between evangelical Christians and active atheists, as well as their relationships within their own social groups and both groups' interactions with society at large. Moreover the analytic concepts themselves were stretched and developed as they were applied to the various social circumstances in this research.

The story told here was created together through in-depth interviews and participant observation, and informed by literature and theory. Boundary and identity work became clear to me throughout the social lives of active atheists and evangelical Christians. Through the analysis process I distilled the data into four substantive areas of observation: Boundaries and Solidarity, Boundaries and Morality, Boundaries and Gender, Boundaries and Technology. This research illuminated several facets of othering and identity work for evangelical Christians and active atheists. Looking across these substantive chapters several themes emerged. Boundaries served as a tool for the construction and maintenance of identity for participants from both worldviews. The boundary work perspective revealed simultaneous layers of boundaries within and boundaries between the groups observed. It became apparent that while on some levels these oppositional groups do borrow from one another and their positionality may be parallel, some core aspects of social life are truly oppositional and remain contradictory.

Boundary Work as an Identity Tool

Findings from this research show how boundary work and identity work in tandem between and within two groups with oppositional worldviews. Boundary work is often employed as a tool to solidify identity – individual and/or collective – for active atheists and evangelical Christians. A great example of this came from the discussion of solidarity and distancing. When Christian strangers confront atheists about their beliefs, it is an opportunity for both parties to assert their identities and demonstrate the distance between their worldviews.

Boundary work enacted online proved particularly effective for active atheists in forming and articulating an atheist identity. The virtual world was a space where participants could explore what it meant to be an atheist individual as well as how they might fit into the atheist community. Two interviewees – Tristan and Eric – illustrated this honing of identity through online interaction, though their individual paths and experiences were quite different. Tristan, a young man “new” in his atheism, asked more experienced atheists online about particular supernatural related questions. As he got more comfortable with his atheist identity he began to post anti-religious and pro-secular articles on his Facebook page, publicly linking himself with this new worldview. These actions, while virtual, had “real world” repercussions as family members and friends learned of his new identity and reacted to him. Tristan declared himself part of the atheist community, in solidarity with his fellow non-believers.

For Eric, the online boundary work also helped him find his place within the atheist community; however he found that his rhetoric was too strong. Eric’s enthusiasm was not reciprocated in the online group he participated in and he was asked to leave. He learned

from that experience more about the community he was a part of and his individual identity within it. Interacting online allows individuals like Eric and Tristan to practice new identities as they become part of the atheist community. Evangelicals used social media similarly as a way to further elucidate their identity as Christians, as a platform to stand up for what they believe in and, as is always a goal, to potentially share their Christian identity with others. By drawing that ideological line in the sand they simultaneously created solidarity with their like-minded community of believers and made the distance between themselves and mainstream society clear.

The example where evangelical Christians best demonstrated the interplay between boundaries and identity development was in the context of gender related interaction. Stories from two young men in particular – Logan and Joshua – very clearly described the experience of isolating from the opposite sex and as a result growing in their Christian identity. They both set up boundaries for themselves in an effort to focus on their relationships with Christ rather than their more worldly relationships. Boundaries related to same-sex interactions played a part in evangelical identity as well. In both the situations of discipling (Christian mentorship and leadership training) and the emphases participants put on father-son bonds in our interviews, male relationships emerged as an important component of identity for many of the evangelicals involved in this research. Interviewees placed a sense of importance on these male-male relationships, describing them as special, meaningful, and integral parts of what being a Christian, a Christian man or a Christian father, meant to them.

Looking at boundary work as a tool for identity management in terms of morality brought up examples particularly rich with embodied identity from participants from both

atheist and evangelical Christian communities. All interviewees shared something about the way they expressed their moral authority, or their morality in motion, at some point in our conversations. These accounts tended to have a physical component – the motion in the morality – and thus they provided further illustration of the embodied identity concept. Active atheists had a lot to say about what they did to make a positive difference in their communities or in the world, whether it was volunteering at shelters or food banks, donating to organizations, or simply individual acts of social justice. For example, Jennifer, a pharmacist, insisted the stores she worked for carried and distributed emergency contraception. It was the law but some pharmacists in the area purposefully let the stock lapse. Jennifer made sure the medication was available for those who needed it. For many of the active atheists in this research, morality in motion was part of how they expressed themselves as atheists. Not all atheists collapsed their moral framework into their atheist identity. However, even separated they still exhibited a moral code and their morality was still part of their overall identity. Atheist identity had a bodily component in the ways active atheists did “good for goodness sake.”

An interesting twist on morality as part of embodied identity emerged in narratives from several evangelical Christian interviewees. A number of participants pointed to things they did *not* do as evidence of their moral code and Christian identity. They drew behavioral boundaries, such as no drinking, no smoking, no pre-marital sex based on their conception of Christian morality. While not active, these abstentions were still embodied they affected physical behavior, routine, and ritual. This was a physically discernable “line in the sand” that interviewees would not cross. In social situations these boundaries were plainly visible, giving them the opportunity to explain their identities as Christian as justification for their

behavior (or lack thereof). The boundary gave these young evangelicals an opportunity to hone and then share their Christian identity.

Boundaries within Boundaries

The initial research question focused on the “othering” boundary work between these two oppositional groups. Two groups, with opposite worldviews, but similar circumstances feed off each other in order to solidify and legitimize their own position in a society that does not, in general, agree with them. While plenty of data demonstrated how this boundary work occurs between these two groups, this research also brought to light many circumstances in which significant boundary work occurred within each group as well. While looking at these two groups from a boundary work perspective it became clear that important “othering” work regularly took place within each worldview. Just like the between-group boundary work, within-group boundaries also contributed to identity construction and maintenance as individuals further defined themselves in comparison and in contrast to others.

For members of both groups quite a bit of boundary work revolved around what kind of group member one should be. For instance, many evangelical participants were quick to differentiate themselves from nominal Christians, who they interpreted as less committed and thus not authentically Christian. Several narratives included stories of trying out multiple churches until finding one that lived up to the standards participants felt were correct and Biblical. It was important for evangelicals to find the right faith community for their own spiritual needs but also, and more importantly, to be part of the correctly Christian community and not support those that did not live up to the strictly Biblical evangelical standard. I was told explicitly that this was not a matter of preference but an issue of being

part of God's true kingdom on earth. Active atheists also navigated difficult waters when it came to what type of group or organization they should build. Their struggle differed in that there was not a single blue print from which all groups started (like the Bible for Christians). Each individual organization had to decide for themselves what combination of social, educational, political or out-reach oriented they wanted to be. My research participants expressed many opinions on this; hence the variety of atheist related groups with largely overlapping membership. For example, most people who attended the monthly lecture also came to the twice-monthly social hours and occasionally participated in-group volunteering projects. Unlike the evangelicals, active atheist opinion differed greatly and with a variety of tenacity when it came to what type of atheist culture they should cultivate. The within Christianity boundary between evangelicals and other Christians was firm and rigid, where the boundary between activist New Atheists, firm agnostics, social freethinkers, and philanthropic secularists was weaker and more permeable.

Similarly both groups had to draw boundaries to assert where they and their group stood in terms of allies and allegiances with other groups and organizations. This issue came up repeatedly as active atheists questioned the extent to which they ought to be involved with social justice concerns as part of their secularism. My interviewees particularly wrestled with whether or how to incorporate feminist ideas into their communities, a struggle that echoed problems the movement has had on the national level. The creation of, and subsequent controversy surrounding, the Atheist Plus movement illustrates the concept of boundary making to solidify identity. Some members of the larger active atheist population felt social justice issues were integral to the atheist identity. They created the Atheism Plus label to reflect that commitment. In defining themselves as atheists who care about various

social ills, they drew boundaries between themselves and atheists who preferred not to conflate their secularity with their goodwill. Suddenly the moniker “A+” was more about being in one club or not rather than committed to a set of issues or not.

Evangelicals described frustration with outsiders assuming they agreed fully with the any well-known conservative leader or personality they saw in mainstream media. Several interviewees spoke of actively distancing themselves from the stereotyped ideal of conservative Christianity often portrayed on television or in print. They were careful to distinguish themselves from those Christians and irritated by the notion that the loudest and most famous Christians in the U.S. were speaking for them. Some evangelicals used very specific language when talking to others in order to distance themselves from these one-dimensional Christian stereotypes. Others took a more direct approach and openly criticized them, even if that meant criticizing some aspects of their own faith community. They did not want to be associated with the stereotype, but even more so they did not want Jesus to be associated with the negative Christian stereotype. By redrawing the boundaries my participants hoped to change people’s minds about them and about Jesus Christ.

Some Borrowed, Some Avoided

As discussed in the introduction, previous research indicated that these two groups used similar tactics to bond and build their movements. Both evangelical Christianity and atheism could be considered minority viewpoints in mainstream society; as a result they both use their “underdog” position as a strategy to galvanize membership and motivate their close-knit teams into action. The qualitative nature of this research allowed for an in-depth and intimate look at the lives of individuals from both ideological groups and that

examination uncovered a few other examples of how these two groups borrow and share from one another. In contrast, certain situations made clear times in which neither group was interested in the perspective of the other.

In addition to strategies for survival and growth as a movement, atheists have borrowed from Christianity, and religion more broadly, for community rituals and routines. Over the past decade “atheist churches” have popped up in a number of cities in the United States. The two major organizations are Sunday Assembly and Oasis. Both provide a weekly meeting that includes music, some sort of presentation, and a social component. At the time of my interviews neither of these organizations had sites near my participants. However individual atheist clubs borrowed from church-like scripts to give their secular community a parallel set of opportunities. For example groups would have outings specifically tailored for parents to take their children, like a “Sunday school” retreat but secularly oriented. Some atheist groups also regularly studied philosophy books together, not unlike a Bible study. While some atheists frowned upon the idea of borrowing anything from Christian culture, others argued: why should religion get social ownership of things like music, fellowship and togetherness? Active atheists set out to create these things for themselves in their own secular way.

Atheists borrowed from Christianity more than Christians borrowed from atheism. Christianity is the much more established tradition, however some examples of Christian borrowing from secular culture more broadly surfaced. The style with which Faith Walk presented itself and its message borrowed from secular culture. The worship band mimicked a secular band in appearance and mannerisms, though lyrically they stayed on their Christian message. The casual, “come as you are” vibe gave Faith Walk a reputation as the “cool”

church in its Midwestern college town. At Fellowship of Christ it was the symbols and logos from mainstream culture that Pastor Lake and his team re-appropriated with a Christian message. In both these examples it was not atheist culture specifically that these evangelical congregations borrowed from, but mainstream culture in general, which they would consider secular in nature.

In other cases though the ideology of each group precluded each of them from borrowing from the other. The two cases where it appeared most clear that the two worldviews had no interest in what the other had to offer were on the topics of morality and gender. In the subject matter of both evangelicals and active atheists truly came from different places. From motivation to execution, they did not borrow from one another. As could be argued in many examples, the Bible as the beginning and end for evangelical Christians makes their approach to morality completely untenable for atheists. Not only do atheists disagree with a literal interpretation of the document, many interviewees expressed concern at the ramifications of using such a problematic source for moral authority. Atheists were sincerely troubled by the prospect of using the Bible as the definitive word on anything, much less as the backbone of a moral structure. Evangelicals on the other hand could not conceive of a moral framework without Biblical foundation. There would be no borrowing through this impenetrable boundary.

Gender was another example where these two groups had no appreciation for the way the other approaches the social world. Active atheists have long been critical of conservative religion in general as a force promoting gender inequality in the world. Interviewees were also quite vocal about LGBTQ rights and a lack of support from conservative Christianity. This was another situation when atheists had more to say directly about evangelicals than

they had to say back. On the whole evangelical Christians were critical of gender roles and sexual mores in mainstream society but did not comment specifically about atheists. The evangelicals interviewed seemed aware that their opinion on things like marriage equality and transgender acceptance was potentially unpopular, but to them a minority opinion is meaningless if they feel like it has Biblical support. There is a right and a wrong and the way secular people interact and carry on relationships is wrong from the evangelical perspective.

The two groups studied here made for an intriguing comparison. In some respects they share a marginalized position when compared to mainstream U.S. culture. However, evangelical Christians have strong ties to political leaders and other popular figures in this country and through those alliances wield power and influence atheists simply do not have. In this sense their positions in society are almost as dissimilar as their worldviews. Both groups maintain a minority worldview; both groups remain confident that society would be better off if everyone saw things their way. In a world where most people do not agree with them, it is important for both groups to have an opposition that is just as maligned in order to have that “other” to push against. Active atheists and evangelical Christians, from their similar-but-dissimilar position in contemporary U.S. culture – need one another as a marker by which to navigate their own boundaries and identity.

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